

Deadly Serious Fun: *The Great Divorce*

by C. S. Lewis

"No individual has had a greater influence on the Christian Church in the 20th Century than C.S. Lewis."

C. S. Lewis Foundation

"He is the ideal persuader of the half-convinced."

New York Times Book Review

"Men must endure their going hence."

Lewis's epitaph, King Lear

A few biographical facts: Clive Staples Lewis--self-nicknamed "Jack" at age 4, after his beloved dog, Jack, died--was born in Ireland in 1898. His mother, grandfather, and uncle died when he was 10, and his father never completely recovered from the losses. ("Warmth went out of the house," Lewis wrote.) Respiratory problems interfered with his schoolwork. By the age of 13, he was an avowed atheist.

By 18, he was a poet. He read George Macdonald's *Phantastes* (1858), a Christian fantasy/allegory, and felt "baptized in imagination," though "the rest of him would take longer." Macdonald is his spirit guide in *The Great Divorce*.

Lewis excelled at Oxford, fought in WWI, and was wounded on his 19th birthday. His close friend and bunkmate, "Paddy" Moore, was killed in battle. He cared for Moore's mother, as promised, until she died.

He did not become a Christian until 1931 at the age of 33—and even then, it was "kicking and screaming."

Lewis held positions at both Oxford and Cambridge--a much beloved teacher, novelist, poet, medievalist, literary critic, essayist, lay theologian, broadcaster, lecturer, and Christian "apologist"—defending Christianity against skeptics with rational arguments.

During World War II, he gave popular radio broadcasts and wrote weekly installments of *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce* for the Anglican newspaper, *The Guardian*.

In 1956, after a long friendship, Lewis married Joy Davidman in a civil ceremony (which he called "a pure matter of expediency") to prevent her deportation back to America. Many of Lewis's friends (including J.R.R. Tolkien) disapproved of the marriage. Joy was a Jewish-American Christian convert, a former member of the Communist party, divorced, and the mother of two sons. But she was also Lewis's match in intellect and imagination and deeply in love with him.

A few months after the ceremony, Joy was diagnosed with incurable cancer. Lewis fell in love with her when he faced the prospect of losing her. They consecrated their marriage in a Christian ceremony in 1957, a "deathbed wedding." But miraculously Joy recovered, and she and Lewis enjoyed four good years together

before the cancer returned. After her miracle cure collapsed, his faith wavered. He wrote *A Grief Observed* “in order to survive.” (“Why is God a very absent help in [such] trouble?”)

He recovered from the loss of Joy, but people who knew him well said he was never the same. He died in 1963. [The film *Shadowlands* tells their story.]

THE GREAT DIVORCE

“Lean on me . . . I can’t absolutely carry you, but you need have almost no weight....” (60)

“Could you only for a moment fix your mind on something not yourself?” (64)

Preface: A Disclaimer from the Author

What does one pack for a day-trip from Hell to Heaven with the option of staying forever?

What purpose does the Preface serve?

Is Earth a foretaste of Hell? Heaven? (viii)

Chapter 1: At the Bus Stop

Is “Lew,” the narrator, reliable? Can you trust his account of things?

Where’s the fire and brimstone?

Why are Hellions so *irritable*??

Reference: Luke 16: 19-25

Chapter 2: “Helicopter”--The Journey on the Bus

What qualifies one for Hell?

Why does night never come there?

Is Hell an expanding universe of its own?

As the bus approaches its destination, radiant light pours in through the windows. Why does Lew call this light “cruel?”

What does Lew see in the bus’s mirror?

Chapter 3: Arrival

The bus ride enhances Lew’s senses. Why is this necessary?

How do you picture Heaven? Does Lewis’s Heaven come close?

Why can’t Lew pick the flowers? Does reality have to be so *painful*?

Can one “acclimatize” to Heaven? Do the passengers experience a kind of spiritual “bends?”

What does one *do* here? Is all spiritual growth over?
What three shocks does Lew experience?

Chapter 4: Justice in Heaven

Who welcomes the Hellions? What is the “agenda?”
Can a murderer be accepted into Heaven and a non-murderer be excluded?
What does the redeemed spirit “Len” ask of his damned former employer?
What’s the last thing the Big Man says in Heaven? What stands in his way?

Reference: Galatians 2:20

Chapter 5: Two Lions and a Coward

Should Lew be wary of the lions? **Reference: Isaiah 11**
What qualifies the liberal Anglican Bishop for Hell? Does God punish people for their honest opinions about religion?
Why must the Bishop turn down Heaven today? *Is he in Hell in Heaven?*
Reference: John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: “Better to reign in Hell than serve in heaven.” (Lucifer/Satan)
Why is Lewis so tough on the Bishop?

Chapter 6: The Waterfall and the Thief

Does Ikey (the hopeful Capitalist) deserve damnation? Can anything be said in his defense?
Is the waterfall just a waterfall? How does it change before Lew’s eyes?
Is Ikey deaf? Do you pity him as he “carries his torture” back to the bus?
Should you?

Chapter 7: The Conspiracy Theorist: “Bah humbug!”

Why the sudden drooping of Lew’s energy?
The cynical arguments of the “hard-bitten” man plunge him into depression. Are they plausible to you?
Is it possible that the universe is rigged against us, not for us?

Chapter 8: Homesick for Hell

Lew hits rock bottom. *“This is no place for you.”*
Who were Tantalus and Prometheus? Are *all* gods cruel? Is despair the end of all our seeking?
Why is the “high-fashion” ghost hiding in the bushes? (“Every one will SEE me—they will see right *through* me.”)

Does everyone “look bad” in heaven at first?

Reference: “Hell isn’t where they are, but what they are.”

(John Ciardi, translator of Dante’s *Inferno*)

Chapter 9: Turning Point: “Where are ye going?”

Why did George Macdonald’s book *Phantastes* hit Lewis so hard when he was a young man? Should we be reading it now?

“*Good and evil are both retrospective.*” What does Macdonald mean?

Will the Last Judgment be final? No loopholes? No appeals?

“All that can be shaken will be shaken and only the unshakeable remains.”

Note: Scottish pastor and writer, Macdonald (1824-1905) used fantasy as a literary medium for exploring the human condition. He inspired Lewis, Tolkien, Madeleine L’Engle, Lewis Carroll, Mark Twain, and J.K. Rowling to do the same. He rejected the atonement doctrine of John Calvin--that Christ was punished in our place to appease God’s wrath. For him, Christ came to save people from their sins, not exact a divine penalty for their sins. **The problem is “the disease of cosmic evil itself,” he wrote. Christ “let all the waves and billows of evil’s sea break upon him and die without rebound. Evil, not God, spent its rage on him and fell back defeated.”** Yet Macdonald believed that we must still fear the God of love, for his wrath will forever seek to break the false selves we have made, until the selves *He* made reappear.

Is “**Where are ye going?**” the question of his book?

“*There are two kinds of people: those who say “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says [at the end of history], “Thy will be done.”*”

Was God giving man free will a terrible risk? A risk for whom?

Who is the most repulsive and pitiable ghost of all?

Why is sexual flirtation grotesque in heaven?

Chapter 10: The Dutiful Vampire

Did the dutiful wife cause her husband to have a nervous breakdown? Was he complicit? Are some marriages made in Hell?

What IS love on earth? Is it love at all?

Chapter 11: A Smothering Mother and a Whispering Red Lizard

Can a mother’s grief for a lost child be a damnable sin?

Is Lew right to pity “Pam?” Is pity ever wrong?

“Every natural love will rise again . . . but none will rise again until it has been buried.” (105) Is this truth too hard to hear on earth?

What is the Red Lizard that sits on the shoulder of the “dark and oily” ghost?
Is procrastination impossible in Heaven, where all days are NOW?
What happens when the lizard dies?
Why have some readers objected to this transformative victory over sin?

Chapter 12: A Grand Procession, a Tragic Actor, and a Dwarf.

How is greatness defined in Heaven? Who on earth was/is Sarah Smith?
What was Sarah and Frank’s marriage like on earth? (121)
Frank (as tragic actor) intones melodramatically, “*You do not love me . . . You do not need me . . .*” Why doesn’t his “act” work here?
Does Sarah love him? **“I am in love Himself . . . “ (126)** Can she save him?

Chapter 13: The Problem of Pity and Other Questions

Frank uses pity to force love’s attention. Is Lew taken in?
“I do not know that I ever saw anything more terrible than the struggle of that Dwarf Ghost against joy.”
The tragic actor—the ghost of a ghost—finally swallows the chain that Frank leads him by. Should we pity Frank?
Sarah will not follow Frank back into Hell. Should she? **“I am in love, and out of it I will not go.” (133)** Reference: **Psalm 91—revised.**

Culminating Questions

(1) WHAT QUESTION REMAINS UNRESOLVED IN LEW’S MIND? (135)
Shouldn’t even one lost soul give the lie to all the joy of those who are saved? If not, why not?
Reference: Revelation 14:9-12. In Chapter 14, the “third angel” says that the smoke of the torments of the damned will ascend up to heaven forever and ever *in the sight of the angels and the Lamb*---and they will be *unmoved*. Would these words have special resonance in 1944 and 1945?

Do you share Lew’s confusion about pity? Does it have a limit?

(2) REVELATION: HOW BIG WAS THE EXCURSION BUS FROM HELL?
How big—in reality—is the sprawling gray town? How far do the plains of Hell really extend?
How big was the abyss—the great chasm—that separated heaven from Hell? **“A crack in the soil” . . . the width of a grass blade.** (137)

What is the force of this revelation on Lew?

(3) WHY DON'T THE ANGELS STORM HELL AND SET THE CAPTIVES FREE?

“A damned soul is nearly nothing . . . “ If Hell is smaller than a single pebble of Earth, smaller than a single atom of Heaven, how can an angel fit into that spiritual confinement? (139)

Who was able to shrink that much? Will Christ ever go back?

(4) “ALL ANSWERS DECEIVE.”

Reference: Lady Julian of Norwich (1342-1416). What question did she ask Christ in a vision, and what was His answer? (140)*

Chapter 14: Sleepers Awake!

The Sun begins to rise on Judgment Day. Why is Lew so terrified?
Is this a happy ending? What does Lewis see and hear in his bedroom?
Where are we – and when?

“It was necessary that there should be sin; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

*Mystic Julian of Norwich, 14th century Anchorite,
in the midst of the Plague.*

* “Why did God not prevent sin, for then all would be well?”

