

C.S. Lewis and

# The Great Divorce



## A Ridiculously Short Introduction

by

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I can think of only one person who would be qualified to speak authoritatively about C.S. Lewis' short novel, *The Great Divorce*, and that man is dead.<sup>1</sup> This short overview is meant to act as training wheels act for someone learning to ride a bike – it is meant to help you get over the hurdle of starting, and then it is best abandoned once you get going on your own. It gives only broad shapes and rough approximations and is ... ridiculously short!

**If you already love C.S. Lewis in particular, or fantasy literature in general, or just love being surprised and unsure what is going on till the end, don't read this guide before reading the book or seeing the play!**

*The Great Divorce* is a story about a man (the narrator) who takes a trip from Hell to Heaven. The title refers to the great chasm that exists between the two. The narrator gets on a bus in a gray, depressing town which represents hell and travels with an odd assortment of characters from there to heaven. Each of these people has to decide whether to stay in Heaven or go back to Hell, and the decision turns out to be harder than you might think. Heaven is so bright and large and solid that it is actually painful to be there for people who are used to the dreary unreality of hell. In addition, each of them must make a difficult choice. Although they and their problems appear very different on the surface, they all have something in common. Each of them must let go of something in order to enter into the joy of heaven. The thing they are holding onto is actually the source of their eternal misery, but they are tempted to choose it over God. The book is series of short scenes. At each stop along the way we listen in on one of these people and watch the choice they make.

**Thus the key to enjoying the book or the play is to focus on each scene and ask yourself:  
“What does this person want more than the joy of heaven?”**

Key quotes from the book include: *“There is always something they prefer to joy – that is to reality... There is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from Him...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.” All that are in Hell choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened...”* This last quote is typical of the scriptural allusions Lewis weaves throughout the book.

The people who get off the bus are usually met by someone they had known while they were alive back on earth – someone who now lives in heaven. There is a great contrast between the people living in hell and the people living in heaven. In the bright light of heaven each of the people who took the bus ride from hell looks like a small, insubstantial, transparent ghost, while the people who have been living in heaven have become large, solid, bright, angelic beings. The longer one lives in heaven, the more “real” one becomes.

For Lewis, profound questions about eternity are directly connected to practical questions about how we live here and now. He believes that our choices over time shape who we become and so he uses the strange outer shapes of the ghosts (one has a lizard growing on its shoulder, another is chained to a mannequin) to indicate to us the real shape of the person’s soul – what they have become over time due to bad habits and faulty thinking they refuse to part with. Each ghost has a skewed view of reality that keeps them from seeing the beauty and joy of heaven and keeps them from embracing the kingdom of God. Arrogant pride and a need for control lie just below the surface of their very different personalities. They often say far more than they realize, as when one ghosts says “Well, I’ll be damned...”

Many of us find that the ghosts first remind us of people we have known, but then comes the crucial, painful moment when we see our own twisted motives in these characters. Lewis speaks of a man who says **“I spent most of my life doing neither what I ought nor what I liked.”**<sup>2</sup> The surprise ending of *The Great Divorce* is meant to be a wakeup call to all of us. Like Ebenezer Scrooge we can discover that we have been given another chance. There is still time to change – to repent, to turn away from endless gray streets of our own making and turn to the wide open spaces of the God who loves us, knows us by name, and calls us to live within His grace and joy – both now and forever.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis died in 1963. He lived in England and wrote in the style of his place and time which can sound a bit strange to many modern Americans.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis

<sup>3</sup> For more resources on *The Great Divorce*, go to [www.Leverington.org](http://www.Leverington.org) and search for “Great Divorce”