

MISLEADING SIMPLICITY: *THE GREAT DIVORCE* AND THE *DIVINE COMEDY*

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Abstract

Dante's *Comedy* is famous, or should we say notorious, for being 'difficult', so thoroughly medieval as to be irrelevant for current readers. Most of this is a misapprehension based on the first canticle, *Inferno*, which few have actually read. *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* are almost never mentioned. With *The Great Divorce* C.S. Lewis has taken the *Divine Comedy* and reworked it, yet still retaining the gravitas and much of the colour. This is a deceptively simple, easy to read work, but it carries a significant punch if carefully studied. For Lewis, the common human sin is not exciting – say, murder or hatred – but 'accidia'; hell is a featureless grey expanse, and heaven is not easily gained, though we are all invited. All of this is modelled on the *Comedy*: as in the *Comedy*, what is easy is not what is valuable, and the struggle of a soul to rise above itself (and the many more who do not even try) is a memorable re-positioning of Dante's great fable. In *The Great Divorce* C.S. Lewis is a master story-teller: we underestimate him at our peril.

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Dante's *Comedy* is famous, or should we say notorious, for being 'difficult', full of vindictive retaliation against his enemies, and so thoroughly medieval as to be incomprehensible/irrelevant for current readers. Most of this is a misapprehension based on the first canticle, *Inferno*, which is the only one of which most people have heard (and which very few have actually read). Outside the academic community—and even in Italy, where *Inferno* is a compulsory school text, hardly anyone knows about the joyous musicality of *Purgatorio* or the ethereal mysticism of *Paradiso*. As is well known, The *Comedy*'s basic plot is the story of a Florentine poet, Dante Alighieri, singing of his love for Beatrice,

a young woman he had scarcely known before her untimely death at the age of 24.

Dante weaves a highly complex tale of journeying down through the bowels of Hell, defying Cerberus at the gate accompanied only by his hero, the Roman poet Virgil. Emerging from Hell, Dante and Virgil climb the Mountain of Purgatory, where those sinners who are redeemable endure cleansing punishments to make them fit for the next stage. The loveliest part of this is perhaps the Earthly Paradise, where Dante is forced to abandon the pre-Christian, pagan Virgil, and under the gaze of the lovely flower-dancing Matilda bathe in the waters of the river Lethe, which erases all memory of sin and evil from his memory. After all his travails, he finally meets Beatrice, who lashes him with bitter words for his weakness in the face of sin and he then travels up through the circles of Paradise, accompanied by Beatrice herself, who takes him to the Empyrean and the sight of God. This is the literal story, but the importance of this epic is its allegorical meaning, whereby a soul in torment, 'lost in a dark wood', travels through terrible times (hell), somehow finding hope (purgatory) and eventually redemption (Paradise), through suffering, self-examination and with the help of wise mentors.

Both the *Divine Comedy* and *The Great Divorce* are works of art and they have much in common. Where the Comedy is right from the start a very complex epic poem, to be read on several different levels, Lewis' book is outwardly very simple and could be read to a six-year old simply as a story—but it too has a much deeper meaning and is totally thought provoking upon even the slightest reflection.

With *The Great Divorce* CS Lewis has taken the *Divine Comedy* and reworked it, discarding all Dante's complications and contemporary dramatis personae, while retaining the gravitas and much of the colour. Dante is described by TS Eliot as being a very 'visual' writer, and the same can certainly be said of Lewis. This is a deceptively clear, easy to read work, but what a significant punch if carefully studied.

The Great Divorce is modelled on the *Divine Comedy*, of course, with a Virgilian counterpart to guide and advise: he also fulfils the Beatrice role, admonishing when he is misunderstood. And there is of course a Dante (the "I", the narrator). As in the *Comedy*, what is easy is not what is valuable, and the struggle of the soul to rise above itself (and the many more who do not even try) is a memorable re-positioning of Dante's great fable. In *The Great Divorce* C.S. Lewis is a master story-teller: we underestimate him at our peril.

The story starts in the dismal Grey City, where a crowd of grumbling, bad tempered people are pushing and shoving and arguing at a bus stop. Eventually the bus arrives and everyone fights to board it – well, not everyone, as some proclaim it to be just too difficult and the other people too awful, and walk away muttering. However, enough are left to fill the bus and so it literally

takes off into the air and flies to what turns out to be HEAVEN. A dazzling brightness envelops the passengers, who step out of the bus and find they have become insubstantial, transparent ghosts of their former selves. The grass is as stiff and hard as diamond and hurts their feet as they step on it. There are flowers and fruit trees and grass that is greener than the ghosts have ever seen. One of the ghosts spots an apple of solid gold and in his greed tries to pick it up so that he can carry it to the bus and then to the Grey City—but it weighs a ton; far, far too much for him to lift and manage. The ghosts who have come from below are approached on arrival by assorted Bright People, with fully developed bodies and welcoming smiles. They are offered all sorts of kindnesses and understanding, and urged to change, to leave their former habits of grumbling, envious small-mindedness: the ghosts can stay in Heaven and will soon become substantial Bright People themselves. But it takes effort, and having listened to the Bright Spirits, the distrustful ghosts decide almost to a man or woman that it is a trick, or a deceit of some kind, or not fair, or just too difficult, and one by one, they trickle back to the bus, which will take them back to their comfort zone, the grey city. Only one ghost is strong enough to take the challenge, a man with a lizard clinging on to his shoulder. This lizard whispers constant discouragement, urging his host not to accept the Bright Person's offer—there is a terrible inner struggle between the ghost's better impulses and the evil suggestions of the lizard, until finally the lizard is killed and the ghost joins the saved. The other souls, who are too steeped in a lifelong habit of negativity, are unable to make the transition, and they fly back to the Grey City for eternity on the heavenly bus.

After witnessing this episode, our narrator is deep in conversation with his Virgil figure, George Macdonald, who leads him over beautiful gardens towards the distant mountain of Heaven, explaining, as they go, the gift of Love from God, if only each person will accept it and welcome his or her personal transformation. It will not be easy, but it is infinitely worthwhile. The sun shines brightly, birds sing, and water babbles in a brook. Suddenly all changes and an unbearable light envelops our narrator as the sun rises over the mountain. He screams and buries his head in his Teacher's robe. Great blocks of light fall on his head and he cries out in terror...to find that he had fallen asleep at his desk and the blocks of light were books that had fallen off as he clutched the cloth on the table. It was all a dream.

I have hugely simplified both the *Comedy* and the *Great Divorce*, but I hope you can see just how much the *Comedy* resonates in Lewis' work. The basic premise of both is that every single one of us has free will, and both specifically say that there is no such thing as predestination: right up to our final minute of life we can repent and choose God – or as Lewis would have it, become a Bright Person. To say that we could not help it because we were

predestined to commit such and such an act is simply an excuse. We are all totally responsible for ourselves and every single one of our actions.

In the *Divine Comedy* Purgatory is a clear-cut place where the sinner cheerfully embraces the punishments meted out to him, since each brings him closer to the Earthly Paradise and then, ultimately, to God. Hell, on the other hand, is for those who have shown no remorse, and their sins are the sorts that make newspaper headlines today: murder, extortion, and so on. The point being that all the sins in Dante's Hell, are writ large. Eating your children, for example, as Count Ugolino does in *Inferno*, Canto 33, is probably not something anyone here has done. Though some of the sins he condemns do feature today as frequent flyers: adultery, blasphemy, homosexuality and sloth—ours is a far more forgiving and understanding age.

If love is all, we must also understand what it actually is. Lewis presents a distorted version of love, acted out by one of the ghosts, which suffocates rather than nurtures: this is a mother who does not ask, but demands to see her son, for whom she has done 'everything' and who 'owes her' everything and who, having somehow managed to escape her clutches, is already a Bright Person on the Holy Mountain. This mother love is not self-sacrifice, but self-indulgence of the highest degree. The Bright Spirit tells her that her adored son is not her way to God. Rather, God is the way to her son, so no, she cannot see him unless she is capable of change herself.

The really interesting point is Lewis' focus. Firstly, the Grey City is Hell if you choose to remain there: it is not violent nor are there horned devils with pitchforks or fiery furnaces. The city is, rather, spread out over a vast territory, hundreds and millions of miles—because nobody gets on with his neighbours. Each one argues and complains and flounces off to a new house further out so as to cut off contact. In the new district they fall out with the new neighbours, so they move again...and again...and again. Everything in the Grey City is flimsy and unstable: the roofs let in water, the houses are simply conjured up by a single thought. Nothing is solid or reliable. In Heaven, as we have seen, all matter is not only solid, but rock-hard, witness the diamond-like glass and the heavy golden apple.

The passengers in the bus have been given a chance to leave this Grey City: if they leave, it is Purgatory, a stage in their soul's development. But if they choose to remain—or return—then it is Hell, everlasting. The initial experience of Heaven in *The Great Divorce* for those who become Bright People might seem more akin to Dante's Purgatory, since the souls have been shown what salvation is; those that are repentant and prepared to undergo the painful transformation required of them before progressing to the Holy Mountain must face not just a painful physical task, but a mammoth mental shift.

Note the enormous difference between the *Comedy* and *The Divorce* in the nature of sin: where Dante chooses headline-grabbers, Lewis is much more

subtle and far more incriminating. His sins are the everyday ones of which we are all guilty, every one of us: lack of generosity with our time, care or money; irritability; greed; occasional nastiness; dropping a pointed remark; self-centredness, envy; passing on unpleasant gossip, competing with others to their detriment. I have done most of those and imagine I am not unusual. Ouch. Lewis spots the human frailty and nails it. It is not easy to love everyone, all the time, but that is what we should aspire to. The refusenik ghosts in the *Great Divorce* are incapable of change: a lifelong habit of negativity, greed and small-minded thinking has eroded their ability to see the divine and they simply cannot countenance the mindshift, the total personality change, they would have to endure. Their sins will not of themselves take you to hell, but the habit of thought they engender will prevent you from leaving. We may not literally eat our children, but the uncomfortable fact is that all of us have plenty to work on if we are to escape the Grey City.

The erudite Lewis is also a master of adaptation. With his vast cultural frame of reference he seamlessly includes not only Dante, but also MacDonald into *The Great Divorce*. And there are nods to the classical world too, with the speaking waterfall which scolds the ghost in the act of stealing the Golden Apple. The apparent simplicity of *The Great Divorce* is so misleading: it is beautifully clear and wonderfully visual with its golden apples, shining mountain and green pastures—but it has a killer message. *The Great Divorce* may not have the 1000-year heft of the *Divine Comedy*, but it is a remarkable work: a lion in sheep's clothing.

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