Chapter V

THE GREAT DIVORCE
A DREAM
In the relatively short allegorical novel, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis’s first person narrator takes us on a profound journey through both Heaven and Hell. Using his extraordinary descriptive powers, Lewis introduces us to supernatural beings who will change the way we think about good and evil. In this novel C.S. Lewis again employs his formidable talent for fable and allegory. His treatment of Heaven and Hell in this novel is a masterful work of fiction.

The idea for *The Great Divorce* was to mature in Lewis’s mind for a long time before it came to fruition. In August and September 1931 he read the works of the seventeenth-century Anglican divine Jeremy Taylor. In Taylor’s sermon on “Christ’s Advent to Judgement” he came across the idea of the *Refrigerium*. “The church of Rome amongst other strange opinions,” says Taylor:

... hath inserted this one into her public offices; that the perishing souls in hell may have sometimes remission and refreshment, like the fits of an intermitting fever: for so it is in the Roman missal printed at Paris, 1626, in the mass for the dead; *Ut quia de ejus vitae qualitate diffidimus, etsi plenam veniam anima ipsius obtinere non potest, saltem vel inter ipsa tormenta quae forsan partitur, refrigerium de abundantia misererationum tuarum sentiat.*

*1*
* The last four lines may be translated as:

And since we are unsure about the character of his life, 
even if his soul is unable to obtain full remission, let him 
at least feel some relief, through the abundance of thy 
great mercies, among whatever crushing sufferings he 
endures.

In the same sermon Taylor mentions another source of the 
*Refrigerium*: the fourth-century Latin poet and hymn-writer Prudentius 
Aurelius Clemens. In his “Hymn for the Lighting of the Lamp,” found 
in his *Liber Cathemerinon*, he says, “Often below the Styx holidays 
from their punishments are kept, even by the guilty spirits... Hell 
grows feeble with mitigated torments and the shadowy nation, free 
from fires, exults in the leisure of its prison; the rivers cease to burn 
with their usual sulphur.”

The idea took hold, and in his diary for 16 April 1933 Warnie 
Lewis said, “J[ack] has a new idea for a religious work, based on the 
opinion of some of the Fathers, that while punishment for the damned 
is eternal, it is intermittent: he proposes to do sort of an infernal day 
excursion to Paradise. I shall be very interested to see how he handles 
it.” The translation given above of the passage said to come from a
Parisian Missal of 1626 was made by Father Jerome Bertram of the Oxford Oratory, who says:

In *The Great Divorce* Lewis is making use of the old tradition of the Refrigerium or Holiday from Hell. He would have been aware of this from his earliest student days from the tenth-century Anglo-Saxon poem *The Seafarer*, where the hero meets Judas during one of his occasional days off. The idea is older than that, and is usually considered to date from the apocryphal *Apocalypse of Paul* dating from the late fourth century, in which Christ grants a day and a night’s refreshments for ever on Easter day.⁴

It became something of a commonplace in late first-millennium tradition, though the Church never gave any official countenance to the idea. The actual word *refrigerium* is Scriptural, occurring in the Vulgate six times. Lewis cites Jeremy Taylor who claims to have found the idea of repose from Hell in an early seventeenth-century Parisian Missal.

It was to be eleven years before Lewis began his *Refrigerium* story, but the thought behind it was there before he read Jeremy Taylor. In between his conversion to Theism (1929) and his conversion
to Christianity (1931), Lewis composed two poems entitled “Divine Justice” and “Nearly They Stood” in Poems, which appeared in The Pilgrim’s Regress in 1933.

The poems and the chapter entitled “The Black Hole” contain three of the powerful ideas that were to figure in The Great Divorce: (1) you cannot fix a point beyond which a man is unable to repent and be saved but “there will be such a point somewhere”; (2) even God cannot overrule free will because “It is meaningless to talk of forcing a man to do freely what a man has freely made impossible for himself”; (3) “evil is fissiparous and could never in a thousand eternities find any way to arrest its own reproduction,” and Hell was created as a “tourniquet” to stop the lost soul’s downward progression.

In the Preface Lewis remarks that William Blake’s Marriage of Heaven and Hell is one of many attempts to make us believe such a “marriage” possible: that “reality never presents us with an absolutely unavoidable ‘either-or’”. That is, he says, a “disastrous error” (5). We do not live in a world where all roads meet at the centre, but one “where every road, after a few miles, forks into two, and each of those into two again, and at each fork you must make a decision.... Good ... becomes continually more different not only from evil but from other good” (6). Not all who choose the wrong road perish, but
their rescue consists in being put back on the right road: “If we insist on keeping Hell (or even earth) we shall not see Heaven: if we accept Heaven we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenirs of Hell” (6). Earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to be a region of Hell: if put second to Heaven, it will be found to be “the beginning of a part of Heaven itself” (7). Lewis urges his readers to remember that his book is a fantasy: “I beg the readers to remember that this is a fantasy...the transmortal conditions are solely an imaginative supposal: they are not even a guess or a speculation at what may actually await us. The last thing I wish is to arouse factual curiosity about the details of the afterworld” (7-8). As this book demonstrates, however, fantasy can be an effective tool for proclaiming the gospel.

An allegory along the lines of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, *The Great Divorce* was written, as Lewis explains in the Preface, to combat the Universalist notion that everyone will be saved in the end. The book takes the form of a bus ride that carries the damned from Hell to Heaven, where the narrator learns that they are offered a chance to stay there, but ultimately reject it because they prefer to remain in Hell.
In the opening chapters of the book, we find that Hell is a bleak, dreary “grey town” (17), vast and lonely, hovering in a perpetual rainy twilight. Wandering through abandoned streets, the narrator/Lewis finally stumbles across a bus stop in a “long mean street” (11), where a group of people are waiting for the bus. All of them are angry and argumentative, however, seemingly unable to tolerate each other’s presence: they quarrel, assault each other or drop out of the line declaring that they did not want to go anyway at the slightest provocation.

Finally the bus, “blazing with gold light” and “heraldically coloured,” driven by an unidentified man who “seemed full of light” arrives (13). The passengers pile on, and to the narrator’s surprise, as they drive off the bus soars up into the air. the grey town falling away beneath it. The boundaries of the town cannot be seen, however; in fact, the higher they climb, the huger it is revealed to be, filling all the field of vision. We learn that this is because its inhabitants, unable to tolerate each other, keep moving further and further out to be away from everyone else. Since they have no physical needs, necessity does not force them together to build a functioning society. It is further explained that the average damned soul will never meet any of the interesting historical personalities that dwell there, because by now they
are so far away from everyone else—millions of miles—that it would take forever to find them.

The bus at last arrives at the top of a “level, grassy country through which there ran a wide river” (26). As the passengers pile out, Heaven is revealed to be an idyllic wilderness paradise, an Eden-like garden country of rivers and trees. Its sense of scale is enormous, and in a distance unimaginably far away, Lewis catches sight of indistinct cities built on the summits of gigantic mountains. He notices that the other passengers appear transparent when in the light, “smudgy and imperfectly opaque when… in the shadow of some tree” (27). The grass does not bend beneath their feet and Lewis is unable to pluck a daisy because it is as hard as a diamond. He sees the grass through his feet, and he knows that he is a phantom like the others. The strangest thing the passengers discover, however, is that the place is suffused with a supernatural reality, in a sense more solid, more real, than anything else. In fact, it is so real that the damned find themselves to be insubstantial shadows by comparison, unable to move a single leaf or bend a blade of grass beneath their feet. From this point onward Lewis refers to them as Ghosts.

It is not long before the residents of Heaven arrive: “Some were naked, some robed. But the naked ones did not seem less adorned, and
the robes did not disguise in those who wore them the massive grandeur of muscle and the radiant smoothness of flesh” (30). Unlike the damned, they are as fully solid and real as anything else in this place. Lewis calls them Spirits. Each of them pairs off with one of the Ghosts, trying to convince them to stay, and the narrator's watching and listening to their conversations occupies the rest of the book.

In Chapter IV Lewis witnesses a conversation between one of the “bright” or “solid” people and “the Big Man” or the “Big Ghost” (31-32) from the grey town. The Ghost resists all offers of “Bleeding Charity” (34) because he insists on his “rights” (36). Lewis overhears a conversation between a Spirit named Dick and a Ghost who is an Anglican bishop. Dick had been a clergyman, and the Bishop chides him with having become rather narrow-minded towards the end of his life: “Why, my dear boy, you were coming to believe in a literal Heaven and Hell!” “But wasn’t I right?” (38) asks the Spirit. The Bishop is shocked to find him calling the grey town “Hell.” “You have been in Hell,” says Dick, “though if you don’t go back you may call it Purgatory” (39). The Bishop insists that his opinions are honest and heroic: “When the doctrine of the Resurrection ceased to commend itself to the critical faculties which God had given me, I openly rejected it. I preached my famous sermon.” Dick asks, “When, in our
whole lives, did we honestly face, in solitude, the one question on which all turned: whether after all the Supernatural might not in fact occur?” (40). He insists that they had both allowed themselves to “reach a point where we no longer believed the Faith” (41). When Dick asks the Bishop to “repent and believe” (42), he insists that for him “there is no such thing as a final answer... to travel hopefully is better than to arrive” (43). The Bishop refuses to stay and “thicken up” because he is keen to get back to the grey town where he will be giving a theological paper:

“... I’m going to point out how people always forget that Jesus ... was a comparatively young man when he died. He would have outgrown some of his earlier views, you know, if he’d lived. As he might have done, with a little more tact and patience. I am going to ask my audience to consider what his mature views would have been.... What a different Christianity we might have had if only the Founder had reached his full stature!...”(46)

In Chapter VI a Ghost lifts with enormous difficulty an apple from one of the heavenly trees. As he attempts to get it back to the bus, he is stopped by an angel. “Fool,” it says, “put it down.... There is not room for it in Hell. Stay here and learn to eat such apples”
The Ghost continues dragging the apple to the bus. In Chapter VII Lewis gets into conversation with a Ghost who insists that the encouragement to stay here “is only an advertisement stunt” (54) run by the “same firm” as those who trap tourists into going to other places. He refuses to be “taken in” (56).

In VIII Lewis observes a Spirit trying to persuade a female Ghost to let him help her walk to the Mountains. She is trying to hide from the Bright People: “How can I go out like this among a lot of people with solid bodies?” The Spirit answers:

“An hour hence and you will not care. A day hence and you will laugh at it. Don’t you remember on earth – there were things too hot to touch with your finger but you could drink them all right? Shame is like that. If you will accept it – if you will drink the cup to the bottom – you will find it very nourishing: but try to do anything else with it and it scalds.” (61-62).

In IX we meet the writer George MacDonald. George MacDonald was a nineteenth century story-teller and preacher, born in Scotland in 1824. The influence of his writings were to have on Lewis was profound. Lewis described his initial encounter with MacDonald’s mythopoeic fairy tale *Phantastes* as first “baptizing” his imagination
with a taste for goodness, long before he was to accept Christianity on rational grounds. MacDonald’s appeal, for Lewis, was in the holiness of his imagination. His sermons, essays and novels were to be a great support to Lewis throughout his Christian life, and he testified constantly to the spiritual nourishment he drew from them: “I know nothing that gives me such a feeling of spiritual healing, of being washed as to read George MacDonald.” Not surprising that he makes MacDonald his teacher in *The Great Divorce*, a figure of spiritual authority to guide and support him in his journey through heaven and in his quest to understand it.

As Virgil was Dante’s guide in *The Divine Comedy*, so is MacDonald Lewis’s guide in this “Valley of the Shadow of Life.” “Here,” says Lewis, “was an enthroned and shining god, whose ageless spirit weighed upon mine like a burden of solid gold” (67). He addresses a number of questions to his mentor. When Lewis asks him, “Is judgment not final? Is there really a way out of Hell into Heaven?” (66-67), MacDonald replies, “To any that leaves it, it is Purgatory. ... And yet to those who stay here it will have been Heaven from the first. ... but to those who remain there they will have been in Hell even from the beginning.” MacDonald explains that “good and
evil, when they are full grown, become retrospective.” “That is what mortals misunderstand.” he explains. He adds:

“...They say of some temporal suffering, ‘No future bliss can make up for it’, not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory. And of some sinful pleasure they say ‘Let me but have this and I’ll take the consequences’: little dreaming how damnation will spread back and back into their past and contaminate the pleasure of the sin. Both processes begin even before death....” (67-68)

MacDonald says that when the sun arises in the Valley of the Shadow of Life, and the twilight turns to blackness in the grey town, the “Blessed will say, ‘We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven’, and the Lost. ‘We have always been in Hell’” (68). But, asks Lewis, is it not true that Heaven and Hell are only “states of the mind”? “Hell,” answers MacDonald, “is a state of mind ... But Heaven is reality itself. All that is fully real is Heavenly” (69).

The next question is, “Is there a choice after death?” “My Roman Catholic friends,” says Lewis, “would be surprised, for to them souls in Purgatory are already saved. And my Protestant friends would like it no better. for they’d say that the tree lies as it falls.”
MacDonald answers, "Ye cannot fully understand the relations of choice and Time till you are beyond both. And ye were not brought here to study such curiosities. What concerns you is the nature of the choice itself" (69). Lewis then asks, "What do they choose, these souls who go back? ... And how can they choose it?" "Milton was right," answers MacDonald, "The choice of every lost soul can be expressed in the words 'Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.' There is always something they prefer to joy – that is, to reality" (69).

When Lewis wants to know whether anyone lost through mere sensuality, MacDonald says, "Some are, no doubt." The sensualist begins with a real pleasure but as time goes on "though the pleasure becomes less and less and the craving fiercer and fiercer, and though he knows that joy can never come that way, yet he prefers to joy the mere fondling of unappeasable lust" (70). Lewis has another doubt: If the Solid People are so full of love, "Why not go down into Hell to rescue the Ghosts?" MacDonald replies that the Solid People live only to journey further and further into the mountains. Even though they have interrupted their journey to meet the Ghosts on the plain "... it would be no use to come further even if it were possible" (72). Finally, Lewis asks, "But what of the poor Ghosts who never get into the omnibus at all?" "Everyone who wishes it does," answers
MacDonald, “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done’... Without that self-choice there could be no Hell” (72).

Lewis and his Teacher listen to a monologue from a female Ghost who had been married to Robert. Her nagging had driven him to a nervous breakdown and in Heaven she wants him back. “I must have someone to do things to,” she tells a Spirit. “It’s simply frightful down there ... I can’t alter them” (89).

Chapter XI consists of a conversation between a Ghost and her brother, now a Spirit. The Ghost wants to see her son, Michael, who is also in Heaven, but this is impossible until she can “learn to want someone else besides Michael” (91). She complains that Mother-love is the “highest and holiest feeling in human nature” (93), and the Spirit says, “No natural feelings are high or low in themselves. They are all holy when God’s hand is on the rein. They all go bad when they set up on their own and make themselves into false gods” (93).

Lewis and MacDonald then listen to a conversation between a Spirit and a Ghost whose life has been ruined by lust. That lust, in the form of a Lizard, now sits on his shoulder “whispering things in his ear.” When the Ghost permits the Spirits to kill the Lizard, the
Ghost is transformed into “an immense man, naked, not much smaller than the Angel” (102), and the Lizard is transformed into a great stallion. The man mounts the stallion and rides away. MacDonald observes, “Lust is a poor, weak, whimpering, whispering thing compared with that richness and energy of desire which will arise when lust has been killed” (104-105).

In chapters XII and XIII Lewis and MacDonald watch a procession of Bright Spirits, followed by young boys and girls. Then follows the Lady in whose honour all this is being done. Lewis asks if she is the Blessed Virgin. MacDonald answers, “It’s someone ye’l never have heard of. Her name on earth was Sarah Smith and she lived at Golders Green” (107). The Lady is in sharp contrast to the mother Ghost in chapter XI. Lewis learns that, while Sarah Smith had no children,

“Every young man or boy that met her became her son— even if it was only the boy that brought the meat to her back door. Every girl that met her was her daughter…. her motherhood was of a different kind. Those on whom it fell went back to their natural parents loving them more. Few men looked on her without becoming, in a certain
fashion, her lovers. But it was the kind of love that made them not less true, but truer, to their own wives.” (108)

The procession stops and the Lady is approached by two Ghosts, a Dwarf who is holding by a chain a tall, theatrical man much bigger than himself. The Dwarf, named Frank, was Sarah’s husband on Earth. The tall Ghost – the “Tragedian” – is that part of Frank who has struck so many poses that he has become a separate self. He is so desperate to be needed, so ready to use blackmail for the sake of what he calls love, that it is now nearly all that is left of the real Frank:

“And now!” said the Tragedian with a hackneyed gesture of despair. “Now, you need me no more?”

“But of course not!” said the Lady ....

“What needs could I have,” she said, “now that I have all? I am full now, not empty. I am in Love Himself, not lonely. Strong, not weak. You shall be the same. Come and see. We shall have no need for one another now: we can begin to love truly.” (113)

In the end the Dwarf loses his “struggle against joy” (115), and growing smaller and smaller he disappears altogether. The conversation between the Lady and the Tragedian ends as follows:
"You do not love me," said the Tragedian in a thin bat-like voice: and he was now very difficult to see.

"I cannot love a lie," said the Lady. "I cannot love the thing which is not. I am in Love, and out of it I will not go."

There was no answer. The Tragedian had vanished. (119)

And the Lady moves away with the procession.

Lewis then asks MacDonald questions which solicit some of the most profound statements in the book:

To the question whether "the final loss of one soul gives the lie to all the joy of those who are saved." MacDonald replies that while this "sounds very merciful," what lurks behind it is "The demand of the loveless and the self-imprisoned that they should be allowed to blackmail the universe: that till they consent to be happy (on their own terms) no one else shall taste joy: that theirs should be the final power; that Hell should be able to veto Heaven." He says:

"Son, son, it must be one way or the other. Either the day must come when joy prevails and all the makers of misery are no longer able to infect it: or else for ever and ever the makers of misery can destroy in others the happiness they reject for themselves. I know it has a grand sound to
say ye'll accept no salvation which leaves even one creature in the dark outside. But watch that sophistry or ye'll make a Dog in the Manger the tyrant of the universe.” (120-121)

To the question whether Pity must ever die, MacDonald answers that one must distinguish the “Action of Pity” and the “Passion of Pity”: “The action of Pity will live for ever; but the passion of Pity will not.” He defines the Passion of Pity as “the pity we merely suffer, the ache that draws men to concede what should not be conceded and to flatter when they should speak truth.” The Action of Pity, on the other hand, “leaps quicker than light from the highest place to the lowest to bring healing and joy, whatever the cost to itself…. But it will not, at the cunning tears of Hell, impose on good the tyranny of evil” (121).

Lewis is troubled that the Lady did not go down with Frank into Hell. MacDonald shows a very small crack in the soil and explains that this is the crack the bus came through: “All Hell is smaller than one pebble of your earthly world …. Look at yon butterfly. If it swallowed all Hell, Hell would not be big enough to do it any harm or to have any taste” (122-123).
Lewis asks whether Our Lord will ever go down into Hell again. MacDonald replies that “All moments that have been or shall be were, or are, present in the moment of His descending. There is no spirit in prison to Whom He did not preach” (124).

Lewis reminds MacDonald that on Earth he was a Universalist who talked as if all men would be saved. MacDonald replies,

“... Any man may choose eternal death. Those who choose it will have it. But if ye are trying to leap on into eternity, if ye are trying to see the final state of things as they will be ... when there are no more possibilities left but only the Real, then ye ask what cannot be answered to mortal ears....” (124-125)

In XIV Lewis sees a number of gigantic forms standing about a little table on which are figures like chessmen. They are the puppet representations of the great forms that stand by, and they act out on the board the inmost natures of these of giant masters. Lewis says, “These conversations between the Spirits and the Ghosts – were they only the mimicry of choices that had really been long ago?” MacDonald replies that Lewis has seen only “the choices a bit more clearly than ye could see them on earth: the lens was clearer” (127).
MacDonald warns Lewis that he is only dreaming and that “if ye come to tell of what ye have seen, make it plain that it was but a dream....Give no poor fool the pretext to think ye are claiming knowledge of what no mortals knows” (127). The East is behind Lewis as he stands facing MacDonald. Suddenly his Teacher’s face and everything else is flush with the light of the rising Sun. He hears the chorus of bird noises, hounds and horns, and above all the voices of ten thousand men and woodland angels, all beginning to sing. “The morning! The morning!” he cries, realizing that, as the sun rises here, the twilight will turn to blackness in the grey town. He screams, “I am caught by the morning and I am a ghost,” and says, “I awoke in a cold room, hunched on the floor beside a black and empty grate, the clock striking three, and the siren howling overhead” (128).

Critics are of the view that

There are only a few great authors who tend to tackle the enormous burden of trying to write their thoughts about life after death and succeed beyond anyone's expectations. Two of these timeless authors are Dante Alighieri with his Inferno and C. S. Lewis with The Great Divorce. Although the two deal with many of the same topics, the two
authors both take their own unique approach to the eternal realm.

One of the primary purposes in both these books was to make one think about the after-life in a way they probably had not before. And from that, one could apply a few lessons to his/her own life. Through his *Inferno* Dante communicated the idea that there are many different avenues through which a person can sin, and some of these sins are to be taken more seriously than others. Through Virgil, one can learn that God’s judgment is just and that everyone’s punishment is equal to the sin they committed. There are eternal consequences for the actions of people during their time on earth. Lewis had a basic moral concept that he wanted to communicate through his book. He wanted a person to realize that if we accept Christ, then we are saved for all eternity, becoming full and complete with Christ. He shows this through the concept of the “Solid People” and how they fully recognized the eternal truth. Although Dante’s *Inferno* and Lewis’s *The Great Divorce* have many similarities, they are two books with different perspectives on the after-life. Dante looks at the intricacies of eternal punishment, whereas Lewis tends to look upward into the realm of Heaven and thus eternal happiness.
References


