

STUDY GUIDE of *THE GREAT DIVORCE*

By C.S. Lewis

Introduction

The Great Divorce arose out of Lewis' interest in the nature of spiritual choices. The idea for allowing damned spirits a "holiday" in Heaven was suggested to him by his reading of the seventeenth century Anglican divine Jeremy Taylor, who introduced him to the ancient Catholic notion of *Refrigerium* – that the damned are given occasional repose from the torments of Hell by being granted "days off" in other places. The title of the book was a play on William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* – Lewis implying that no such marriage is possible. On the title page there is a telling quote from George MacDonald:

No, there is no escape. There is no heaven with a little of hell in it – no plan to retain this or that of the devil in our hearts or our pockets. Out Satan must go, every hair and feather.

A word about George MacDonald

George MacDonald was a nineteenth century story-teller and preacher, born in Scotland in 1824. The influence 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. Later on, he made no secret of the fact that he regarded MacDonald as "his master": "I don't think I've ever written a book in which I did not quote from him..." 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"; "So many clever writers strike one as quite childish after MacDonald: they seem not to understand so many things." Not surprising then, he makes MacDonald his teacher in *The Great Divorce*, a figure of spiritual authority a little like Virgil or Beatrice in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (another text upon which Lewis frequently drew for heavenly inspiration) to guide and support him in his journey through heaven and in his quest to understand it.

Suggestions for Study

The loose dream-like structure of *The Great Divorce* makes it harder for readers to discuss it in stages, so we have provided a set of topic/case-based questions for those who would like to discuss the book in detail, as well as the more abstract questions for those who want to use the book as a starting point for a general discussion.

We recommend that you mix and match questions according to your group's interests and needs or, alternatively, pick out provocative quotes from the text itself as alternative starting points for discussion. Have someone act as a moderator to help direct the conversation and to ensure that everyone who wishes has a chance to participate.

There are only two kinds of people in the end...

Case-Based Questions

All the conversations in *The Great Divorce* are aimed at unearthing the deceptions with which damned humanity defends its refusal of God. You might like to pick out a few cases of such self-deception in the individual portraits of the ghosts, looking at how they justify their choices. Working through their examples, contrast what they *say* with what, Lewis suggests, are the unspoken crises of the will behind their choices (fear of humbling themselves, wanting to remain in control, possessiveness over others, etc). Here are a few questions to get you started:

Lewis' Picture of Heaven

(1) Discuss the imagery of Lewis' heaven, and what it might have been intended to signify. Consider Lewis' use of :

- (a) Rock-hard and "unbreakable" heavenly matter
- (b) "Size- travel" – changing perceptual dimensions by getting larger or smaller
- (c) Natural imagery, such as trees, rivers and mountains
- (d) Non-human presences such as lions, giants, angels, and unicorns
- (e) The 'double vision' with which the narrator sees the heavenly characters
- (f) Their 'agelessness'

(2) How does Lewis present questions of time and reality in heaven?

Lewis' Picture of Hell

(3) Is there any relationship between traditional notions of hell and the kind of hell that Lewis depicts?

(4) What sort of society could one expect to get in Lewis' hell?

The Tousel-Headed Poet: "He appeared to be a singularly ill-used man"

(5) How is the Poet deceiving himself?

The "Big Man": "Ask for the Bleeding Charity"

(6) What is the Big Man's concept of "decency"?

(7) What prevents him from staying in heaven?

The Bishop: "It all turns on what are honest opinions."

(8) Why has the clerical ghost become an apostate?

(9) What does the solid spirit recommend as the cure?

The Hard-Bitten Ghost: "they won't catch *me* that way."

(10) Do you think the Hard Bitten Ghost is overly cynical?

(11) Can cynicism be dangerous?

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The Frightened Ghost: “You’ve no right to ask me to do a thing like that.”

- (12) What is the ghost frightened of?
- (13) What was the purpose of the final “expedient”?

The Grumbling Ghost: “going on forever like a machine.”

- (14) Do you think MacDonald is too severe in his judgment of grumbling?

The Painter: “one becomes more and more interested in paint for it’s own sake.”

- (15) How had the Painter lost his first love?

Robert’s Wife: “it was all for his own good in the end.”

- (16) What, does Lewis suggest, was the real motive behind Robert’s “treatment”?

Pam: “no natural feelings are high or low, holy or unholy, in themselves.”

- (17) Do you agree with MacDonald that “love, as mortals understand the word, isn’t enough”?
- (18) What do you think Pam’s case was designed to illustrate?

The Ghost with the Lizard: “It would be better to be dead than live with this creature.”

- (19) What was the nature of this ghost’s struggle?
- (20) How did he finally break free?
- (21) What were the consequences of his choice?

Sarah Smith and the Dwarf-Ghost: “Our light can swallow up your darkness: but your darkness cannot now infect our light.”

- (22) What was the relationship between the Dwarf-Ghost and the Tragedian?
- (23) In what ways can people be divided within themselves? What are the dangers of acting a part with others?
- (24) “Is it really tolerable that she should be untouched by his misery....” How does MacDonald explain Sarah’s reaction?
- (25) What distinction is made, in this section, between the action and the passion of pity?
- (26) How is pity for others different than pity for oneself? What dangers are inherent in the latter?
- (27) According to MacDonald’s reasoning, why was Jesus able to descend into hell?

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The picture of the chessmen: “the picture is a symbol: but it’s truer than any philosophical theorem.”

(28) What do you think the picture was intended to signify?

General Questions

- (1) What do you think Lewis is saying, in this book, about the relationship between good and evil?
- (2) Writing in a letter to his brother in 1940, Lewis said: “I begin to suspect that the world is divided not only into the happy and unhappy, but into those who *like* happiness and those who, odd as it seems, really don’t.” Do you think this is a good insight into the spiritual choice we make for or against God? Is it really that simple?
- (3) “Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.” Why, in Lewis’ view, do people reject God?
- (4) “Because the Middle Ages erred in one direction, does it follow that there is no error in the opposite direction?” Discuss Lewis’ portrait of liberalized Christianity.
- (5) Lewis has one of his characters describe God as the Eternal Fact. Do you think that’s a good description?
- (6) “I believe, to be sure, that any man who reaches Heaven will find that what he abandoned... has not been lost.” Do you believe this as well?
- (7) “...mortals misunderstand. 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.” Do you agree with Lewis that the eternal future sets the past in context? Have you ever felt heaven “working backwards” in your own life?”
- (8) “Hell is a state of mind...” What are the characteristics of the Hellish mindset? How can we guard against them?
- (9) “Those that hate goodness are sometimes nearer [heaven] than those who know nothing about it.” Do you think there is some truth in this? Can you think of any real-life examples?
- (10) “Every natural love will rise again and live forever in this country: but none will rise again until it has been buried.” How are we asked to “bury” the natural loves?
- (11) “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 you’ll make a Dog in a Manger the tyrant of the universe.” Do you accept MacDonald’s explanation of why people are allowed to choose hell?
- (12) “Ye cannot know eternal reality by a definition.” Discuss this statement.
- (13) If you drew one lesson from your reading of *The Great Divorce*, what would it be?