

THE MAKING OF A HERO

Carla Alvarez on the Changing Modern
Perspective of Heroism

Courage comes in many forms. There is the courage of the moment when an individual rises to a challenge. There is the courage that is found in a group, a banding together and facing the odds. However, there is another sort of courage that begins in defeated circumstances with a person whom one would never pick to overcome. It is a courage that begins with a building of bravery and a turning of timidity to tenacity. It is a reforming, and because this transformation takes place not in a moment but through a painful step by painful step journey, one challenge overcome at a time; this is the type of courage that endures.

Courage is denoted by action. There must be something within that impels the action. As Lewis

notes in his review on Ajax and Greek Tragedy, “behaviour is primarily a symptom from which to infer the ‘haunting’ latencies of the psyche.”¹ It must be within first before it can come out.

This has not always been our belief or how our stories have been told. In the ancient myths, heroes were those who were of divine descent. They could perform extraordinary feats because they themselves were extraordinary, more than human. In the same essay, Lewis points out this change in origin of the impetus came about because of “Christianity and then by liberal individualism.”² Our stories of courage shifted from the divinely gifted few among the ordinary masses to the Everyman: stories where the innate human dignity flowers and flourishes. The extension of this is that the courageous and benevolent acts of the hero displace the demigods from the pedestal they formerly occupied.

Culture Needs Heroes

A culture is shaped by the heroes that it reveres. A culture’s stories portray heroes with qualities

¹ C.S. Lewis, “Ajax and Others: John Jones, On Aristotle and Other Greek Tragedy,” in *Image and Imagination* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 192.

² Ibid.

that the society values and which citizens should emulate. However, there is an interesting shift that has occurred in the past several decades in the popular stories of our culture. As our society has progressed into postmodernism and further away from Christian values, so have our heroes. Our heroes are no longer those who exemplify praiseworthy character qualities such as goodness, fidelity, and kindness, but there is almost a glorification of the very opposite. As Louis Markos notes in *Restoring Beauty*, “We are often more afraid of beauty than of ugliness.”³

Not only is the ugly and the vile celebrated, but along with this has come the devaluation of the self, the intrinsic worth of the individual. Our heroes don't look like us anymore. Luke of *Star Wars* is born with an innate ability to manipulate the Force: part of a class of a sci-fi version of demigods, if you will. We have returned to a stratification in the cosmos of cultural heroes found among that of the ancient pagans, sometimes with literal reintroductions into popular culture of ancient gods such as Thor and Loki.

³ Louis Markos, *Restoring Beauty: The Good, The True, and The Beautiful in the Writings of C.S. Lewis* (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblical Publishing, 2010).

What encouragement can the common man draw from the exploits of these super beings? Example cannot be taken from them as they are in another class entirely. The only message that can be taken is to wait for someone better equipped to handle the problems life brings. Passivity is cultivated. A spotlight on this dilemma is made in this year's release, *The Incredibles 2*. The sister (and villain) of the superhero patron wants to destroy the supernaturally gifted because she resents the public's reliance upon them and blames this reliance for her parents' death.⁴ As Richard Brody points out in his review of the movie in *The New Yorker*, the film director Brad Bird presents both the reliance on these super beings as well as the super heroes' "detachment . . . from morality" as a good and desirable thing.⁵ The message is that there is one set of rules for the small group of gifted and another for everyone else. In this worldview the gifted, who can be identified as those Lewis labeled the "Conditioners" in *The Abolition of Man*, have the

⁴ Brad Bird, *The Incredibles 2* (Pixar Animation Studios, 2018).

⁵ Richard Brody, "Review: The Authoritarian Populism of 'Incredibles 2,'" *The New Yorker*, June 19, 2018, accessed August 30, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/review-the-authoritarian-populism-of-incredibles-2>.

right to decide the course of action and the destiny of all others.⁶

So what is the answer? If we are to reclaim our culture and reinstate the value and potential for greatness that is found in each human being rather than the dependence of the masses on the preternaturally gifted few, what kinds of stories should be told?

The Stories that Need to be Told

In a culture that is searching for meaning, it is more important than ever to tell stories that point to the path of courage for each individual. As Markos quotes from *The Sacred Romance*, that “In some deep place within, we remember what we were made to be, we carry with us the memory of gods, image-bearers walking in the Garden.”⁷ Not a

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001). 60-61. “But the man-moulders of the new age will be armed with the powers of an omnipotent state and an irresistible scientific technique: we shall get at last a race of conditioners who can really cut out all posterity in what shape they please . . . It is the function of Conditioners to control, not obey them [objective values]. They know how to *produce* conscience and decide what kind of conscience they will produce.”

⁷ Markos. 10. Markos quotes from Chapter 7 of *The Sacred Romans* by Brent Curtis and John Eldredge. The full quote: “Every woman is in some way searching for or running from her beauty and every man is looking for or avoiding his strength. Why? In some deep place within, we remember what we were made to be, we carry with us the memory of gods, image-bearers walking in the Garden. So why do we flee our essence? As hard it may be for us to see our sin, it is far

separate class of demigods, but rather we are called to be the children of God. We matter.

However this path has obstacles of our own making: our pride, our flaws, and our failures. We look to our past and circumstances which often seem overwhelming; it looks as if we will never overcome. When we cannot see beyond our present circumstances and the way to a different outcome, it is hard to have hope. The stories of personal transformation, showing how one person went from a failure to victor can encourage those looking for an answer. As Nicole Howe notes in her essay on Augustine's *Confessions*, "the journey of wandering and overcoming is not a physical journey; it is a spiritual one."⁸ The stories of true value are not just those with quirky characters and interesting plot twists, but those that illustrate the path of personal transformation and growth.

An example of this type can be seen in two very different stories in two different mediums: the

harder still for us to remember our glory. The pain of the memory of our former glory is so excruciating, we would rather stay in the pigsty than return to our true home."

⁸ Nicole Howe, "Augustine's *The Confessions*: The Power of Spiritual Autobiography," *An Unexpected Journal* 1, no. 2 (Summer 2018):87.

book *Till We Have Faces* by C.S. Lewis,⁹ and the film *Dear Frankie* (2004) directed by Shona Auerbach.¹⁰ Each story begins with a conflicted female protagonist who hides from the truth in one way or another. Both rise above an abusive background. Both begin with a distorted view of love and operate out of fear. The themes of the two stories are similar; however, the details are very different.

Till We Have Faces is Lewis's retelling of the myth of Psyche and Cupid. Set in the fictional kingdom of Glome (a distant neighbor of Greece), the story is told from the perspective of Psyche's sister, Orual. From birth, Psyche is beautiful both in word and in deed. The outer beauty is a manifestation of the inner grace. Orual describes it as:

It was a beauty that did not astonish you till afterwards when you had gone out of sight of her and reflected on it. While she was with you, you were not astonished. It seemed the most natural thing in the world as the Fox delighted to say, "She was according to nature"; what every woman, even every thing ought to have

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Inc., 1956).

¹⁰ Shona Auerbach, *Dear Frankie* (Miramax, 2004).

been and meant to be, but had missed by some trip of chance. Indeed when you looked at her you believed for a moment, that they had not missed it. She made beauty all around her.¹¹

Orual, on the other hand was singularly ugly. She did not draw all people to her through face and form, but she cared for Psyche after her mother's death. Psyche was the focal point in her life. When Psyche was offered to the Shadow brute to appease the anger of Aphrodite (known as Ungual in Glome), she risked the wrath of the king and the people in an attempt to save her.

However Orual, as did the sister in the original myth, pushed Psyche to disobey her love's command by looking upon him, precipitating a disastrous series of events. Psyche was then lost to her and Orual had to continue her life alone. This love that had been the focal point of her life turned into bitterness: bitterness against the gods and bitterness against Psyche herself. For her love for Psyche was, as Lewis refers to it in *The Four Loves* a "Need-love,"¹² one which loves because of what it

¹¹ Ibid. 22.

¹² C.S. Lewis, "The Four Loves," in *The Family Christian Library: The Beloved Works of C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Family Christian Press, 1960), 211–288.

receives in that love. It was, as Orual's mentor Fox warned her, "one part love in your heart, and five parts anger, and seven parts pride."¹³

This "Need-love," because it is based in self, does not end simply in being filled by the object of its affection, it must devour. As Psyche told Orual,

You are indeed teaching me about kinds of love I did not know. It is like looking into a deep pit. I am not sure whether I like your kind better than hatred. Oh, Orual—to take my love for you, because you know it goes down to my very roots and cannot be diminished by any other newer love, and then to make of it a tool, a weapon, a thing of policy and master, an instrument of torture—I begin to think I never knew you.¹⁴

This theme of a corrupted and manipulative love, a "Need-love," is also found in the film *Dear Frankie*. The protagonist is a mother who is on the run from her abusive husband with her son and her mother. As with Orual's possessive love towards Psyche, the husband's love had long ago devolved into a thing that damaged and devoured.

¹³ Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*. 148.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 165.

Directed by Shona Auerbach, the film illustrates a woman transformed over the course of the film, from one who lives in fear to a lioness who faces it.¹⁵ However, this change comes gradually, slowly building like the beautiful melody of the theme song composed by Alex Heffes. We may not be able to put our finger exactly on the moment when the change occurs, but the full transformation is evident when the moment of truth comes.

When we meet Lizzie and her son, Frankie, she is arriving at a new town to temporarily call home. In contrast to Psyche who traveled the land to perform quests to be reunited to her love, Lizzie goes to great lengths to stay out of her husband's reach. For three years she has moved from town to town in Scotland, always on guard, ready to pack up and leave at a moment's notice. She lives like a refugee escaping the terror of her former life, always trying to stay one step ahead of her past which is trying to catch up with her.

In her effort to protect Frankie from the knowledge of what his father is and to keep questions at bay, she fabricates a story that his father is a seaman on a ship called Accra. In order to continue this charade, she writes periodic letters to

¹⁵ Shona Auerbach, *Dear Frankie* (Miramax, 2004).

Frankie impersonating his father as he should be and with which Frankie corresponds. This deception is motivated by love and a desire to keep her son safe; however, like Orual's, it is a controlling love. Just as Orual withholds bits of information in order to manipulate outcomes, such as acknowledging she did actually catch a glimpse of Psyche's home when speaking to Fox and distorting Fox's words when convincing Psyche to break her word to her husband, Lizzie keeps tight control on the information she shares with those around her. It is this manipulation of truth that brings about a crisis that forces a revelation in the end.^{16 17}

Development Through Circumstance

However, before the shadow can lift, darkness has to be exposed to the light . . . especially the darkness within. Orual loses the person closest to her by trying to control and refusing to let go. In her mind, she is in the right of it and her actions are justified. As with the superheroes in *The Incredibles 2*, she sets her own rules. Refusing to reflect on her own actions after the loss of Psyche, she continues

¹⁶ Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*, 133-134.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 161.

on to rule the kingdom of Glome in service of others, but always alone.

If Orual's "Need-love" was a combination of love, anger, and pride, Lizzie's is equal parts fear and love. She keeps her secrets from everyone around her . . . her son, her mother, and her friends who are by necessity transitory . . . in an effort to maintain control of the situation. However, for Lizzie, circumstances begin to escalate that are far beyond her control.

After the little family begins to get established in their new community and obtains a sense of balance, exposure threatens on two different fronts. The first comes in the form of Frankie's cocky friend Ricky who shows him a newspaper announcement that the ship Accra will be docking in Greenock the following week, making a bet with Frankie that his dad will not come to see him. Betting his prized cards against Frankie's precious stamp collection, he seems certain that Frankie's father will be a no-show. From where does this confidence come? Perhaps Auerbach agrees with filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski who once stated, "Children know more because they think with their

instinct, not their reason."¹⁸ Somehow Ricky senses the situation is off and believes he has a sure thing.

This revelation also prompts a second issue not immediately apparent. Because Frankie diligently charts the path of his dad's ship, his map shows the ship should be approaching the coast of Africa, not anywhere near Greenock, Scotland. This begins to raise questions in Frankie's own mind which are pieced together in the end. Lizzie, like Orual and Lewis's "Conditioners", believes she has the best in mind for her son; however, within each of us is a desire for truth that will forever push against the curtain of deception, no matter how lovingly hung.

However, it is not only this incident and the pending exposure to Frankie that is disturbing Lizzie's world. Her past life is also threatening to catch up with her. Lizzie's mother, Nell, discovers an ad looking for Lizzie and Frankie placed by Lizzie's in-laws. Nell attempts to get her son-in-law's family to leave them alone, but instead the size of the ad is exponentially increased along with a photo of Lizzie. The family, like Ricky, is not going to go away quietly.

¹⁸ Simon Hattenstone, "Krzysztof Kieslowski Interviewed for Three Colours Red," *The Guardian*, November 8, 1994, accessed December 1, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/nov/09/krzysztof-kieslowski-interview>.

Exposing Darkness to Light

These incidents occurring all at one time make Lizzie realize that she cannot continue the deceit. She begins to tell Frankie; however, when she realizes how emotionally invested he is in the imaginary picture of his father she has created, she is spurred to drastic and ill-considered action. Rather than confessing the whole, she instead decides to find a man, a stranger, who will impersonate Frankie's father for one day. After failing miserably at the local pub, she is disconsolate and wanders the streets ending up by the bay. It is here that her friend, Marie, finds her the next morning. The entire sequence is mostly silent. It is the silence itself that conveys Lizzie's loneliness and desperation. Lizzie confesses her plight and Marie offers to find a man to fit the job, a stranger to play Frankie's dad for a single day. This releasing of her tightly controlled secret to another is the beginning of Lizzie's transformation. As she acknowledges her vulnerability and opens up to another, the chains of manipulation, control, and fear begin to lose their hold.

While circumstances cumulate quickly in Lizzie's life, Orual's transformation from one consumed by a "Need-love" to surrendering to the

Divine “Gift love” takes place over a longer period of time.¹⁹ Although no one takes the place that Psyche held in her heart, through the years there are others close to her which are impacted by her self-focused love: Fox, her mentor; Bardia, her second-in-command; and Redieval, her remaining sister. Because her opinion and view of the people close to her is defined by the actions and attention coming in to her, how her own needs are filled, not only does she never truly see them, but she herself is never truly known because her “glass,” to use the Apostle Paul’s metaphor, is clouded with self-interest.²⁰

Even the love and care poured into Psyche was tainted with need, Psyche may have been loved and admired by all, but Orual was loved by Psyche. If all admire a desired one but the desired one admires you, you are in the superior position. From the first, Orual’s care is motivated by a desire to control, it is a selfish and jealous love as finally revealed in the conclusion when she confronts the gods to make her complaint for their actions.

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:12. KJV. “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known.

We want to be our own. I was my own and Psyche was mine and no one else had any other right to her. Oh you'll say you took her away into bliss and joy such as I could never have given her, and I ought to have been glad of it for her sake. Why? What should I care for some horrible, new happiness which I hadn't given her and which separated her from me? Do you think I wanted her to be happy, that way? It would have been better if I'd seen the Brute tear her in pieces before my eyes.²¹

Death Before Rebirth

For both Lizzie and Orual, before there can be a rebirth into something new, that which is corrupted in the old must die. Lizzie must rise above the fear which has bound her and Orual must release the pride which has prevented her from seeing the truth of her actions. For both, the spiritual renewal is precipitated by a physical death.

While there have been outbursts where Orual's self-centered actions are on display throughout the narrative, the only perspective given to the reader is Orual's own. In her mind, her actions are

²¹ C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*, 291-292.

warranted. It is not until the death of her close friend and military commander, Bardia, that she is forced to examine herself. Throughout his final illness, Orual is indignant that he is away for so long, certain that it is his wife that is keeping him away. Even when she hears of his death, her only thoughts are of how it affects her and regrets that “all would be bearable if, only once, I could have gone to him and whispered in his ear, ‘Bardia, I loved you.’”²²

It is not until she visits Bardia’s widow, Ansit, to give her condolences that Orual is forced to take a hard look at herself, her actions, and her motivations. Pushed past courtesy in her grief, Ansit confronts Orual with her narcissism which consumed without thought of those around her. The clear mirror held by Bardia’s wife is not one Orual can ignore.

Orual leaves incensed, but it is no use. Her conscience so long muffled is revived and “those divine Surgeons had me tied down and were at work. My anger protected me only for a short time; anger wearies itself out and truth comes in. For it was all true - truer than Ansit could know.”²³ A

²² Ibid, 258.

²³ Ibid, 266.

flood of other memories come in until Orual has to admit that what she had called love is “a sickening thing.”²⁴ All that she had prided herself on is as ashes until “nearly all that I called myself went with it. It was if my whole soul had been one tooth and now that tooth was drawn. I was a gap. And now I thought I had come to the very bottom that the gods could tell me no worse.”²⁵

For Lizzie, it is the impending death of her estranged husband that causes her to face her fears. The film up to this point has been one of sparse words and stretches of silence. Meaning is communicated through what is not said. In contrast, the hospital scene where she faces her husband is the most verbal and sound filled portion of the film. It is as if Lizzie steps from the half-light of a twilight world back into reality to face and vanquish her dragons. The light is brighter; there is background noise and more words. A war is being waged. Some words are violent words from Frankie’s father when his will is thwarted and he once again threatens Lizzie. Lizzie must acknowledge and face the fears that have kept her in bondage and allow the courage that has been

²⁴ Ibid. 267.

²⁵ Ibid.

silently germinating, nurtured by the love and support of those around her, to arise. Lizzie does not turn and run this time, but draws on her newly found courage and denies him.

New Vision

For both Lizzie and Orual, the vanquishing of the old brings about restoration and new beginnings. After the emptying of her pride and her rebellion abandoned, Orual is finally in a condition where she can hear the gods when they speak.²⁶ She acknowledges, "I could mend my soul no more than I could mend my face, unless the gods helped."²⁷ Orual experiences a vision in which she presents her complaint to the council of gods. As she reads the litany of the wrongs she believes she has suffered at their hands, her true self and her true voice are heard. Not only can she not deceive the gods, but she cannot deceive herself. The last vestiges of her false construction of self come crashing down and she realizes "I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How

²⁷ Ibid, 281.

can they meet us face to face till we have faces?"²⁸ Her spiritual transformation and physical journey are complete, and at the end of her life, she sees the beauty in herself that was always hidden by the pride which obscured.

While both Orual's physical life and spiritual transformation are completed at the same time, Lizzie's transformation brings about a new chapter. *Dear Frankie* ends with Lizzie discovering Frankie at the bay sitting at the end of the pier. Sitting down beside him and leaning against him, the scene closes with the two sitting there, which Frankie described at the beginning of the film as "the end of the world." It is the end of that world for them, one which had been lived in fear and filled with deception, and the beginning of a new based on a foundation of truth. However, the viewer is not given a neatly wrapped ending and resolution. Lizzie's journey is ongoing; her destination not yet determined.

The Apostle Paul assures us in Romans 8:28 that in spite of circumstances, God is working together all things for our good. Good does not always mean pleasant. Good in this context means transforming us into the image of Christ. Like Orual

²⁸ Ibid, 294.

who was knocked down and trampled by the golden-wooled rams in the field of her vision (representing the acts of the gods), she found herself "butted and trampled . . . Yet they did not kill me. When they had gone over me, I lived and knew myself, and presently could stand on my feet."²⁹ Life can, and often does, run us over, but it is at times that very discouragement and defeat that ultimately brings us to a place of victory. Just as Lizzie and Frankie had come "to the end of the world," it is when we come to the end of ourselves that God can begin. It is the stories of individual transformation, where the weak are made strong and the corrupt are made right, that need to be told because it is only through our individual transformation . . . the making of a hero . . . that society as a whole can be redeemed.

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