

Light and Fire in Apuleius and Lewis' Retellings of *Cupid and Psyche*

The stories of Cupid and Psyche's trials view love both as a fallible figure and an ideal worth striving for, a quality that attracted both Apuleius as he wrote his *Metamorphoses* and C. S. Lewis, who retold the story in his novel, *Till We Have Faces*. As philosophers, both men tell their versions of the story through their own understanding of nature and divinity, which creates vastly different narratives surrounding the same subject. As fiction writers, they also both utilize the familiar cultural imagery of light and darkness to illustrate their points.

Apuleius, for his part, told the tale as a reflection of the larger narrative of curiosity and enlightenment in *The Golden Ass*, which foreshadows Lucius' own transformation into a priest of Isis and the grace extended to him for his youthful meddling. As a Neoplatonist, Apuleius was probably influenced by Plato's own use of light and fire imagery, most notable in *Republic's* Allegory of the Cave. In the contrast between the shadowy, smoky half-truths found underground and the clear, harsh realities seen in sunlight, the allegory builds on societal connotations of each type of light. As Apuleius situates his characters opposite one another, the distinctions between his Venus, who frequently "burns" with anger, and Psyche, who "shines" with beauty, take on a moral condemnation of the former while honoring the latter. It is not a coincidence that, in order to err, Psyche must use a burning oil lamp to break her oath with her husband. In contrast to them both, however, Cupid's figure is constantly shrouded in shadow, both literally and figuratively, throwing the other two central characters into relief while avoiding moral implications himself.

Likewise, Lewis' own Christian context led him to reframe the story into one about doubt, sacrifice, and fear in religion, finding curious ignorance not in the actions of Psyche but in those of her sister. While he typifies Ungit as a squat, dark god ensconced in her dark temple

whose worship is defined by burnt sacrifices, he attributes a burning nature to all divine beings in the story, describing the God of the Grey Mountain as lightning sustained and Psyche's own, transfigured hands as giving a painless, burning touch. Within his Christian context, which features images such as Moses' burning bush and the tongues of flame at Pentecost alongside descriptions of God himself as Light, Lewis uses the imagery of fire and light not to moralize any one figure but to denote the terrifying, unfamiliar nature of divinity.

As each author manipulates light and fire to represent enlightenment, desire, greed, and divinity, they insert their own world views into their adaptations to offer their own unknown truths about the universe and its mysteries. In this paper, I argue that Apuleius' use of fire and light reflects Psyche as a mirror of Venus to directly contrast Psyche and Venus against Cupid, while Lewis utilizes light and dark as different aspects of a burning divinity, ultimately upholding fire as an image for spiritual transformation rather than consuming desire.

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