

The Great Divorce Study Guide

The Great Divorce by C. S. Lewis

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Contents

The Great Divorce Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1.....	4
Chapter 2.....	6
Chapter 3.....	9
Chapter 4.....	10
Chapter 5.....	12
Chapter 6.....	14
Chapter 7.....	16
Chapter 8.....	18
Chapter 9.....	20
Chapter 10.....	23
Chapter 11.....	24
Chapter 12.....	26
Chapter 13.....	28
Chapter 14.....	30
Characters.....	31
Objects/Places.....	34
Themes.....	36
Style.....	38
Quotes.....	40
Topics for Discussion.....	41



Plot Summary

The narrator suddenly finds himself in a dismal gray town just before nightfall. It's raining, and the narrator wanders around the dingy streets, looking for direction or at least a better part of town. He never encounters another person; it looks like the entire town is empty, but then he finds a bus station where people are waiting in line. For lack of anything better to do, he stands in line.

He listens to the conversations of others while he stands in line. They all seem discontent. They argue and shove. Finally a bus arrives. The narrator barely makes it onto the bus and feels himself very fortunate to have gotten a seat. The bus flies up into the cloudy sky, above the gray wet rooftops.

Before long the bus arrives in a sunny, grassy country. The scenery is more beautiful than the narrator has seen on earth. The bus passengers disembark, and the narrator notices that in the bright sunshine, the passengers appear to be transparent. He looks down and is horrified to see that he can see through his own feet. The new arrivals are ghosts, whereas the people they see in this new land are bright, opaque, and beautiful. Some of the ghosts are afraid and immediately return to the bus. The others huddle together for protection.

The ghosts find this beautiful world very uncomfortable. The grass doesn't bend beneath their feet, making walking very difficult and painful. Everything is too heavy for them. They do not have the strength to lift an apple that has fallen to the ground. The narrator fears that an insect could crush him if it landed on his head.

The solid people approach individual ghosts to encourage them to stay and travel to the mountains with them. They advise the ghosts to stick it out, that they'll get acclimated to this new world and eventually grow solid themselves if they'll give up their petty problems. The narrator overhears many such conversations, but the ghosts, one by one, give up and return to the bus.

The narrator's guide is George McDonald, the Scottish writer. McDonald offers his arm to the narrator, and as the narrator leans on his mentor's arm, he finds that walking isn't quite as difficult. The two begin to journey toward the mountains, and as they go they overhear many conversations between ghosts and solid people. Each conversation indirectly teaches the narrator about earth life and the afterlife and what it will take to live in love and joy forever. McDonald offers advice and philosophy after each conversation.

After the narrator finally understands what his guide has been teaching him, the scene changes, and he sees a great assembly of gigantic forms standing around a silver table and looking at it. On the table are little tiny figures, like chessmen, moving to and fro. The narrator asks McDonald which of the two visions is the truth, and McDonald answers that it's all been just a dream. The dream fades, and the narrator awakens to WWII sirens blaring outside.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The narrator suddenly finds himself in a dismal gray town just before nightfall. It's raining, and the narrator wanders around the dingy streets, looking for direction or at least a better part of town. He never encounters another person; it looks like the entire town is empty, but then he finds a bus station where people are waiting in line. For lack of anything better to do, he stands in line.

A waspish little woman who is standing in front of him in line snaps at the man she is standing with, exclaiming that she won't go on the bus at all. The man tells her that he doesn't care if she doesn't come along, that all he really wants is peace. He's only been trying to please her, after all. The man walks away, so the narrator gets to move up two slots in line.

A Short Man in line tells the narrator that he was hoping to escape such people by boarding the bus and he feels a bit discouraged to see such people waiting in line. The Short Man disparages the people in line, saying that they're not the sort of society he's used to. Another passenger overhears this comment and hits the Short Man, who remains sprawled in the gutter. So the line gets a little shorter.

A pair of young people trick a woman out of her place in line, and the other passengers refuse to let the tricked woman back in, so she flees. At this moment, the bus arrives. It is a glorious vehicle, blazing with golden light. The Driver seems to emit light himself, and he waves the passengers cheerfully on board. The passengers fight like hens to get on board. The narrator is the last to get on the bus. He finds a seat in the back away from the others, but a young man sits down next to him.

The young man says he feels about the present company just as the narrator feels. The narrator asks him if the other passengers like this place. The youth says they like it as much as they'd like anything because there are fish and chip shops and advertisements and the sorts of things they want. The youth says he realized as soon as he'd arrived in the gray town that there'd been some mistake because there's no intellectual life, and that's why he's taking the bus. The youth pulls out of his pocket a thick wad of type-written paper and asks the narrator if he'd mind reading some of his work. The narrator says he's forgotten his glasses and then realizes that the bus has left the ground.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The novel begins with the narrator finding himself disoriented in a new and foreign place. As Lewis doesn't give the reader any background as to how the main character finds himself in this new place, the reader joins the narrator in the discovery process, picking up clues here and there from a common mortal experience.



The setting of this first scene is appropriately depressing. Everything about the setting tells the reader that the characters must be depressed. The weather is bleak, drear, and rainy. Night is about to arrive but never seems to. The neighborhood is dingy and unprosperous, and the streets feel lonely and unpopulated.

The first character encountered by the narrator who represents a type is the tousle-haired youth on the bus. Types will populate the book from here on out. The type portrayed by the tousle-haired youth is a prideful intellectual. This type seeks for praise from others based on his knowledge. He disparages those who do not meet up to his intellectual expectations and seeks comfort and acceptance from those who do. Lewis makes it clear that such a character flaw must be overcome in order to progress in post-mortal life.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Another passenger interrupts the narrator's conversation with the Touse-headed Poet. This passenger claims to have been ill-used his entire life, from his earliest school days until the end. He blames all this mistreatment on Capitalism turned his attentions toward Communism. But when the war started and he saw Russia allied with capitalist governments, he felt once more isolated in his conscientious objections. So he moved to America, but then America entered the war as well, leaving him no choice but to go to Sweden. In Sweden he had money troubles and, worse, woman troubles. He fell in love with a girl whom he thought to be quite civilized, but then he discovered that she was a mass of bourgeois prejudices and too bound to monogamy. So he threw himself under a train.

Since arriving in the gray town, this new passenger's troubles have continued. He assumes that his placement in the gray town is a mistake and that he won't be returning there. He is sure that in this new place he is traveling to he will finally find Recognition and Appreciation.

The threesome is interrupted at this point by one of the quarrels that is constantly simmering on the bus. Knives are drawn and pistols fired, but it all seems strangely harmless and soon everything is back to normal, though the narrator finds himself in a new seat with a new companion. This new companion has a large nose and a bowler hat. He seems intelligent and quiet.

The narrator says to his new companion that he wonders why he didn't see many people in the gray town because the town itself seems so large. He speculates that there was once a much larger population. The man with the bowler hat refutes this theory, explaining that the trouble is that everyone is so quarrelsome. As soon as someone arrives he settles in a street, but it's not twenty-four hours before he quarrels with his neighbor. Before a week is out he decides to move. He finds the next street empty, because all of those people have moved, and he settles there. But the same cycle repeats itself, so the inhabitants just keep moving outward and the town grows and grows. The man with the bowler hat claims that the bus stop is thousands of miles from the Civic Centre where all newcomers arrive from earth. The older inhabitants live millions of miles away.

The man with the bowler hat knows of two chaps who went on a long journey to find Napoleon. It took about 15,000 years to get to him, but they found him in a huge Empire style house millions of miles from any neighbors. They peeked into the windows and saw Napoleon walking up and down, to and fro, never stopping for a moment. He was muttering to himself the whole time, "It was Soult's fault. It was Ney's fault. It was Josephine's fault," etc.



The man with the bowler hat is trying to solve some of these problems in the gray town. He thinks the problem is that the people have no Needs. They can have anything they want just by imagining it, but nothing is good quality. If the people had to stay near real shops, they couldn't just move out so far when they got in quarrels, and they'd learn to get along. So the man with the bowler hat is taking the bus to find some real commodities to create demand in the gray town. He intends to "make a nice little profit and be a public benefactor" as well.

Their homes can be as large and fancy as they want but they don't keep out the rain. The man with the bowler hat whispers that real houses would be safer, too. He talks about the impending night and how people will need safety when the night comes. The narrator asks if night is really coming, and the bowler hat man says of course it will. The other passengers notice the two men whispering and get angry, shouting at them that they needn't spread rumors.

A fat, clean-shaven man comes and sits next to them and says there's not a shred of evidence to support the position that night will come. He says it's just a product of the nightmare fantasies of their ancestors. Hours later, the passengers notice light coming in from the windows, and the narrator lets his window down for a breath of fresh air. The man in the bowler hat becomes angry and puts the window back up, asking the narrator if he wants them all to catch their death from cold. In the bright light, the narrator looks around at his fellow passengers and notices that they all look gaunt and distorted.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Different varieties of pride mark the characters of the three new types represented in this chapter. The first character is the Conscientious Objector. His pride has led him to believe that he is both right and alone in his views and that he has been mistreated all his life. His martyr view of himself spreads from his political views to his private relationships until he finds that he cannot have a normal relationship anymore. Of course, he blames other people for his inability to love and appreciate them. Interestingly, this problem does not end with his suicide but follows him into the next life. He still feels ill used in the gray town and hopes to find Appreciation and Recognition when he disembarks the bus. Just as he moved from country to country on earth seeking gratification, he moves from kingdom to kingdom in the afterlife. Of course, pride does not lead to joy, so he will never find it until he changes his heart.

The man with the bowler hat represents greed, another byproduct of pride. He desires something better than the gray town has to offer. He wants something substantial. He wants to create demand for real goods. He claims to want these things so he can benefit society, but he also admits that he can get rich off of this scheme. He seeks a better life, but he's seeking it for the wrong reasons. He is, however, very intelligent and has learned the ways of the gray town well. He has been around long enough to know about its vastness and its character. Based in pride, though, this knowledge doesn't lead to the progress of his character.

The third character the narrator encounters is tainted by a slightly different variety of pride. The fat, clean-shaven man assumes that he is more intelligent than previous generations because he is modern and lends credence to empirical knowledge rather than faith. He disdains primitive superstitions and the tales of his ancestors. He looks for evidence to support his opinions. He says that the hankering for "real" things is earth-bound and retrogressive, that they only need spiritual matter. This comment is foreshadowing of the land they will encounter when the bus stops.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The bus lands and everyone jumps out. The narrator alone remains in the bus until he hears a lark singing. He gets out and finds himself in a summer morning, a minute or two before sunrise. The space feels very larger to him, larger than any space he experienced on earth.

He looks at his fellow passengers and gasps when he sees that in the bright light they look transparent, like ghosts. He also notices that the grass does not bend beneath their feet, and the dewdrops seem undisturbed by the ghostly figures. The narrator tries to pick a daisy but finds that he doesn't have the strength to bend or twist the stalk. He tries to lift a leaf, but it is heavier than a sack of coal. The narrator also discovers that he, too, is a phantom.

One of the ghosts screams that she doesn't like it and immediately runs back to the bus. A large ghost asks the driver how long they have before that must return. The driver tells him that they can stay as long as they like; they don't have to return at all if they don't want to. One of the quieter ghosts whispers to the narrator that there must be some mismanagement to allow all this riff-raff to come; they're not enjoying it. This ghost expects someone to arrive at any moment to sweep him away from the riff-raff.

There are enormous mountains in the distance. The narrator sees people coming to meet the new arrivals. The earth shakes beneath their feet. Some are naked, some are robed, but all of them are exquisitely beautiful. They seem to have no particular age. Two of the ghosts scream and run for the bus when they see these solid people approaching. The others just huddle together.

Chapter 3 Analysis

A new and important setting is introduced in chapter 3. This new land is unlike any the narrator has before experienced. The other bus passengers and he do not belong to this land, and they realize this as soon as they get off the bus. Some of them think it is a trick. Some immediately run back to the bus. Thus, only open-minded ghosts even give this new land a chance. Again, this harkens back to the theme of pride being a stumbling block to progress.

The theme of pride manifests itself most blatantly in the quiet man who whispers to the narrator that he believes there's some mismanagement going on. He doesn't think the riff-raff should be allowed to come to this new land because they don't belong and don't appreciate it. His pride has blinded him to the fact that he is one of these ghosts, that he doesn't belong either. His criticism of the "management" also reveals his pride, and it's clear that he will have a difficult time progressing with his current attitude.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The solid people approach the ghosts, and the narrator moves aside under the pretext of exploring. It's difficult for him to walk over the prickly solid grass. He envies the bird that flies in front of him because it belongs to this country and is comfortable in its environment. Then he encounters the ghost that he calls the Big Man.

The Big Man recognizes one of the solid people. This solid person has such a jocund face it makes the narrator want to dance. The Big Man can't believe he recognizes this man, but even more, he can't believe this solid person is here because he thinks the solid person has murdered a man named Jack. The solid person assures The Big Man that Jack is here and they will get to see him soon. The solid person admits to having killed Jack but tells The Big Man that it's all right now.

The Big Man can't understand why the solid person, a murderer, has been here all this time while he's been down in the dismal gray town. The Big Man tells the solid person that he thinks they should be the other way around because he's been a good Christian person. The solid person gently reminds him that he wasn't always a good Christian, that he treated his employees and wife and children terribly. The solid person was an employee of the Big Man on earth.

The Big Man grows irate and demands his rights. The solid person invites him to come along with him and make the journey to the foothills, but the Big Man refuses his arm, too prideful to take assistance from someone he considers beneath him. The solid person tells the Big Man that his feet will never grow hard that way, that he'll have to forget himself and accept a little help.

When the solid person talks to the Big Man about some of his interpersonal indiscretions, the Big Man tells him to stay out of his private affairs. The solid person tells him that there are no private affairs. Again, the solid person invites the Big Man to walk with him to the mountains, that he is the one who was sent for him. At this, the Big Man feels he has been tricked, and he goes back to the bus.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The Big Man represents a new type, that of a character whose pride stems from authority. On Earth, the Big Man was an employer, a husband, and a father, and he viewed these roles as authoritative roles and treated his "inferiors" poorly. Hence, when he reaches this new kingdom and finds that authoritative roles hold no sway, and furthermore that there are no secrets, he feels there is a conspiracy against him, a trick, and he cannot abide by these new rules.



He has always felt superior to the solid person who has come to assist him to the mountain. In fact, he was sure that this person would spend the afterlife in hell, so to see him as a glorious personage, obviously happy and content, and sent to assist him, is too much. The Big Man has set up a superiority/inferiority system in his head, and this new world goes against his own belief system. Instead of adapting to this new system, he rejects it altogether because he's too prideful to change his mind.

The last sentence of this chapter reminds readers of the fragility of men: "In the end, still grumbling, but whimpering also a little as it picked its way over the sharp grasses, it made off." This sentence reminds readers that though the human will may be strong, unless human will aligns itself with God's will and acts in humility, human efforts will be rather pathetic. This follows the theme of pride once again.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

In his tentative explorations, the narrator comes across two lions playing. He tries to avoid them and, in doing so, comes across a river, which is smooth but swift flowing. The water is so clear that he can count the pebbles in the riverbed. Nearby, a ghost is having a conversation with a solid person, which the narrator now calls a Bright Person. The ghost is the fat man with the cultured voice from the bus.

The ghost is addressing the Bright Person as "my dear boy" and speaking to him of his father. The Bright Person asks the ghost if he has brought his father, but the ghost says his father lives a great distance from the bus station and has been getting eccentric lately. The ghost reminds the Bright Person of his "incorrect" opinion held during life, that there is a literal heaven and hell. The ghost thinks the Bright Person became rather narrow minded toward the end of his life and points out that the Bright Person was wrong to believe in heaven and hell.

The Bright Person asks the ghost where he thinks he has been. The ghost thinks the Bright Person is referring to the gray town as heaven, with its continual hope of morning approaching. The Bright Person explains that he's not saying that the gray town is heaven but rather hell, to which the ghost replies, "There is no need to be profane, my dear boy." The Bright Person explains that he has been in hell, although if he doesn't return to the bus it will have been Purgatory to him, and he also explains that he was sent there because he was apostate. The ghost and the Bright Person discuss whether or not there are sins of intellect and whether or not all opinions are honestly come by.

The ghost refuses to believe in absolutes, and the Bright Person explains that one will drift away from the Faith if one accepts every solicitation from one's desires while neglecting to pray and resist. The Bright Person asks the ghost to repent and believe. The ghost professes to already believe. The Bright Person then asks the ghost to come with him to the mountains, admitting that it will hurt at first but then his feet will grow harder. The ghost says he is willing to consider it, but he first must have some assurances and guarantees, that there will be scope for his talents there and an environment conducive to free inquiry. The Bright Person can make no guarantees for these requests, and the ghost feels that he would be stifled there.

He also remembers that he has to get back to the gray town to present a paper at the Theological Society by Friday. He begins expounding about his paper, which is full of speculation about what religion would be like had Christ lived on the earth longer, and then he says goodbye to the Bright Person to return to the bus.

After watching this scene, the narrator gets an idea. He wants to walk on the river because he thinks it will hurt his feet less than the grass. The surface is slick and he falls on his face, getting some nasty bruises. Although it is solid, it moves very quickly.



He picks himself up about 30 yards downstream but finally gets the hang of walking up the stream. He makes very little progress, but at least it doesn't hurt.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The fat ghost represents a type, that of a person who believes that all opinions are valid and that there are no absolutes. Even after years of living in hell, he has convinced himself that he lives in a "sort of heaven," refusing to believe in any absolutes. He feels constrained by questions that have absolute answers and feels that truth would be stifling, preferring to associate with others like him at the gray town's theological society than earnestly seeking answers in a higher kingdom.

The man's pride leads him to refuse absolutes because in absolutes he might be wrong sometimes. If there are right and wrong answers, he will not be able to talk his way out of error or consequence. His so-called enlightened thinking leads ironically to cloudy thinking where every opinion is as valid and correct as every other. Therefore, he cannot learn anything new and stunts his mental and spiritual growth.

The river symbolizes the difficulty of true progress. The narrator takes a chance at walking on the river, which alludes to Christ, and, like Peter, falls down. He is humbled at his first attempt. But he gets up and tries again. The next time, he understands more about the nature of the river and can get his balance and acclimate himself to the motion. He begins to make progress, although his progress is slow because of the swiftness of the stream. This gives readers hope that the narrator will overcome the great obstacle of pride that prohibits so many of the ghosts from reaching their potential.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The narrator walks on the cool stream for about an hour and covers about a hundred yards. Then the current grows swifter and islands of foam run into his feet, making the going painful and difficult, so he walks on the stone bank for several more hours. Before him he can see green slopes made into a wide amphitheater over a lake with a waterfall. He realizes that he is receiving impressions he would not have been capable of receiving on earth, so he is progressing already.

He sees a ghost crouching near a bush, looking at him and making signals to duck down. The ghost stands up and runs for cover behind a tree, but the grass is still obviously very painful to his feet. He recognizes that man as the ghost with the bowler hat from the bus. He remembers that someone had called this ghost Ikey.

Ikey runs for a tree that is surrounded by tall lilies, which he cannot surmount. He tries to crawl through them, but they're too close together. A strong gust of wind comes up and blows some apples down from the tree. Some of the apples fall on the ghost, visibly hurting him. As soon as he recovers from his wounds, he tries feverishly to fill his pockets with the golden apples. This is useless, so he gives up the idea of filling his pockets with apples and tries to take just two. Two apples are far too heavy for the ghost, so he settles on the idea of just one, the largest one. But even this is too heavy for him to carry. He finally finds an apple small enough to carry, the smallest one, and makes his way toward the bus.

A great voice calls out to Ikey, "Fool. Put it down. . . You cannot take it back. There is not room for it in Hell. Stay here and learn to eat such apples." The narrator cannot locate the source of the voice, but he thinks it's coming from the waterfall. Ikey ignores the voice and continues on his agonizing way over the painful grass with his heavy load toward the bus. The narrator loses sight of him.

Chapter 6 Analysis

We first meet Ikey in Chapter 2, so his tragic flaw, greed, is already familiar to us. In Chapter 2, he talks about bringing something tangible to the people in the gray town. He thinks this will solve the problem of people moving so far away from the city center, for they will have a reason to stay and will have to learn to settle their disputes. But Ikey also admits that he will make himself rich if he can manage to bring real objects to the gray town.

Once in heaven, he is surrounded by real objects, but instead of admiring their beauty and changing himself so he can belong to such a world, he is intent on reaching his original goal: to bring the treasures of heaven to hell for his own gain.



An angelic voice tries to warn him against it, but he is too prideful to listen. The narrator does not backslide in his progress during this scene, so he doesn't see what happens to Ikey, but the voice has already taught us that it's not possible to take the golden apple into hell. There is foreshadowing in the following statement: "There is not room for it in Hell."



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

After the ghost in the bowler hat is gone, the narrator turns his attention to the Water Giant, the voice in the waterfall that spoke as the man tried to carry the apple away. The narrator cannot bear the presence of the Water Giant, but at the same time, the Water Giant seems to not pay any attention to the narrator. The narrator is getting tired from walking upstream; he wishes he were solid so he could take a dip in the river.

A tall ghost approaches the narrator and asks if he's thinking of turning back. The narrator says he doesn't know and asks the ghost if he is going back. The tall ghost says he is turning back because he's seen all there is to see and it's all propaganda because you can't eat the fruit or drink the water or walk on the grass. He is unimpressed with everything he's seen on earth, in hell, and in heaven. The narrator comments that there seems to be the idea that one can grow accustomed to the heaven, but the tall ghost thinks it's a lie. He says he's been told such lies since he was a child. He talks extensively about "they," the people who manage everything and lie to the common people to keep them going. For example, he thinks "they" lied to him on earth about serving in the wars, that the wars were all a big game that had to be kept going.

The narrator asks the tall ghost what he would do if he had the choice. The ghost claims that it's up to the management to keep them busy and to entertain them. The tall ghost invites the narrator to return to the bus with him, and the narrator says there doesn't seem to be much point going anywhere with him. "At least it's not raining here," he says. He feels depressed after speaking with the tall ghost, who asks the narrator to imagine what it would be like if it did rain there; the rain drops would be like machine-gun bullets, which is something the narrator hadn't considered.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The narrator has been making some progress when he comes across the tall ghost, who represents yet another version of pride: cynicism. A cynic looks for the negative in any situation, even finding fault beyond what is reasonable. For example, when the tall ghost speaks of the wars he served in on earth, he claims that "they," whom he is never to define, "keep the wars going as a sort of game to play, not caring at all for those in their stewardship.

This attitude carries over to the afterlife, where he feels the management should entertain the ghosts and find things for them to do. Instead of finding joy in his travels, he looks at every place he's been, from Peking to Salt Lake City to heaven and hell, as a tourist trap. Everything shrinks in stature and wonder under his cynical gaze until there becomes no point to his life. His cynicism also takes his personal accountability



and choices away because he believes he doesn't have control over his own life. He believes the management arranges everything, so it doesn't matter what he does.

The tall ghost has a great effect on the narrator's mood; the narrator feels very depressed after speaking with him for a while. Likewise, cynicism causes depression and inactivity in people in general. A cynical person believes he knows better than everyone else. The last words from the tall ghost are, "First of all tantalize you with ground you can't walk on and water you can't drink and then drill you full of holes. But they won't catch me that way."



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

After his encounter with the tall ghost, the narrator sits on the riverbank and feels as miserable and discouraged as he's ever felt. Before his conversation with the tall ghost it had never occurred to him to doubt the intentions of the Solid People, but now he explores the possibility and wonders that they don't seem to help the ghosts more. He thinks that it might be true that the bus trip might just be to mock the ghosts, that it is like a punishment of those consigned to hell.

Suddenly, he no longer feels safe there. He worries that a dewdrop might knock him down or that an insect landing on his head could crush him to the earth. He feels that he would be safer if he avoided open areas, so he stays near shrubs and trees until he comes across another ghost, a well-dressed woman who appears to be trying to hide near some shrubs.

A Bright Person notices her and approaches her, whereupon she squeals and asks the Bright Person to go away. The Bright Person wants to help her, but she protests, saying that she doesn't want his help and that he's taking advantage of her. He says she needs to go to the mountains, and although he can't carry her, she's welcome to lean on his arm until the going gets a little easier.

She's uncomfortable about the way she's dressed because she's aware that she doesn't look as good as the Bright People. "How can I go out like this among a lot of people with real bodies?" She is so worried about being shamed that she doesn't want to be seen. The Bright Person talks about shame with her and tells her that if she will accept shame and drink the cup to the bottom, it will be very nourishing, but if she tries to do anything else with shame it will scald her. The Bright Person again asks her to go to the mountains with him. The narrator waits on her answer, feeling that his destiny hangs on her reply. She says she wants to but can't. The Bright Person asks her to fix her attention on something other than herself, but she cannot.

The Bright Person puts a horn to his lips and blows. The earth seems to shake and the trees to tremble. A herd of unicorns comes thundering through the woods. They are all white with indigo horns and red eyes. The grass squelches under their hooves. The ghost screams and flees, so the narrator never hears the end of their conversation.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The ghost of the well-dressed woman represents pride. This ghost's pride will not allow her to go anywhere where she won't be the best-dressed person. In life, she found comfort in possessing nice things, but in the afterlife this comfort has been taken from her. She didn't focus on improving her character or helping others, so she has not



progressed morally and is too ashamed of her appearance to swallow that pride and take the first steps toward progress.

The unicorns represent possibility. They are beautiful and mythical, but here in heaven they are very real and striking. The Bright Person shows them to her to elicit a desire to stay, but the ghost feels nothing but shame and her own weakness, so she responds to the unicorns not with hope but with fear and anger and flees to the bus.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

A Bright Person approaches the narrator and asks, in a Scottish accent, where he is going. The Bright Person looks ageless but also like an old shepherd. The narrator says he doesn't know where he is going, so the Bright Person invites him to sit down and talk. The Bright Person introduces himself as George MacDonald, and the narrator instantly recognizes him as a trusted author he can count on. In life, the narrator had come across George MacDonald's writings in a train station, and MacDonald had been to him what Beatrice had been to Dante.

The narrator asks MacDonald if any of the ghosts actually stay, if any of them really can stay and if they have any choices. MacDonald explains that the damned have excursions they can take if they want to, but most of them don't even bother. They'd rather take trips back to earth where they try to assert ownership of some house that once belonged to them or they spy on their children. Literary ghosts hang around public libraries to see if anyone is still reading their books.

But the narrator wants to know if any of the ghosts stay here in this country, and MacDonald says some do. The narrator comments that he thought judgment was final. He explains that for those who move up from hell to heaven, that hell is initially purgatory to them. And that this land they're in isn't deep heaven but just the Valley of the Shadow of Life. The gray town could be called the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

MacDonald tells the narrator that he cannot in his present state understand eternity but that people's pasts begin to change once they are forgiven of their sins. Once people are saved, they look back and see that what was misery has been turned to joy. Hell is a state of mind, but Heaven is reality itself. There is always something that the ghosts prefer to reality, some of which are wrath, grandeur, injured merit, self-respect, tragic greatness, and proper pride.

The narrator asks MacDonald why the Solid People don't go down to hell and rescue the ghosts if the Solid People are so full of love. MacDonald says that every one of the Solid People he has seen has "interrupted his own journey and retraced immeasurable distances to come down today on the mere chance of saving some ghost".

Remembering the fight to get on the bus at the bus station, the narrator asks what becomes of the ghosts who never get on the bus. MacDonald answers that everyone who wish to get on the bus does get on.

A ghost talking at enormous speed to a Solid Person interrupts their conversation. She is talking about how mistreated she has been, especially in the nursing home before she died. The narrator is troubled to see that an unhappy old woman should be in danger of damnation; she doesn't seem to be the type who should be in such a situation. MacDonald says that if there's a real woman in there, and not just a grumbler,



she can be brought back to life again. If there's still a spark, she can repent and progress.

MacDonald invites the narrator to lean on his arm and walk a little. He obeys, and finds himself feeling like a child, leaning on the arm of someone older and more experienced. He also notices that his other senses seem to be quickened, perhaps as a result of his proximity to his glorious guide. As they walk the narrator notices a most pitiable ghost, a woman who is trying to attract the Bright People. "If a corpse already liquid with decay had arisen from the coffin, smeared its gums with lipstick, and attempted a flirtation, the result could not have been more appalling." The woman eventually mutters, "stupid creatures," and gets back on the bus.

They meet some Ghosts who come so near heaven only to tell the Celestials about Hell. This is perhaps the most common type of ghost. Some actually want to give lectures about Hell, bringing fat notebooks of statistics and maps. Some proclaim to the Solid People, "You have led a sheltered life!" They want to extend Hell, to bring it into Heaven if they can.

They come across a ghost who was a painter in life. He wants to paint heaven, and the Solid Person he converses with says it's no good painting it because they all can see it already, better, in fact, than he can. The painter decides that he doesn't want to stay if there's no point painting. Of course, if he can meet other famous painters it might be worth staying, but his guide explains that people here aren't famous for such things. Then the artist ghost really doesn't want to stay because there will be no glory for him, so he vanishes.

Chapter 9 Analysis

C.S. Lewis uses a new literary device in this chapter, a guide, such as Virgil used in *The Divine Comedy*. Generally, an author will use a guide to bring an air of authority to a work. In this case, C.S. Lewis used an author he admired, George MacDonald, to lend credibility to his theories. George MacDonald was a Scottish author, poet, and Christian preacher who influenced such authors as C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, Auden, and Madeline L'Engle.

In Chapter 9, Lewis uses MacDonald to explain the nuts and bolts of heaven and hell. The narrator finally gets his own chance to talk to a Bright Person and get some questions answered. Beyond that, the narrator also has a chance to lean on a strong arm and make some real progress toward becoming solid himself, though he realizes that he is still like a little child. The image of the narrator appearing to be like a little child next to the Bright Person is an allusion to Christ's biblical admonition to becoming like a little child, submissive and full of patience.

The narrator and his guide come across several ghosts in this chapter. The first is an unhappy ghost who is still complaining about her conditions from earth life. The second is trying to get ahead by flirting with the Solid People. The third is an artist who was

notable on earth but is trying to get on in heaven on his own terms. He wants creative satisfaction and fame, and he quickly returns to the bus when he realizes that heaven doesn't play by his rules. Each of these ghosts cannot get past his or her pride, keeping with the overall theme.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The narrator and MacDonald next overhear a conversation between a female ghost and a Bright Woman. The ghost tells her companion that she would not dream of staying if she's expected to meet Robert. She says she has forgiven him as a Christian but there are some things she can never forget. Robert is her husband, and she recounts to the Bright Woman, whose name is Hilda, that Robert lacked ambition from the very beginning of their marriage. She had to push him to make something of himself and force him to do things to better himself socially. She discouraged him from writing so he could have a real job so they could buy a bigger house. She says it was maddening the way he sunk into himself, that he was no good at the parties she threw. She claims to have done her duty by him to the very end.

After recounting the countless ways she controlled him in life, the ghost changes her mind and thinks she really would like to see Robert, that she'd like to take charge of him once more, if only to continue to do her duty by him. She is very uncomfortable in this afterlife not being able to control people. She wants the Bright Woman to give Robert back to her. The ghost that had towered up like a dying candle suddenly snapped, and only a sour, dry smell lingered in the air. The ghost could no longer be seen.

Chapter 10 Analysis

This entire chapter recounts the story of one ghost, told almost entirely in monologue from her own point of view, which makes the condemnation all the more powerful. Her sin in life was controlling her husband for her own selfish ends, not caring about his spirit or his wishes. Since death, she has not been able to control and dominate him, and she can find no pleasure without such control. This is another form of pride, so strongly denounced by the author that this ghost doesn't return to the bus; she merely disappears and leaves behind a foul odor.

Many of the ghosts up until this point have been men. Of the women we've seen, most of them have received very little print space, such as the flirtatious ghost or the complaining old woman. But this one is enlarged in great detail, indicating that C.S. Lewis thinks that this type of woman is quite prevalent. Perhaps at the time he wrote this book, he saw controlling behavior as a major indication of pride in women.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

One of the most painful meetings encountered by the narrator and his guide is one between a woman's ghost and a Bright Person who had been her brother on earth. The Bright Person hopes that she will be glad to see him, though he assumes she would have rather had someone else to greet her. The woman says she did hope that Michael would come to see her. The Bright Person explains that Michael is here, far up in the mountains but that he wouldn't be able to see or hear her at the present, that she would be totally invisible to him and she needs to be built up first.

The narrator learns that Michael is the ghost's son. The ghost, whose name is Pam, snaps at her brother for perceived insults and grows very impatient when she is told that she can't see Michael right away. Her brother explains to Pam that the first step will be difficult but then she'll make progress like wildfire. The first step is to learn to want someone else besides Michael, and that someone is God. Pam says she'll do whatever he wants, just to make it quick. The Bright Person tells her it won't work if she uses God only as a means to get to Michael, that she's got to learn to love God for His own sake.

She says he wouldn't talk like that if he were a mother. He explains to her that she doesn't exist only as a mother, that she was God's creature before she was a mother and that God has also suffered and waited a long time for her. She says that if God loved her, He would let her see her son and He wouldn't have taken her son away from her. The Bright Person says that God had to take Michael away, partly for Michael's sake and partly for her own.

In life, Pam loved Michael like a tigress, and when he died, she loved him even more fiercely, to the exclusion of her daughter and husband. She left his room just as it was for ten years, kept anniversaries, and refused to leave their house, even though her husband and daughter were miserable there. She felt that her husband and daughter didn't honor Michael, that they were heartless because they didn't continue to mourn him the way she did.

Now she talks about love, but she has no love for her own mother or brother or for God. MacDonald leads the narrator away for a while to discuss this conversation. He explains that her love for her son has turned into a poor, prickly, astringent sort of thing, but there is still a spark of real love that could be blown into a flame.

They soon see another ghost coming toward them. This one has a little red lizard on his shoulder, and the lizard is whispering into the ghost's ear. The ghost sometimes tells the lizard to shut up, but the lizard never does. The ghost says to an angel that he'd like to stay, but it's no good, the lizard won't be quiet so he'll have to go home. The angel offers to kill the lizard for him, but the ghost doesn't want him killed. The angel tells the ghost that killing the lizard is the only way for him to stay. The ghost seems to be open to the



idea, but only wants to talk about it; he doesn't want to go through with it. The ghost is afraid that he himself won't survive if the lizard is killed, but eventually he concedes and the angel kills the lizard. The ghost thinks he is dying, but then the lizard turns into a mighty stallion and the ghost turns into a Bright Person. He mounts the stallion and they take off toward the mountains. As they ride away, a song of praise is sung by the earth itself about overcoming weaknesses.

MacDonald explains to the narrator that the lizard represents lust, which is "a poor, weak, whimpering, whispering thing compared with that richness and energy of desire which will arise when lust has been killed." The narrator asks if the man's sensuality proved to be less of an obstacle than the woman's excess of love for her son. MacDonald points out that the woman didn't have an excess of love for her son, that her love was defective, not excessive.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Lewis compares and contrasts two kinds of counterfeit love: lust and selfish love. Lust is represented by the ghost with the lizard on his shoulder. The lizard, or lust, had to be killed before he could make progress. There was no place for lust in a perfected character. The angel in this chapter is insistent that the lizard must be killed, but he cannot kill it without the ghost's permission. When the ghost finally agrees to give it up, the transformation is immediate and stunning.

Pam, Michael's mother, represents selfish love. After her son's death, Pam neglects all of her relationships and devotes herself entirely to someone who is no longer on earth. In doing so, she feels freed from all other obligations and actually blames those whom she should be serving. Thus, her "love" for her son becomes an excuse to neglect her real duties. By the time we meet her she has become very self-righteous and prideful. She only sees defects in others and cannot conceive the idea that God may actually love her. All love is deficient compared with her own, misguided love for her son.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

The narrator asks his guide if there is another river because of the strange reflected lights he notices, but then he realizes that the lights are coming from the Bright People who make up the approaching procession. Some of them are scattering flowers and most of them are singing. The song is so beautiful that he thinks if he could write down the music, those who hear it would never grow sick or old.

Soon the narrator sees the woman whose honor they are all praising. She is unbearably beautiful, and the narrator wonders who she is. MacDonald says she is someone he would never have heard of on earth, one Sarah Smith. She is one of the great ones. Those who praise her are those she helped on earth; she was very kind to everyone she knew. A great number of animals follow as well, and these are the animals she loved on earth. Sarah Smith notices two oddly shaped ghosts approaching. One of them tall, thin, and shaky and is leading on a chain another ghost no bigger than an organ grinder's monkey. The tall ghost has the air of a seedy old actor.

The tall ghost and Sarah greet each other. The narrator then notices that the dwarfish ghost is actually leading the tall ghost around, and Sarah looks solely at the dwarfish ghost, seeming to deliberately ignore the tall ghost. Love shines from all her limbs, as if she had just been bathing in it. She kisses the dwarf and addresses him as Frank. She asks his forgiveness for everything she ever did wrong and all she didn't do right.

The dwarfish ghost becomes a little more visible after her kiss. He is a small man with an oval, freckled face and a wisp of a mustache. He gives her a glance, not a full look, and watches the Tragedian (the tall ghost) out of the corner of his eyes. The Tragedian tells her to think no more about it, that they all make mistakes. She continues to focus her gaze on the dwarfish ghost even as the Tragedian is talking.

The dwarf asks Sarah if she missed him, and she says that he will understand about all that very soon. The dwarf and Tragedian then speak in unison, commenting that she isn't answering their questions, and it is at this moment that the narrator realizes that the two ghosts are really fragments of one man. The two ghosts conspire against her and rile each other, making it impossible for them to forgive her sins against them, such as the time on earth when she used the last stamp in the house to write a letter to her mother.

Sarah has a discussion with the two ghosts about love. She explains to the dwarf that she now understands love in a way that she never did on earth. Of course, the Tragedian turns this statement against her, accusing her of never really loving him. She invites him to come with her and learn about God's love, the kind of love that makes one feel full, not empty. The Tragedian says he wishes she were lying dead at his feet. Sarah asks Frank to get rid of the Tragedian. Frank looks right at Sarah and begins to



grow a little taller. She thinks the Tragedian's comment about death is funny because Frank did see her lying dead, but not at her feet. The matron at the nursing home would never have allowed dead bodies to lie around.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Never before this chapter has the author explored the idea of a dividing a single person into two ghosts. The idea of an alter ego or separate conscience is not revolutionary in literature, but what is interesting here is that the reader cannot immediately identify which of the ghosts is the real soul of the person. The taller ghost, the Tragedian, appears to have the upper hand over Frank, the dwarfish ghost. But Frank is the only one of the two who can progress. He grows a little taller when he looks Sarah in the eyes. He grows a bit more solid when she kisses him. The Tragedian cannot grow, and he becomes more and more hateful as Frank begins to heed Sarah's pleas.

Before the narrator sees the Frank and the Tragedian, he only sees Sarah Smith's procession approaching, and he is overcome by the love that emanates from her. Every creature in the procession appears to love her. Even the animals love her. So when the repulsive ghosts visit her and show so much bitterness toward her, it's clear to the reader that the ghosts are disillusioned and in error.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

The narrator claims to have never seen anything more awful than Frank's struggle against joy. The Tragedian accuses Sarah of not wanting them and of driving them back to Hell. Sarah explains that no one would drive them back, but that everything here bids them to stay. But even as she speaks, Frank is growing smaller. The Tragedian berates her, and she begs Frank to make the Tragedian stop.

The Tragedian goes on and on, pointing out all of her supposed flaws as the dwarf ghost shrinks until he's no bigger than a kitten. She explains that she asked him to get the Tragedian to stop not because he was hurting her feelings but because acting does no good here. The Tragedian is killing the dwarf. He is now so small that he's indistinguishable from the chain. She tells him to stop using other people's pity in the wrong way, as a kind of blackmailing. The Tragedian continues to rail against her, and the dwarf is no longer visible.

Now Sarah addresses the Tragedian for the first time and asks where Frank is. She says she never knew the Tragedian, that she cannot love a lie. The Tragedian vanishes and she gets up and walks away. Other Bright Spirits receive her and sing as they come. The narrator finds it odd that she is untouched by Frank's misery. MacDonald asks the narrator if he thinks Frank should have the power of tormenting her. Hell does not have the power to veto Heaven.

The narrator thinks it would have been good of Sarah to wait for Frank at the bus stop. MacDonald invites the narrator to get down on his knees, which really hurts. MacDonald picks a blade of grass to use as a pointer and points to a crack in the soil so small that the narrator wouldn't have been able to see it on his own. MacDonald explains that the crack he came up through from Hell was no bigger than that. Hell is smaller than one pebble from the earthly world. Therefore, Sarah Smith could never fit into Hell, even if she wanted to go visit Frank. Only Christ can make himself small enough to visit Hell because he has already descended into Hell. MacDonald tells the narrator that any man may choose his eternal reality. People have the freedom to choose which way they will go.

Chapter 13 Analysis

As the Tragedian becomes more and more dramatic and irrational, Sarah's calmness is a striking contrast. But what appears to be a tragedy to the narrator, that her husband disappears and is lost, has virtually no effect on Sarah, and this bothers the narrator greatly. MacDonald points out that Hell cannot veto Heaven's joys and that Time is like a telescope; your perception changes depending on which end you look through. MacDonald's explanations grow more complicated and uninterrupted, showing that the



narrator is either lost in thought or not understanding, and the doctrinal conflict comes to a climax, which must surely be resolved in the next chapter.

The size of Hell brings a change in perception at least as dramatic as the contrast between Hell and Heaven earlier in the story. The joys of Heaven become enlarged as the miseries of Hell are reduced infinitesimally. Also, the contrast between Heaven and Hell expands into another dimension: reality. Hell seems transparent and flimsy whereas Heaven seems substantial and very real.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Suddenly everything has changed. The narrator sees a great assembly of huge forms, all of them motionless and quiet. They are standing around a small silver table and are very interested in the little chess-like figures on the table. The figures move around on the table, and each figure shows the acts of one of the giant figures. The silver table is Time, and those who stand and watch are the souls of those same people.

The narrator asks MacDonald if all that he has seen, all of the conversations between Bright People and ghosts, has been false. MacDonald explains that the conversations were choices made on earth but seen through a different lens. He also informs the narrator that this is all a dream, that he has not died yet, and that he shouldn't go about talking about all that he has learned.

The vision of the chessmen fades and they are once again in the quiet woods with the mountains in the distance. The cock crows, morning arrives, and the narrator buries his face in MacDonald's robes, crying that morning has come and he is still a ghost. The narrator wakes up and finds himself on the floor next to his study table. The room is cold, the clock is striking three, and a siren is howling overhead.

Chapter 14 Analysis

The setting shifts again to a surreal, unnatural setting where the only tangible item is a silver table. The gigantic motionless figures are very different from the Bright People described in heaven. This final setting strikes fear into the narrator, who feels that he has been either misled or has misunderstood everything. But he does understand immediately that the conversations between the Bright People and the ghosts were reflections of what took place on earth.

Waking up from his dream, the narrator finds himself cold, in the dark, and in a setting filled with fear. This setting contrasts with Heaven and feels similar to the Gray Town, or Hell. The story ends before we see what difference the narrator's dream has on him, but we know from his last conversation with MacDonald that the impression is deep and lasting.



Characters

Narrator

The Narrator is Everyman in the sense that we know nothing about his background, his personality, his flaws and weaknesses, his strengths. We don't even know his name. Because of this lack of information, readers can put themselves in his place and take the journey along with him. At the end of the story, when the Narrator wakes up from the dream, we get about a paragraph to let us know a little about him. He has fallen asleep at a desk in a cold room, so he must be something of a scholar. Books fall on his head, so he must have been reading when he fell asleep.

The Narrator watches the ghosts around him having conversations with the Bright People. In all situations, he responds with curiosity, seeking answers from his guide and wondering more about the ghosts than he is able to find out. The narrator's curiosity allows for further explanation of what is happening and should be seen less as a personality characteristic than as a literary device.

George MacDonald

George MacDonald doesn't appear until about halfway through the novel, but next to the narrator, he is the most important character in the book. George MacDonald was a real literary figure, a Christian preacher, poet, and philosopher, whom C.S. Lewis admired and looked up to. The real George MacDonald was Scottish, and C.S. Lewis has preserved that detail, giving the character George MacDonald a Scottish brogue in his conversation.

George MacDonald is jovial and humble. He looks like a shepherd and scholar at the same time, is totally honest and reliable. No matter what atrocity the two encounter, MacDonald is always calm and ready with an explanation when the narrator asks questions. George MacDonald's character can be compared with Dante's Virgil from *The Divine Comedy*.

Ikey

The narrator first encounters Ikey, the ghost with the bowler hat, on the bus. He represents greed, although he tries to disguise his greed with beneficence, claiming that if he manages to bring real objects to Hell, it will solve the social problems of people moving away from the city center when they dispute with their neighbors. The narrator encounters this ghost in heaven when he sees him trying, with great consequence, to take a golden apple back to the bus with him.



The Conscientious Objector

The Conscientious Objector feels that the world is against him. He feels an obligation to protest "incorrect" policies and philosophies. And in objecting governments and people he has removed himself from his country and eventually from all his loved ones. Even after his suicide, he still cannot be happy. He finds himself still objecting to everything around him and does not have the humility necessary to realize that he is the one who needs to change.

The Big Man

On Earth, the Big Man was an employer, husband, and father who found great pleasure in his authority. But his love of authority caused him to treat his employees, wife, and children poorly. After his death, he still cannot escape the superiority his position has given him. When one of his employees is sent to greet him, he cannot submit himself to the teachings that would save him.

The Tall Ghost

The Tall Ghost represents cynicism. On Earth he believed that everyone had ulterior motives, that nobody was genuine. As with all the ghosts, his earthly views have followed him into the afterlife. When the Bright People encourage the ghosts to come with them to the mountains, saying that their feet will harden up, the Tall Ghost accuses them of spreading propaganda.

The Well-dressed Ghost

Although she wears beautiful clothes, the Well-dressed Ghost hides behind shrubs and trees because she doesn't want anyone to see her. She can see the difference between her own transparent body and the shining beautiful bodies of the Bright People, and she would rather hide than humble herself enough to progress to their glory.

The Female Ghost

The Female Ghost wants to see her husband Robert, whom she controlled during Earth life. She used him to satisfy her needs and didn't respect him as a separate person. Robert is now a Bright Person, and she feels incomplete without having someone to control. At first she considers controlling Robert her duty, but then she begs to have him back so she can continue to manipulate him.

Pam

Pam is a ghost who has come looking for her son Michael. Michael died young, and she mourned him so absolutely that she neglected her husband and daughter. Now she demands to have Michael with her, but she must learn to love others, and most especially God, before she see him. She feels that this is cruel and unjust and that a mother's love eclipses all other kinds of love.

Frank and the Tragedian

Although they physically look like two different ghosts, Frank and the Tragedian are fragments of the same person. When Frank's wife Sarah, who is bright and beautiful, comes by in a procession, these two fragments of a person try to make her feel pity for them. She no longer falls for their blackmail, and they end up returning to Hell.



Objects/Places

The Gray Town

The Gray Town represents Hell. It is always rainy and gray.

The Bus Stop

The Bus Stop is in the Gray Town. Passengers fight to get on the bus.

The Bus Stop

The bus takes passengers from Hell to Heaven.

The Foothills of Heaven

The bus drops the passengers from the Gray Town at the Foothills of Heaven. The ghosts must travel to the mountains on foot in order to become Bright People.

The Mountains

The Mountains represent Exaltation. Once there, people continue learning and are always happy.

The River

The narrator finds a river to walk on because the grass hurts his feet.

The Waterfall

The waterfall speaks to the ghosts and advises or warns them.

The Chess Game

The chess people represent the souls of the gigantic people.

The Silver Table

The silver table is the world whereon the chess people reside.

The Narrator's Study

The narrator's study is the last setting of the story, where he wakes up from his dream.



Themes

Pride

Each of the ghosts who give up on Heaven to return to Hell possesses pride inasmuch that he cannot progress. Pride manifests itself in many different ways. Some of the ghosts cannot give up their authority. Some are greedy or narrow-minded or cynical. Some will not allow others to see them as they are and so they cannot find help or progress on their journeys. Some will not forgive or forget trespasses from long ago, so they grow bitter and smaller.

The Bright People who advise the ghosts continually ask the ghosts to let go of something or other in order that they might progress. Invariably, the ghosts try to give up their pride, but they find it too difficult. They would rather return to Hell and keep their pride intact than remain in Heaven and humble themselves.

There is one exception to the rule. The ghost with the lizard on his shoulder humbles himself enough to allow the angel to kill the lizard. In doing so, he instantly becomes much greater and happier than he ever could have been had he not swallowed his pride. Unfortunately, the other ghosts slink or stomp back to the bus, wounded because the Bright People fail to see their worth.

The Reality of Heaven

Everything in the story points to the reality of Heaven. The comparison between the gray town and heaven is striking. In the gray town, everything is dingy and unsubstantial. Nothing is taken care of properly and the streets seem deserted. In Heaven, everything is heavy and beautiful and bright. The ghosts look transparent against such solidity, and everything is too heavy for them to lift.

Besides physical objects, the truths revealed in Heaven are more real and authentic than the philosophies bantered about in the gray town or even on Earth. The ghosts all have different theories about their lives and how things ought to be. But in Heaven, all of the Bright People have the same understanding and calmly relate the nature of things, as a parent would explain to a child how gravity works. All is understood and accepted as scientific laws. When the narrator returns to consciousness at the end of his dream, the chaos of earth life, with air raid sirens blaring in the midnight air, seems bearable because of the reality of Heaven.

Childlike Submission

Although never directly referred to, the idea of submitting oneself like a child is ever present in *The Great Divorce*. This idea, of course, comes from the Bible, where followers of Christ are admonished to be meek and teachable as little children. The



narrator, ever curious, does submit himself to his teacher, George MacDonald, as a child submits himself to his father. He even mentions at one point that he feels curiously like a child when he leans upon his mentor's arm to ease the pain in his feet as he walks across the spiky grass.

The ghosts who return to Hell do not submit themselves as a child to their father. They refuse to give up their pride or take advice from anyone else. They think they know better than their guides and revile against authority. In so doing, they fail to progress as a child would fail to progress if he doesn't listen to his parents and teachers.



Style

Point of View

The point of view in this novel is first person from the narrator's point of view. The narrator represents everyman, so the reader can take the journey through Hell and Heaven with the narrator. The narrator interacts with some of the ghosts, but many of the ghosts are simply observed by the narrator. In these instances, the point of view seems to switch to the third person until the narrator comes back in to ask his guide questions about what he has just witnessed or to make comments of his own.

The narrator acts as the eyes and ears of the readers as they make his same journey. When the narrator is confused, the reader trusts him all the more, for he is traveling in uncharted territory. The narrator is a trustworthy source of information, genuine in his thoughts and questions.

Setting

The sentence structure in *The Great Divorce* is simple and straightforward. With such unusual ideas and settings involved, the language must be simple and plain so as not to overload readers with too much at once. There is quite a bit of dialogue between ghosts and Bright People. The dialogue is all quite familiar, for each conversation is a scenario one would encounter on Earth. In fact, the ghost's weaknesses are all too familiar.

The narrator's guide, George MacDonald, is Scottish, and Lewis reminds us of this fact with every word MacDonald says. His brogue is clearly Scottish, and the dialect is a fresh break from the unfamiliar territory we read about. The dialect also adds personality to a seemingly conformist character, for we don't get to know too many of the Bright People intimately.

Language and Meaning

The sentence structure in *The Great Divorce* is simple and straightforward. With such unusual ideas and settings involved, the language must be simple and plain so as not to overload readers with too much at once. There is a great deal of dialogue between ghosts and Bright People. The dialogue is all quite familiar, for each conversation is a scenario one would encounter on Earth. In fact, the ghost's weaknesses are all too familiar. Readers can't help but recognize bits of themselves in these conversations.

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Structure

This novel is constructed of fourteen chapters, varying in length from a couple to a dozen pages. The story begins abruptly as the narrator begins his dream. The abruptness is disconcerting as the reader gets his bearings, but this leads us immediately into the narrator's consciousness, emphasizing his Everyman role.

The dream sequence runs chronologically, beginning with the narrator's journey through Hell, to the bus stop, and then on to the foothills of Heaven, where he learns from the other ghosts and from his guide all he needs to know to complete his life on Earth. The novel ends as abruptly as it begins, with the narrator waking uncomfortably in his cold, dark study at three o'clock in the morning to air raid sirens during World War II in England.



Quotes

"You can see the lights of the inhabited houses, where those old ones live, millions of miles away. Millions of miles from us and from one another. Every now and then they move further still. That's one of the disappointments. I thought you'd meet interesting historical characters. But you don't: they're too far away." Chapter 2, p. 11.

"They were all fixed faces, full not of possibilities but impossibilities, some gaunt, some bloated, some glaring with idiotic ferocity, some drowned beyond recovery in dreams; but all, in one way or another, distorted and faded." Chapter 3, p. 17.

"One gets glimpses, even in our country, of that which is ageless—heavy thought in the face of an infant, and frolic childhood in that of a very old man. Here it was all like that." Chapter 3, p. 24.

"Will you come with me to the mountains? It will hurt at first, until your feet are hardened. Reality is harsh to the feet of shadows. But will you come?" Chapter 5, p. 39.

"Once you were a child. Once you knew what inquiry was for. There was a time when you asked questions because you wanted answers, and were glad when you had found them. Become that child again: even now." Chapter 5, p. 41.

"You cannot take it back. There is not room for it in Hell. Stay here and learn to eat such apples. The very leaves and the blades of grass in the wood will delight to teach you." Chapter 6, p. 49.

"It's up to the Management to find something that doesn't bore us, isn't it? It's their job. Why should we do it for them?" Chapter 7, p. 55.

"Here was an enthroned and shining god, whose ageless spirit weighed upon mine like a burden of solid gold: and yet, at the very same moment, here was an old weather-beaten man, one who might have been a shepherd—such a man as tourists think simple because he is honest and neighbors think 'deep' for the same reason." Chapter 9, p. 65.

"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.'" Chapter 9, p. 75.

"If all Hell's miseries together entered the consciousness of yon wee yellow bird on the bough there, they would be swallowed up without trace, as if one drop of ink had been dropped into that Great Ocean to which your terrestrial Pacific itself is only a molecule." Chapter 13, pp. 138-139.

"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." Chapter 14, p. 146.



Topics for Discussion

Compare the functions of light in the three main settings: the gray town, heaven, and the chess table.

Discuss how pride manifests itself in the characters' lives. How does pride manifest itself in your own life?

What is the role of free agency in determining where the ghosts spend their afterlives?

What steps does the narrator take in progressing from a fully transparent ghost to one who feels more comfortable in heaven?

What does the chess game represent in the last chapter?

The last chapter ends on Earth in WWII England. What is significant about ending the book in a war scene?

Why do you think C.S. Lewis used Scottish writer George McDonald as the narrator's guide in heaven?

Discuss the significance of the title.