The Great Divorce

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF C. S. LEWIS

C. S. Lewis was born and raised in Ireland. He then attended Oxford University, where he distinguished himself as a scholar of English, Classics, and Philosophy. Lewis fought in World War I, and, partly as a result of the carnage he witnessed, he was an atheist for most of his twenties. For more than thirty years, Lewis taught at Oxford University. During this time he converted to the Anglican Church, and became an articulate proponent of Christian values. Lewis's love for Christianity, as well as his vast knowledge of mythology and linguistics, inspired him to write his most famous book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*—the first volume of the Chronicles of Narnia—in 1949. Over the course of his life he wrote poetry, essays, literature, autobiography, fantasy, science fiction, and non-fiction works of academic criticism, philosophy, and Christian apologetics. Lewis taught at Cambridge University until his death in 1963.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Great Divorce alludes to the First and Second World Wars, which occurred from 1914 to 1918 and 1939 to 1945, respectively. In both conflicts, European (and some non-European) countries fought against one another and millions of people were killed, challenging many people's faith in a merciful, all-powerful God. Lewis also alludes to the growing secularization of the academic and artistic spheres, and the rise of Marxism—the doctrine that history is a struggle between different class groups for control of the economic means of production—in Europe in the years leading up to World War Two.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The book alludes to many famous works of Christian literature. Perhaps the most important such work is William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (composed between 1790 and 1797). In this long poem, Blake constructs a complicated argument about why good and evil are "two sides of the same coin," and equally necessary to life. Lewis disagreed with Blake's argument so strongly that he wrote *The Great Divorce* as a response to Blake—as the title suggests, Lewis wants to reiterate the differences between Heaven and Hell instead of blending them together. There are also many other literary allusions in the novel. The spirit of the author George MacDonald guides the Narrator through the Valley of the Shadow of Life, alluding to MacDonald's own work but also to Dante's *Divine Comedy* (composed between 1308 and 1320), in which the spirit of the Roman poet Virgil guides Dante through the stages of the afterlife. Another work of Christian literature that influenced Lewis heavily is John Bunyan's *A Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), an allegorical work about an everyman who moves from Earth into Heaven.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Great Divorce
- **When Written:** 1943-44
- **Where Written:** London and Oxford
- **When Published:** October 1945
- **Genre:** Religious fiction, Allegory, Fantasy
- **Setting:** The Grey Town, the Valley of the Shadow of Life
- **Climax:** The game of chess
- **Antagonist:** Sin, hate, and pain could all be considered the antagonists of the novel—as Lewis sees it, these concepts are different versions of the same fundamental evil—the denial of the glory of God
- **Point of View:** First person, Present tense

EXTRA CREDIT

Famous fans. C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* books are some of the most famous children's novels of all time, and they've inspired some other classics of children's literature. Lewis's fans include J. K. Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* books, Philip Pullman, authors of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, and Lemony Snicket, author of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Pullman, an atheist, claims to despise Lewis's Christian ideas, but has "boundless respect" for the *Chronicles of Narnia*.

Best buddies. Lewis was a popular professor at Oxford University, and had lots of book friends on the faculty. His closest friend, another expert in Classics and English literature, also penned a series of Christian-inspired fantasy novels for intelligent young readers. His name? J. R. R. Tolkien, author of the *Lord of the Rings* books!

PLOT SUMMARY

An unnamed Narrator finds himself in a **Grey Town**, waiting for a bus. He boards the bus, along with a small number of other people, and the bus proceeds to fly over the grey town. The Narrator then talks with some of the other people on the bus, some of whom remember dying in various ways. One man, Ikey, tells the Narrator that the grey town is always getting bigger as

more and more people enter it. Some of these people get closer to the bus stop, so that one day they can drive away. Others drift farther from the bus stop—indeed, some people in grey town must be millions of miles from the bus stop by now.

The bus lands on a huge cliff, and the Narrator and the other passengers get out. They find that they've landed by a beautiful river, surrounded by grass and trees. However, the Narrator quickly discovers that everything in this place is motionless—even the blades of grass are rigid and hard. This makes walking around very painful. The Narrator also realizes that he no longer has a solid body—he and his peers are ghosts. The Narrator slowly realizes that he's in the afterlife. As he realizes this, he sees a group of Spirits approaching the ghosts. The Spirits are bright and have solid bodies—they've come to try to convince the ghosts to come with them toward the beautiful, majestic **mountains** in the distance. But most of the ghosts refuse to do so. One, the Big Ghost, notices that one of the spirits is Len, a man he knew while they were both alive. Len killed a man, and yet has become a Spirit, while the Big Ghost has led a supposedly virtuous life, and yet was sent to the dreary Grey Town. Len tries to convince the Big Ghost to "love," but the Big Ghost refuses, and walks back to the bus, eager to return to the Grey Town.

The Narrator witnesses other spirits trying to convince the ghosts to stay by the river, regain their solid bodies, and eventually climb to the top of the mountain. Each time, however, the ghosts refuse to stay, and walk back to the bus. Ikey, who's eager to make "a tidy profit" in the Grey Town, picks golden apples from a **tree** and carries them back to the bus, causing himself great pain in the process. Another ghost, the Hard-Bitten Ghost, tells the Narrator to be careful, and argues that "the same people" must control the river, the mountains, and the grey town. The Hard-Bitten Ghost's words fill the Narrator with despair.

Just as the Narrator is thinking of returning to the bus, he sees the Spirit of one of his favorite authors, George MacDonald. MacDonald greets the Narrator cheerfully and promises to show him around. He explains that the Narrator has come on a "vacation" from Hell, the Grey Town, to the "Valley of the Shadow of Life." There are many people in the Grey Town who visit the Valley and then return to the Town forever. For these people, the Grey Town is Hell. But there are others who stay in the Valley instead of returning to the Grey Town—for these people, the Grey Town is merely Purgatory; a place for them to exist before they "climb" up to Heaven. The people who are too stubborn to go to the mountains and love God, MacDonald explains, are like stubborn children who would rather be miserable than humble.

For the rest of the book, MacDonald carries the Narrator around the Valley, showing him conversations between Spirits and ghosts. In the first conversation, the Narrator sees a Spirit trying to convince the ghost of a famous Artist to remain in the Valley and go to Heaven. The Artist arrogantly refuses, claiming that he couldn't stand to live in a place without personal property, where his painting wouldn't be appreciated.

MacDonald shows the Narrator a female ghost who complains so much about her husband that she eventually disappears entirely—she's so consumed by pettiness and fussiness that she no longer has a soul. Another female ghost, Pam, argues with the Spirit of her brother, Reginald, about her love for her dead child, Michael. Pam claims to love Michael so much that she couldn't love anyone else during her lifetime. Reginald argues that Pam must surrender her love for Michael in order to love God completely—and afterwards, Pam will be reunited with Michael in Heaven forever. Pam refuses to give up her love for her son, though, claiming that Reginald is being cruel.

Another ghost carries a tiny **lizard** on his shoulder—MacDonald explains to the Narrator that this lizard is Lust. Reluctantly, the ghost allows an angel to crush the lizard, freeing the ghost from his burden to sexual desire. To the Narrator's amazement, the lizard transforms into a beautiful horse, who gallops away with the ghost, now a new-born man, toward the mountains. MacDonald explains that by surrendering our earthly desire—even for our loved ones—humans can become more beautiful, more powerful, and more loving than they ever thought possible.

In the final chapters of the novel, MacDonald shows the Narrator a beautiful Spirit, Sarah Smith. Sarah reunites with a man she once knew, Frank. Frank has become so embittered and self-hating that he's separated into two ghosts: a tall "Tragedian" ghost and a small "Dwarf" ghost. The Small Ghost—a bitter, self-hating being—uses a heavy chain to control the Tall Ghost—an overdramatic being who overreacts whenever Sarah does something even mildly offensive. Sarah, speaking to the Small Ghost, tries to tell Frank that he doesn't have to hate himself anymore—he's in a place of boundless love. The Small Ghost is almost ready to laugh along with Sarah and stay in the Valley. But instead, he pulls his chain, and the Tall Ghost rages theatrically, accusing Sarah of having never loved him. The Small Ghost shrinks until he's no longer visible at all. Then, the Tall Ghost disappears, too. MacDonald explains to the Narrator that Frank was trying to manipulate Sarah's pity and concern in order to pass along some of his own self-hatred to Sarah. While it might seem cruel for Sarah to be happy in the Valley, rather than spending her time pitying Frank, MacDonald insists that the saved should rejoice in their own salvation, rather than pitying the damned. If it were otherwise, he argues, then people in Hell would be able to "blackmail" people in Heaven into feeling miserable.

The Narrator asks MacDonald if the people in Hell will remain in Hell for all eternity, or if one day, God will free them and bring them to Heaven. MacDonald says that Heaven is open to all those who truly desire it. However, the Narrator must not ask questions about what will happen to human beings in the

future. It is the nature of human beings to live in time, uncertain about their future possibilities. For a human being to learn the mysteries of salvation would involve that human being standing "outside of time" and seeing the future—in other words, ceasing to be a human being. MacDonald illustrates this concept by taking the Narrator to a huge **chessboard**, across which chess pieces move rapidly.

The Narrator suddenly wakes up—he's been sleeping in his study.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The Narrator of *The Great Divorce* is never named. Furthermore, the novel contains little information about his personality, his personal life, or his interests. While we know that he's of a literary turn of mind, and is in some ways modeled on Lewis himself (hence his respect for the author George MacDonald), it's hard to think of words that could describe him clearly—as he travels through the afterlife, learning about Christian doctrine, readers learn relatively little about him. The Narrator, in short, exemplifies an archetype called the "everyman"—a character who's supposed to be as ordinary and relatable as possible. The original everyman was the protagonist in a 15th-century morality play of the same name. Indeed, one of the most common purposes of the everyman archetype is to teach an audience about a moral point of view, especially Christianity. In *The Great Divorce*, the Narrator's ordinariness and open-mindedness make him an ideal "stand-in" for the book's readers—as he experiences the afterlife and learns about Christianity, Heaven, and Hell, so do we.

George MacDonald – George MacDonald (1824-1905) was a Scottish author (in real life, as well as in *The Great Divorce*) who wrote a series of highly popular children's books and fantasies, many of which had a strong Christian flavor. MacDonald's books had a major influence on the childhood of C. S. Lewis, and partly inspired Lewis to pen Christian-themed children's books of his own. In the novel, MacDonald appears as a huge, powerful Spirit who (much like Virgil in Dante's *Divine Comedy*) guides the Narrator through the afterlife, explaining the intricacies of Christian morality. Ultimately, MacDonald teaches Lewis the most important Christian lesson of all: there are some facets of Christianity that human beings are not meant to know, especially concerning the redemption of souls. MacDonald is both the Narrator's guide and his "discussion partner," allowing Lewis to stage intelligent discussions of the book's difficult theological concepts.

The Intelligent Man / Ikey – A shrewd, businesslike soul who has a nonsensical plan to sell the golden **apples** of the Valley of the Shadow of Life to the people of the **Grey Town**. Ikey exemplifies the shallowness and vulgar materialism of humanity, but he also has an important narrative function in the novel: he's the character who explains the Grey Town to the Narrator (and therefore, to readers).

The Hard-Bitten Ghost – A bitter, cynical soul who tells the Narrator that Heaven and Hell are a "racket," both owned by the same people. The Hard-Bitten Ghost is generally distrustful of the world—despite the fact that he's "been everywhere" in life, he's never particularly impressed by the places he visits. It's possible that Lewis intended the Hard-Bitten Ghost partly as a parody of the ideas of William Blake, whose long poem, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, argues that good and evil are two different forms of the same vital energy. The Narrator generally respects people like the Hard-Bitten Ghost, and so the Ghost's cynical observations throw the Narrator into deep despair.

Sir Archibald – An intelligent, intensely curious man who became so obsessed with understanding "survival"—i.e., how to live on Earth in the best way possible—that he became impatient in the afterlife. Archibald's example acts as a warning to scientists, theologians, and philosophers, who love the search for knowledge more than they love God.

Frank / Dwarf / Tragedian – Frank's character is a complicated metaphor for the way humans use pity and self-loathing to manipulate other people, though he only appears toward the end of the novel. In life Frank knew and was loved by Sarah Smith, and would take advantage of her love by pretending that she'd hurt his feelings. Indeed, Frank has a long history of pretending to be sad in order to make other people feel guilty—even as a child he would do so. In the afterlife, Frank appears as two different ghosts, one small (the Dwarf), the other tall (the Tragedian). The Dwarf represents Frank's inner life: his self-hatred, and his manipulative tendencies. The Tragedian, on the other hand, represents the "image" of pain and sadness that Frank tries to project in order to make other people feel guilty. Thus, in the afterlife Frank takes on a form that externalizes the psychological processes by which Frank would try to "blackmail" Sarah into feeling sorry for him.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Driver – The Driver is responsible for transporting souls from the **Grey Town** to the Valley of the Shadow of Life. He hides his face, and seems to be "full of **light**," suggesting his supernatural, even angelic, qualities.

The Short Man – One of the souls who waits in line for the bus to the Valley of the Shadow of Life—he gets in a fight with the Big Man and leaves before the bus arrives.

The Big Man / Big Ghost – A large, aggressive man (and later a ghost) who argues, gets in fights, and ultimately refuses to believe that he can go to Heaven by exercising humility.

The Tousle-Headed Poet – A young, pretentious man who's gone to the **Grey Town** after committing suicide. He thinks that

he's better than everyone around him, and loves to complain about people and places.

Len – A Spirit who knew the Big Man while they were both alive. In life, Len murdered Jack, but—much to the Big Man's consternation—he's partly redeemed his soul by loving God.

Jack – The man who Len murdered.

Dick – A Spirit who was an academic of some kind during life, and who believed in the truthfulness of Christian doctrine.

The Fat Man / Fat Ghost – A damned soul who in life was a Christian bishop. He wrote a series of intentionally provocative articles questioning the Christian doctrine of resurrection, and now refuses to change his warped beliefs.

The Water-Giant – An enormous angel, whom the Narrator mistakes for a **waterfall**.The Water-Giant's extended arms and awesome demeanor evoke the spirit of Jesus Christ.

The Artist – A vain, pretentious painter who refuses to go to Heaven because there would be no need for paintings there. The Artist exemplifies the pitfalls of creativity—it can be a link to the glory of God, but also a distraction from it.

Robert – The husband of a female ghost—supposedly a lazy, negligent husband.

Hilda – A Spirit who vainly tries to convince a ghost to join her in Heaven.

Reginald – A Spirit, and the brother of Pam. Reginald vainly tries to convince Pam to join him in Heaven.

Michael – The child of Pam, who died too soon.

Pam – A ghost who refuses to join Reginald and Michael in Heaven because of her professed love for Michael, her child.

Sarah Smith – A lovely, beautiful Spirit who knew Frank in life, and tries to convince him to join her in Heaven.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DREAMS, FANTASY, AND EDUCATION

The unnamed Narrator of *The Great Divorce* has a long, vivid dream, during which he witnesses surreal scenes from the afterlife and learns valuable lessons about Christianity, morality, and love. The fact that the novel is structured as a dream suggests two important, closely related questions: first, what are the strengths and weaknesses of dreams and fantasy as Christian teaching tools; second, to what extent can Christianity be taught at all?

Because it's framed as a dream, the novel presents the Narrator's experiences as subjective, rather than literally and universally true, suggesting some limits on their educational content. In interviews and essays, Lewis made it plain that his account of the afterlife shouldn't be taken literally. Lewis believed in the afterlife, but in his novel he never claims to know everything about Heaven and Hell; instead, the book represents his imagining of how Hell and Heaven *might* be. Indeed, Lewis's imagining of Hell and Heaven are altogether different from the traditional Christian Heaven and Hell: in Lewis's novel, damned souls can choose to travel out of Hell and go to Heaven (though few do so). To make it crystal-clear that his novel isn't offering any kind of literal truth about the afterlife, Lewis presents the Narrator's travels as a dream—an experience that is, by definition, subjective.

But by qualifying the *literal* truth of his novel, Lewis focuses readers' attention on the spiritual, metaphorical truth of the Narrator's experiences—a kind of truth that fantasies and dreams are ideally suited to present. In his dreams, the Narrator sees bizarre people and places that teach him important Christian ideas symbolically. Often, the people he meets have their innermost qualities represented in some external form. For instance, he meets a man who "carries" his lust in the form of a tiny red **lizard**, and a man named Frank who pretends to be offended by controlling a giant with a chain. Similarly, the Narrator travels to places whose very geography symbolizes an emotional state—for example, going to Heaven, in *The Great Divorce*, involves climbing a **mountain**—an apt metaphor for the struggle for salvation. By externalizing and literalizing abstract concepts—lust, redemption, self-pity, etc.—the novel makes these concepts particularly easy to understand. In general, the novel's imaginary, dreamlike plot educates people—both readers and the Narrator himself—about key Christian concepts where a literal, abstract discussion of these same concepts might fall short. (There is also a long Christian tradition of using fantasy and allegory to teach religious lessons, arguably starting with the parables of Jesus himself.)

Another noteworthy consequence of the novel's use of fantasy and allegory is that it emphasizes the common faith of all Christians, rather than the literal differences between Christian sects. Although the novel addresses many aspects of faith, such as free will, sacrifice, love, pity, and redemption, it contains few, if any, specific mentions of Christian *practices*. Totally absent are mentions of baptism, Holy Communion, confirmation, etc.—rituals that, according to many sects and denominations, are essential parts of the religion. Where a literal discussion of Christianity presumably would have to discuss literal Christian rituals, Lewis's allegorical treatment of Christianity is better-suited for discussing the spiritual, or even psychological, aspects of the faith. (For example, it would be difficult for *The Great Divorce* to present a ritual like communion

symbolically—particularly since communion is arguably a symbolic ritual to begin with.) By emphasizing faith and spirituality and downplaying specific rituals, the novel seems to imply that Christians are defined primarily by their morality and faith, rather than their fidelity to a set of complicated, arbitrary rules—or, put another way, Christians are defined primarily by what they believe, not what they do.

Even though fantasy and metaphor can be highly effective teaching tools, they're not enough to convince people to lead virtuous, moral lives. Dreams cannot *make* a human being become a Christian; they can only encourage good, Christian behavior. Ultimately, humans must exercise their free will and choose to embrace religion (see Free Will theme). Partly for this reason, *The Great Divorce* ends with the Narrator waking up from his dream in a cold, dark room. The Narrator must decide whether to apply the lessons he's learned to his daily life—the same choice facing readers as they finish Lewis's novel.

HEAVEN, HELL, AND THE "GREAT DIVORCE"

C. S. Lewis intended *The Great Divorce* in part to be a rebuttal to a famous poem by the English author William Blake: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Essentially, Blake used his poem to argue that Hell gets a "bad rap." While Christian theology claims that Hell is wicked, and should be avoided at all costs, Blake proposed that Hell—and evil in general—was a vital component of creativity, enlightenment, and happiness. In all, Blake suggested that the only way for humans to be truly enlightened was to "marry" Heaven and Hell in their lives—in other words, to be kind and lawful (Heavenly), but also proud and devious (Hellish). Blake further suggested that a life lived according to traditional Christian values would be boring, repetitive, and overly "prudish," and even implied that God and Satan were allies. Lewis despises this theory, and tries to refute Blake's argument, "divorcing" Heaven and Hell for good.

Lewis's first line of attack against Blake (and Romanticism in general, which Blake is essentially representing) is to show that Heaven is the source of all human enlightenment, happiness, and beauty. Lewis's argument is epitomized in the character George MacDonald's claim that Heaven is "reality itself." Heaven, and good, are "real" in the sense that they're utterly rational; indeed, Lewis endeavors to show that Christianity is really just "common sense," meaning that sinners have foolishly confused themselves into worshipping evil and Hell (see the following theme). Furthermore, Lewis suggests that true happiness is only possible in Heaven. Sinners may believe that they're happy; but in reality, they've just embraced short-term pleasures and sacrificed the eternal, profound pleasures of Heaven. There is, in short, no true enlightenment without Heaven—contrary to what Romantics like Blake maintained. The novel also argues that God (as the ultimate Creator) is the source of all creativity, so there can *be* no beauty, art, or creativity that doesn't originally come from him, and reflect the beauty of Heaven. While William Blake might claim that the greatest art is that which incorporates both Heaven and Hell into its design, Lewis suggests that Blake has a misunderstanding of what Hell really means—by its very nature, nothing beautiful or creative could ever come from Hell.

Lewis's second major line of attack against Blake is to present Hell as a boring, repetitive, and ultimately meaningless place—essentially, taking Blake's criticism of Heaven and applying it to Hell. Hell, as depicted by Lewis, is far from the creative haven that Blake posited. On the contrary, damned souls barely interact with one another at all, and most of them have drifted millions of miles away. There are many creative people in Hell, but because they lack the true "spark" of beauty and enlightenment that Heaven alone can provide, they're incapable of producing great art or philosophy. Lewis then delivers the final blow to Blake's ideas at the end of *The Great Divorce* when he reveals that Hell is *tinier* than Heaven—so tiny, indeed that it could fit inside a butterfly's mouth. Lewis suggests that Hell, quite apart from being a worthy equal to Heaven, is actually almost nothing: put another way, evil is simply the *absence* of beauty, enlightenment, creativity, and all the other things that only Heaven can provide. In short, Lewis argues that Blake was wrong to fetishize Hell—the supposed merits of Hell are either 1) not really merits at all, or 2) actually found in Heaven.

CHRISTIANITY AND COMMON SENSE

In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis uses fiction and fantasy to make a strong argument for the truth and value of Christianity. Surprisingly, though, the novel never offers a specific definition of Christianity; indeed, it would seem that the only two beliefs that a Christian *must* have are a belief in the existence of God and a belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. Using this simple, straightforward definition of Christianity, the novel aims to show that Christian morality isn't a complicated set of arbitrary rules; deep down, it's just "common sense."

The Great Divorce makes the somewhat surprising argument that Christianity is the most obvious, intuitive way to think about life, morality, and happiness. In order to make such a point, Lewis makes use of the *reductio ad absurdum* technique: in other words, he proves that Christianity is common sense by showing that the alternatives to Christianity are irrational, nonsensical, or otherwise ill-founded. The damned souls who refuse to believe in God or the divinity of Christ are deeply confused about themselves and their place in the world. They want to hurt themselves or hurt other people, and some of them even deny the existence of any afterlife at all—despite the fact that they're *in* the afterlife. Furthermore, souls who deny

the existence of God and Christ often fail to show basic human emotions like compassion, respect, or dignity. Even if non-Christians seem virtuous on Earth, the afterlife exposes their true irrationality and moral callousness—suggesting that Christianity alone can lead humanity to enlightenment and virtue (or alternately, that true enlightenment and virtue only comes from God).

Principled, compassionate atheists are conspicuously (and maybe inevitably) absent from *The Great Divorce*. Damned souls insist that they're capable of love and reason, but George MacDonald—the Spirit who guides the Narrator through the afterlife—shows that, in fact, these damned souls are incapable of loving or thinking logically about the world. Even the "fat ghost" who claims to be a reasonable, intelligent man, in spite of denying Christ's resurrection, is shown to be a foolish contrarian, denying Christ's divinity for the sake of denial (and not because he really doubts Christ's divinity). Arguably, Lewis uses a series of "straw men" to make his argument—instead of seriously exploring the possibility that one can be reasonable, good, and agnostic, he invents easy targets like the fat ghost to confirm the rationality and morality of Christianity. But this is also the nature of the work, as Lewis isn't trying to present an all-encompassing argument for Christianity, but rather a short, entertaining, and hopefully enlightening story—so perhaps he's allowed to indulge in straw men for brevity's sake.

FREE WILL AND SALVATION

At the heart of *The Great Divorce* (and Christianity) is the concept of free will. The early Christian thinker Saint Augustine proposed a useful way of understanding free will: if a human being acts a certain way, and, under identical circumstances, *could* have acted differently, then that human has exercised their free will. Lewis never explicitly defines free will in his book, perhaps assuming that his readers already understand what it is. Nevertheless, *The Great Divorce* suggests that humans can only enter Heaven by exercising their innate free will.

One of the premises of *The Great Divorce* is that humans have the capacity to choose to go to Heaven even after they die—a notable digression from traditional Christian doctrine, in which souls either go to Heaven or Hell permanently. Humans are born with the power of free will: they can choose where to go, what to think, and—most importantly of all—whether or not to love God. Even in Hell, humans retain their powers of free will, meaning that they can choose to leave Hell and enter Heaven. Over the course of the novel, the Narrator observes the souls of human beings in Hell as they board a bus that takes them to the Valley of the Shadow of Life, located at the outskirts of Heaven. In the Valley, spirits and angels try to convince the souls of humans to love God and give up whatever sin they're clinging to that is keeping them out of Heaven. If a damned human being chooses to embrace God, they'll be welcomed into Heaven with open arms—even if they've committed horrific sins on Earth. In this way, the novel shows that going to Heaven is the result of a free, personal choice, not an external action (such as going to church, donating to charity, etc.).

Toward the end of the novel, Lewis emphasizes the importance of free will by declining to clarify whether or not God has "planned" humans' ultimate fate—an idea which, it could be argued, denies the existence of free will. The notion that God knows whether humans will be saved or damned has been interpreted by some Christian thinkers, such as John Calvin, to disprove the existence of free will: for Calvin, free will is just an illusion. However, when the Narrator asks George Macdonald whether or not God knows which human beings will be saved and which human beings will be damned, MacDonald forcefully insists that the Narrator must not ask such a question. Humans must continue to exist in time and space, choosing their own destinies, whereas God, in Lewis's view, exists *outside* of time, and so can see what we perceive as the "future" rather as an eternal present. In short, "the mind of God" is beyond human comprehension. MacDonald's advice suggests that *The Great Divorce*'s philosophy of free will is closer to that of the poet John Milton (a major influence on Lewis) than Calvin. Milton argued that God's foreknowledge of human salvation isn't mutually exclusive with humans' ability to choose their own salvation. Even if God does know the fate of humanity, God gives humans the power of free will; therefore, humans can exercise their free will and choose to join God in the afterlife.

While going to Heaven might seem like an obvious choice for one's free will, the vast majority of the damned souls the Narrator encounters refuse to choose Heaven, suggesting that choosing God—and free will itself—is more difficult than it seems. Many of the damned souls refuse to go to Heaven because they're frightened. Loving God involves surrendering one's love of earthly things—other people, one's pride, art, etc.—and most people are afraid of giving up these things for God. Other damned souls refuse God because they're under the delusion that damnation and life in Hell are preferable to salvation. For example, the souls of educated, academic human beings smugly suggest that Hell is more conducive to "creativity" than Heaven. (This is a simplified version of William Blake's argument in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*—an argument that Lewis tries to refute in his novel, even in its very title.) By definition, the concept of free will allows for humans to choose between two or more options. In *The Great Divorce*, most of the souls the Narrator encounters choose the *wrong* option—damnation—because they're confused, prideful, or otherwise corrupted.

Ultimately, the novel shows that free will is potentially dangerous, yet also emancipatory for human beings. If given the option to choose, many people will make the wrong choice, choosing to go to Hell instead of embracing Heaven. Yet the pitfalls of free will make a Christian's choice to worship God

more commendable: the handful of souls who freely choose to love God will be rewarded in Heaven for their difficult decision.

LOVE, SACRIFICE, AND SIN

According to the novel, the only way for a human being's soul to be accepted into Heaven is for the human to love God above all other things. But why, then, must humans love God in order to be saved—and why is it often so difficult to love God?

The Great Divorce, following Christian theology, posits that true morality is only possible if it comes from God. While Lewis never explicitly states why it's necessary to believe in and love God in order to be truly good, his argument takes two different forms. First, he suggests that to believe in God is to believe that infinite goodness is possible. A human being who believes in God, and therefore infinite goodness, will be capable of treating all other human beings with goodness—there is, in a sense, no upper limit to their capacity for goodness, kindness, and morality. Second, and more importantly, believing in God is the ultimate form of "humble love." A Christian who loves an all-powerful being knows how to love others selflessly. By contrast, an atheist or agnostic sometimes mistakes love for desire—in particular, the desire for ownership. For instance, the Narrator encounters a woman named Pam, who's spent the final decades of her life mourning for her dead son, Michael, to the point where she's neglected everyone else in her life, including her friends and husband. Pam insists that she loves her son, but it quickly becomes clear that her "love" is just a form of selfishness and clinginess—precisely the opposite of the calm, selfless love that a good Christian feels. Thus, the novel shows that even love—if it's not grounded in love for God—can be twisted into sin and become an obstacle to salvation. By the same token, the novel suggests that the only way for atheists and doubters of God's existence to enter Heaven is to love God completely—which, in practice, means "sacrificing" their feelings for earthly things, (including money, non-Christian ideology, sex, and even other human beings) and resituating these feelings within the context of a universal love for God.

Unsurprisingly, most of the souls the Narrator meets over the course of the book find it very difficult to give up short-term, sinful pleasures for the sake of God. They've become so accustomed to enjoying earthly pleasures such as lust and wealth, or even more abstract "pleasures" like curiosity and art, that they've forgotten about loving God—in Lewis's view, the only true source of pleasure there is. A particularly clear example of this principle is Ikey, a damned soul who endures enormous physical pain in order to steal **apples** to sell in the **Grey Town**—an apt metaphor for the way that sinners foolishly sacrifice their spiritual happiness for the sake of supposed material rewards. The Narrator encounters many other sinners who've turned their back on loving God. Some of these sinners are fully conscious of what they're doing, while others have deluded themselves into believing that other pleasures are better. In either case, the novel shows that sinners have denied themselves true, eternal happiness in Heaven by declining to sacrifice their selfish love for other things.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE LIZARD

One of the ghosts in the Valley of the Shadow of Life carries a small lizard with him; the lizard whispers in his ear, preventing him from entering Heaven. As the book makes clear, the lizard is the embodiment of lust: a dangerous, seductive force that can distract human beings from God.

THE GREY TOWN

The novel begins in a dull, grey town which, we come to realize, represents the afterlife. The grey town is lonely, and the people who live there are always fighting and yelling at one another. For some, the grey town is Hell—a place where humans are punished for eternity (though their punishment consists of arguing, fighting, and loneliness, rather than the stereotypical fire and brimstone). For others, though, the grey town is a form of Purgatory—a place where souls live for a time, before eventually migrating to Heaven.

MOUNTAINS

The mountains that the Narrator witnesses from the Valley of the Shadow of Life symbolize Heaven—the beautiful, majestic home of God, where all human beings are welcome, provided that they learn to love God above all other things.

WATER

The Great Divorce is full of water imagery: rivers, waterfalls, rain, etc. More than once, the Narrator expresses his desire to bathe or drench himself in water: to jump in the river, pass under a waterfall, etc. These images arguably evoke the Christian practice of baptism, in which a human being bathes in water, accepts Jesus Christ as their lord and savior, and is "born anew." Thus, the water imagery in the novel symbolizes mankind's desire to cast off sin, embrace God, and achieve salvation.

LIGHT

The novel is also full of light imagery: often, holy or enlightened beings (such as the Spirits in the Valley of the Shadow of Life) are described as being blindingly bright. In general, light symbolizes the enlightenment and beauty that Christianity provides. The enlightenment of Christianity isn't always pleasurable—at times, in fact, it can be painful and hurtful—but in the end, it is true, beautiful, and emphatically *real*, and it leads human beings to salvation.

THE CHESSBOARD

At the end of the novel, the Narrator travels with George MacDonald to an enormous chessboard, across which chess pieces move constantly. As MacDonald explains, the chessboard symbolizes the universe as God sees it: predetermined, perfectly controlled, and yet utterly mysterious to human beings, who still act with free will within the system God has created.

THE APPLE TREE

In the Valley of the Shadow of Life, the Narrator sees a large, beautiful tree, from which golden apples hang. The image of the tree evokes the Biblical story of Adam of Eve, in which fruits symbolize humanity's inherently sinful nature. (The golden fruits may also symbolize the Greek myth of the Judgment of Paris. In this myth, the young, handsome Paris was asked to offer a golden apple to the most beautiful of three goddesses. Paris's decision to offer the golden apple to the goddess Aphrodite led to the long, bloody Trojan War.) In the novel, Ikey tries to carry some of the golden apples back to the **grey town** with him—an apt symbol for the way that human beings cause themselves great pain and misery for the sake of supposed material gain. The symbol of the tree and the apple becomes more complicated when an angel invites Ikey to stay in the Valley of the Shadow of Life to eat the apples (suggesting that the true evil lies in Ikey's desire to *sell* the apples, not the physical pieces of fruit). Ultimately, the apple tree symbolizes humanity's wickedness and their ability to find evil and corruption in the most innocent things.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperOne edition of *The Great Divorce* published in 0.

Chapter 2 Quotes

He had found himself once more isolated and had to become a conscientious objector. The indignities he suffered at this stage of his career had, he confessed, embittered him. He decided he could serve the cause best by going to America: but then America came into the war too. It was at this point that he suddenly saw Sweden as the home of a really new and radical art, but the various oppressors had given him no facilities for going to Sweden. There were money troubles. His father, who had never progressed beyond the most atrocious mental complacency and smugness of the Victorian epoch, was giving him a ludicrously inadequate allowance. And he had been very badly treated by a girl too.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Tousle-Headed Poet

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Narrator is sitting on the bus that transports damned souls out of Hell and into Heaven. On the bus, he begins talking to a young man, the Tousle-Haired Poet. Like many of the people on the bus, the Poet is a complainer: here, he complains about his parents, the army, the avant-garde, etc. In short, the Poet believes that the entire world is against him—he's so arrogant, and so certain of his own talent and genius, that he has no choice but to blame the rest of the world whenever something goes wrong in his life.

It's interesting to note that the Poet thinks of himself as being "different" from (and, presumably, better than) the other people on the bus. While the other people on the bus are more overtly aggressive and unlikable than the Poet, the passage suggests that everyone on the bus is guilty of the same problem: egotism. The Poet is so concerned with his own pleasure and success that he seems to have no real interest in other people, except as 1) scapegoats for his own problems, or 2) an audience for his life story. The Tousle-Haired Poet could also be considered Lewis's caricature of the young, pseudo-Romantic intellectuals Lewis encountered during his time as a professor at Oxford and Cambridge: selfish, spoiled, idealistic to a fault, and unable to commit to anything difficult for long.

That's one of the disappointments. I thought you'd meet interesting historical characters. But you don't: they're too far away.

Related Characters: The Intelligent Man / Ikey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

On the bus from the grey town, the Narrator speaks will several other passengers, including an intelligent man named Ikey. Ikey explains that he was somewhat surprised when he got to the grey town—he'd assumed that he would get to meet famous and interesting people from the past. In reality, Ikey explains, people who arrive in the grey town don't get much of a chance to interact with historical people, though.

The passage represents one of the first explicit discussions of the fact that the grey town is a part of the afterlife—in other words, that Ikey and his peers have died. While Lewis hasn't yet explained that the grey town is a version of Hell (or Purgatory), Ikey's observations about it imply that the damned go to live in the grey town after they die.

One might think that it would be fun to spend time in the grey town, talking with famous damned souls. But, as Ikey explains here, damned souls almost never talk to one another—after they arrive in the grey town, they have a choice: either staying together, or slowly drifting apart. Because most of the souls in the grey town choose to drift apart, there are some who are now millions and millions of miles away. Many of the oldest (and, therefore, most famous) people in the grey town are now so far away that they'll never be heard from ever again. The passage is interesting because it refutes one of William Blake's key points in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the long poem that inspired Lewis to pen *The Great Divorce*. Blake posits that Hell is a Mecca of creativity and enlightenment, since so many brilliant minds have presumably gone there over the centuries. Lewis takes pains to show that Hell is anything but the "creative colony" Blake described—on the contrary, it's a dull, lonely place.

❝ I'd start a little business. I'd have something to sell. You'd soon get people coming to live near—centralization. Two fully-inhabited streets would accommodate the people that are now spread over a million square miles of empty streets. I'd make a nice little profit and be a public benefactor as well.

Related Characters: The Intelligent Man / Ikey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Narrator continues his conversation with Ikey, who goes on and on about his elaborate plans to make a profit in the grey town. Ikey is traveling on the bus in the hopes that, during his trip, he'll be able to find items to sell in the grey town.

Two important points here. First, and most obviously, Ikey's plans are nonsensical—what would be the point of buying anything in the afterlife, particularly since (as the Narrator points out) the people of the grey town can imagine whatever they want? Perhaps Ikey's plans to turn a profit are meant to symbolize the nonsensical nature of most human beings' plans to make money—money may be a necessity for survival, but it can also be a distraction from more important things.

A second, subtler point, is that Ikey is a prisoner of his own desire for money. In the afterlife, one would think, the only thing that matters is one's acceptance into Heaven. Ikey, however, is so used to thinking in financial terms that he continues to crave money long after it has lost all its value. The concept of being a prisoner of one's own desires will be very important to *The Great Divorce*—Ikey won't be the last such prisoner we'll meet.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ I had the sense of being in a larger place, perhaps even a larger sort of space, than I had ever known before: as if the sky were further off and the extent of the green plain wider that they could be on this little ball of earth. I had got out in some sense which made the Solar System itself seem an indoor affair. It gave me a feeling of freedom, but also of exposure, possibly of danger, which continued to accompany me through all that followed.
It is the impossibility of communicating that feeling, or even of inducing you to remember it as I proceed, which makes me despair of conveying the real quality of what I saw and heard.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Narrator finally arrives in the Valley of the Shadow of Life, though he doesn't yet know where he is. As we'll later learn, the Valley of the Shadow of Life is located on the "outskirts" of Heaven—it's a kind of "decompression zone" between Purgatory and salvation. The Narrator will soon find that the damned souls who've traveled to the Valley of the Shadow of Life face a difficult choice: they can either choose to remain her and gradually work their way toward salvation, or they can return to the grey town for eternity.

The Valley of the Shadow of Life feels distinctly different and indescribably vast to the Narrator, perhaps reflecting the novel's argument that Heaven—and God—is the only truly "real" thing in the universe (and again Lewis turns to fantasy and dream-logic to describe the potential wonders of God and the afterlife). Furthermore, it's important to recognize that the Valley of the Shadow of Life represents a time for choosing, because this partially explains the Narrator's reaction in the passage. The Narrator feels an almost indescribable sense of danger and fear—it's as if he can sense the vast importance of the choices being made in his new environment. The passage arguably symbolizes the challenge of free will itself: although it might seem obvious that the damned souls in the Valley of the Shadow of Life should choose to be in Heaven forever, many of them choose to go back to Hell, either because they're intimidated by the pressure of their new environment, or because they're so used to the inertia of their life in the grey town. As the Narrator's behavior might suggest, it's easier for most people to continue doing the same thing than it is for them to exercise their free will and choose to do the right (but often difficult or frightening) thing.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ "What I'd like to understand," said the Ghost, "is what you're here for, as pleased as Punch, you, a bloody murderer, while I've been walking the streets down there and living in a place like a pigsty all these years."

Related Characters: The Big Man / Big Ghost (speaker), Len

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we begin to understand some of the rules of the Valley of the Shadow of Life. One of the passengers from the bus—now transformed into a ghost—reunites with someone he knew during his life: a Spirit named Len, who now lives in Heaven. Len, we learn, led a wicked life: he murdered another man, and yet he has been accepted into Heaven. The reason that Len went to Heaven while the Big Ghost went to Hell is that Len repented his sins and accepted God as his master, whereas the Big Ghost chose not to believe in God. Thus, a murderer went to Heaven while an "ordinary man" went to Hell.

This passage represents one of the most challenging aspects of *The Great Divorce*, and of Christianity itself: according to some Christian doctrine, sinners and even murderers can go to Heaven, so long as they repent their sins and worship God. As a result of this idea, a murderer could go to Heaven while an honest, decent atheist goes to Hell—a scenario that would strike many people as profoundly immoral and unfair. Morality, one might argue, is about rewarding and punishing people for what they *do*, not just what they say—therefore, murderers must be punished, no matter what God they worship.

In response to these objections, the novel suggests that *all* human beings are sinners until they accept God in their lives. In the passage, for instance, we see that the Big Ghost—quite aside from being a "nice, normal guy," is really a jealous, small-minded sinner. As Len will explain, the Big Ghost led an unjust, immoral life, mistreating his wife and children. Thus, it could be argued, the Big Ghost didn't lead a significantly better life than Len—in the grand scheme of things, they were both sinners, and therefore, Len, because he repented his sins, was more deserving of acceptance in Heaven than the Big Ghost. This explanation might not seem entirely satisfactory to some readers—and indeed, the argument that murderers can go to Heaven is one of the most controversial aspects of the Christian faith.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ "When the doctrine of the Resurrection ceased to commend itself to the critical faculties which God had given me, I openly rejected it. I preached my famous sermon. I defied the whole chapter. I took every risk."
"What risk? What was at all likely to come of it except what actually came—popularity, sales for your books, invitations, and finally a bishopric?"

Related Characters: The Fat Man / Fat Ghost (speaker), Dick

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Narrator witnesses a conversation between two beings—a Spirit named Dick, who's been accepted into Heaven, and a fat ghost, who knew Dick in life, and worked alongside him as a clergyman. As Dick reminds the fat ghost, the fat ghost had some pretty controversial beliefs during his life: he maintained that Jesus Christ was not, in fact, resurrected after three days. Although the fat ghost arrogantly insists that he was "brave" for holding such a view, Dick knows the truth: the fat ghost didn't argue against the Resurrection out of bravery—he did so because he knew that such a controversial argument would make him popular. Indeed, the fat ghost's gamble paid off: he was rewarded with book sales and a "bishopric" (i.e., the church appointed him to be a bishop).

The passage suggests that human beings can only be accepted into Heaven if they believe in the existence of God and the divinity of Jesus Christ. The fat ghost, in questioning Christ's divinity, has ceased to be a true believer, and therefore can't go to Heaven. Second, the passage implies that some of those who doubt Christian doctrine do so not because they sincerely believe in their own arguments, but just because they want to be controversial and popular. The fat ghost now sincerely doubts that Christ was resurrected, but when he was a younger man, he chose to write willfully provocative books questioning Christ's divinity—after years of doing so, he's deluded himself into believing his own lies. Third, and more generally, the passage could be interpreted as Lewis's critique of modern intellectual culture—most so-called" great thinkers" don't really believe in their own ideas; they adopt deliberately counterintuitive positions, calculated to sell books. Finally, the passage could be considered a good example of Lewis's tendency to use "straw man" and *ad hominem* arguments. Instead of addressing the possibility that an honest human being could doubt Christ's divinity, Lewis arguably creates an easy target—an amoral, publicity-starved "shock jock"—and uses this target to discredit all possible arguments against Christ's divinity, without ever delving into the content of these arguments. (Of course, Lewis might deny that the fat ghost is a straw man—he'd probably argue that most of the arguments against Christ's divinity really *are* provocative for the sake of provocation.)

> Next moment I stepped boldly out on the surface. I fell on my face at once and got some nasty bruises. I had forgotten that though it was, to me, solid, it was not the less in rapid motion. When I had picked myself up I was about thirty yards further down-stream than the point where I had left the bank. But this did not prevent me from walking up-stream: it only meant that by walking very fast indeed I made very little progress.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

In this symbolically loaded passage, the Narrator realizes that he can walk on water. There is a large, fast-flowing river in the Valley of the Shadow of Life, and the Narrator finds that he can walk on it, since he doesn't yet have a solid body. Although the river is flowing away from the mountains in the distance, the Narrator finds that by walking very quickly, he can walk toward the mountains (sort of like someone walking up a "down" escalator).

The key word in this passage is "progress." Indeed, the entire passage could be considered a metaphor for the good Christian's struggle to achieve salvation. Going to Heaven (symbolized by the mountains in the distance) can be incredibly difficult—sometimes, external situations and human nature pulls humans away from Heaven and toward sin and damnation (symbolized by the river flowing away from Heaven). And yet, it's possible—if difficult—to choose to go to Heaven anyway, even if it means fighting the "pull" of nature (i.e., walking toward the mountains against the river's flow). Lewis further reinforces the holy, Christian nature of the Narrator's progress by alluding to Christ's famous miracle of walking on water—by walking on the river, the Narrator is, quite literally, modeling his actions after Christ's, and therefore, striving to be a good Christian. The word "progress" also alludes to John Bunyan's early Christian novel, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, an important influence on *The Great Divorce*. Like the protagonist of Bunyan's book, the Narrator struggles to be good in a world full of evil, and, slowly but surely, approaches salvation.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ I could hardly help admiring this unhappy creature when I saw him rise staggering to his feet actually holding the smallest of the apples in his hands. He was lame from his hurts, and the weight bent him double. Yet even so, inch by inch, still availing himself of every scrap of cover, he set out on his *via dolorosa* to the bus, carrying his torture.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Intelligent Man / Ikey

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

In this important passage, the Narrator—having just walked on water against the flow of the river—sees Ikey, whom he met on the bus, pushing through the grass toward a large apple tree. Ikey, who doesn't have a solid body, either, endures a lot of pain in order to get to the tree—he has to push against the thick, heavy grass. When Ikey finally reaches the apple tree, he hurts himself by carrying the apples back through the grass (like a lot of fantasy books, *The Great Divorce* blurs the laws of physics—sometimes, ghosts can touch solid objects, and sometimes they can float through them altogether).

The mention of an apple tree immediately alludes to the Adam and Eve story, one of the quintessential Christian stories. Just as Adam and Eve, the original two human beings, sinned by plucking the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Ikey sins in the act of plucking the fruit of the apple tree and dragging himself back through the grass. Whereas Adam and Eve's sin was to disobey God and desire knowledge of the world, Ikey's sin is to try to "turn a profit" in the afterlife by selling the apples—he's so blinded by greed and materialism that he's willing to cause himself significant physical pain in order to make money in Hell.

Another phrase worth noticing in this passage is "*via dolorosa*," the term often used to describe Christ's grueling walk to his own crucifixion, during which he was mocked and tortured. While Ikey seems to be enduring a comparable amount of pain during his walk back to the bus, the phrase is ironic: Christ endured physical suffering in order to redeem mankind for its sins—Ikey, on the other hand, endures pain because he's deluded himself into thinking that his get-rich-quick schemes justify the pain.

❝ "Fool," he said, "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 very leaves and the blades of grass in the wood will delight to teach you."
Whether the Ghost heard or not, I don't know. At any rate, after pausing for a few minutes, it braced itself anew for its agonies and continued with even greater caution till I lost sight of it.

Related Characters: The Narrator, The Water-Giant (speaker), The Intelligent Man / Ikey

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

This passage adds another layer of complexity to the symbolism of the apple tree. Ikey, a greedy, materialistic ghost, picks the fruit of an apple tree and tries to carry the fruit back to Hell, in order to sell it for money (despite the fact that damned souls would never spend money on apples). As Ikey drags his fruit away from the tree, an angel appears in the form of a waterfall, and tells Ikey that he's foolish to try to bring the fruit back to Hell with him—he'll never be able to carry it (and, as we later learn, the apple is far larger and more "real" than the entirety of Hell itself, and thus would never even fit). Furthermore, the angel insists that Ikey should stay in the Valley of the Shadow of Life and eat the fruit.

The passage is somewhat surprising, because of the Christian symbolism of the apple tree. Since the presence of the apple tree seems to allude to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve (who fell from grace after eating an apple that gave them knowledge of good and evil), one might think that consuming the apples is a sinful act, on par with Adam and Eve's crime against God. However, the passage suggests that Ikey's irrational desire to *sell* the apples in Hell is the real sin—not the consumption of the apples themselves. This is an important distinction, because it suggests that humans sin by corrupting good things—all sin is a corruption of virtue, just as the "evil" apples are only evil because of the purpose to which they are put. Moreover, the passage might suggest that knowledge and salvation aren't mutually exclusive—according to Lewis, it is possible to have knowledge of good and evil (i.e., eat the apple) and *also* go to Heaven.

The passage reinforces Ikey's obliviousness to reason and morality. He's deluded himself into enduring physical pain,

all for the sake of ephemeral material rewards. Rather than listen to reason, Ikey continues with his nonsensical business ventures.

Chapter 7 Quotes

"I thought they were at war?"
"Of course you did. That's the official version. But who's ever seen any signs of it? Oh, I know that's how they talk. But if there's a real war why don't they do anything? Don't you see that if the official version were true these chaps up here would attack and sweep the Town out of existence? They've got the strength. If they wanted to rescue us they could do it."

Related Characters: The Narrator, The Hard-Bitten Ghost (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Narrator meets an old, Hard-Bitten Ghost—a cynic who doubts everything he sees. During the course of his conversation with the Hard-Bitten Ghost, the Narrator begins to have profound doubts about Christianity and Heaven. As the Hard-Bitten Ghost points out, the fact that both Heaven and Hell (i.e., the mountain and the grey town) exist would suggest that God—who, according to Christian doctrine, is all-powerful—has chosen to allow Hell to continue. In other words, the Hard-Bitten Ghost is offering the Narrator a slightly modified version of a familiar theological argument: the fact that sin and suffering exist mean that God wants human beings to be unhappy—if God wanted humans to be happy, he would let everybody into Heaven. The Hard-Bitten Ghost further implies that God must, on some level, be responsible for Hell and evil.

Interestingly, Lewis presents the Hard-Bitten Ghost as a cynical, world-weary paranoiac, rather than a sincere, intellectually engaged thinker. As before, Lewis used *ad hominem* attacks to discredit important theological arguments—in other words, it's so abundantly obvious to us that the Hard-Bitten Ghost is an unlikable person (he's an anti-Semite, for instance) that we're inclined to doubt the legitimacy of his ideas, too. Nevertheless, Lewis seems to take the Hard-Bitten Ghost's questions seriously—throughout the novel, he will strive to explain why the Hard-Bitten Ghost is wrong about Heaven and Hell, and why God allows Hell to continue.

Chapter 9 Quotes

"But I don't understand. Is judgment not final? Is there really a way out of Hell into Heaven?"
"It depends on the way ye're using the words. If they leave that grey town behind it will not have been Hell. To any that leaves it, it is Purgatory."

Related Characters: George MacDonald, The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, the Narrator meets a key character, the spirit of the author George MacDonald. In real life C. S. Lewis was a huge admirer of George MacDonald, an important 19th-century Christian thinker, who—much like Lewis himself—used fantasy and children's literature to teach important Christian ideas. MacDonald will serve as the Narrator's guide throughout the remainder of the novel, explaining the complicated ideas that the Narrator encounters during his time in the Valley of the Shadow of Life.

In this passage, for instance, MacDonald explains to the Narrator that the grey town is both Hell and Purgatory at the same time. For those who choose to remain in the grey town forever, the grey town is Hell: a lonely, sad place where it's impossible to be truly happy. For those who choose to leave the grey town, however, the grey town is just Purgatory—a temporary place before souls migrate to Heaven.

It's crucial to see the implications of MacDonald's explanation. Following MacDonald's argument, it would seem that Hell is in the "eye of the beholder." Put another way, it's possible for one person to experience the grey town as Hell and another person to experience it as mere Purgatory. Therefore, it follows that Hell is in some ways a self-imposed state—the damned souls in Hell could choose to leave Hell if they wanted to do so; instead, most of the souls in Hell choose to continue their own damnation. The self-imposed nature of Hell helps explain the fact that the grey town is altogether unlike the traditional Christian model of Hell: there are no fires or devils with pitchforks in Lewis's version Hell, with the result that nobody is being held involuntarily. Ultimately, damnation is a choice.

> Hell is a state of mind—ye never said a truer word. And every state of mind, left to itself, every shutting up of the creature within the dungeon of its own mind—is, in the end, Hell. But Heaven is not a state of mind. Heaven is reality itself. All that is fully real is Heavenly.

Related Characters: George MacDonald (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, MacDonald clarifies some important theological ideas. As we've already seen, Hell is a state of mind: the damned souls who go to Hell after they die could choose to leave Hell and go to Heaven—and yet most of them choose to continue with their own damnation, drifting farther and farther from the possibility of salvation. However, MacDonald continues, Heaven is not a state of mind: on the contrary, Heaven is reality itself.

MacDonald's equation of Heaven and truth fits with Lewis's own ideas about salvation, as expressed in *The Great Divorce*. As we've already seen, the Spirits who live in Heaven have attained a state of enlightenment, while the damned exist in a state of constant irrationality and delusion. So one interpretation of MacDonald's statement is that Heaven is a place where the saved can see the truth about the world: they can see the contradictions of sin and the basic rationality of Christianity. Furthermore, Lewis is being very literal here—all reality comes from God, and so it is inherently good, and it's only the corruption of pure reality and goodness that leads to evil. This is why Lewis portrays the Valley as painfully bright and real, and the grey town as small, weak, and ghostlike.

> There was nothing more to prove. His occupation was clean gone. Of course if he would only have admitted that he'd mistaken the means for the end and had a good laugh at himself he could have begun all over again like a little child and entered into joy. But he would not do that. He cared nothing about joy. In the end he went away.

Related Characters: George MacDonald (speaker), Sir Archibald

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, MacDonald tells the Narrator about a man named Archibald, whose life illustrates the potential dangers of knowledge and curiosity. Archibald, Macdonald explains, spent his entire life studying the world—he devoted himself to learning about earthly matters. The problem with Archibald's curiosity was that he became more interested in the act of discovery than in the information itself—he was at his happiest when he was *pursuing* knowledge, not when he attained this knowledge. The result was that, when Archibald and came to the Valley of the Shadow of Life, he refused to go to Heaven. In Heaven, he realized, he would have no reason to search for knowledge—all the happiness and joy he needed would be right in front of him. As a result, Archibald went to Hell.

Archibald's story illustrates an important distinction between means and ends. Knowledge is important, but it's a means to the "end" of happiness and truth. Many people mistakenly think that knowledge is important for its own sake—but according to MacDonald, this simply isn't true. Archibald (and many other intelligent people) became so accustomed to searching for knowledge that he forgot that knowledge was just a way of attaining happiness for oneself. MacDonald will give many other examples of people who confuse ends and means, and go to Hell because of their refusal to accept their mistake.

> This put me in mind to ask my Teacher what he thought of the affair with the Unicorns. "It will maybe have succeeded," he said. "Ye will have divined that he meant to frighten her, not that fear itself could make her less a Ghost, but if it took her mind a moment off herself, there might, in that moment, be a chance. I have seen them saved so."

Related Characters: George MacDonald, The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, MacDonald explains something the Narrator witnessed in a previous chapter. The Narrator saw a Spirit talk to a ghost who was reluctant to walk toward the mountains in the distance. In order to compel the ghost to

walk toward the mountains (i.e., Heaven), the Spirit summoned a frightening herd of unicorns, which scared the ghost so much that the ghost ran off to escape them. MacDonald explains that the Spirit was trying to "shock" the ghost into running toward Heaven, and adds that sometimes, this technique has worked.

It's important to notice that MacDonald *isn't* saying that Spirits can scare souls into salvation. Throughout its history, Christianity has used fear and shock to scare people into behaving virtuously (the traditional model of Hell as a place of "fire and brimstone" is a great example). While MacDonald approves of such methods, he argues that fear itself cannot *make* a person believe in God or behave virtuously—rather fear is an important teaching tool because it can help people to get out of their own heads and think about their lives in a new way. At the end of the day, the only way for a person to go to Heaven is to *choose* to go to Heaven—fear can be helpful, not because it forces people to be good, but because it helps them think differently about themselves and the world, and perhaps can correct some of their sins and delusions.

❝ One grows out of [light]. Of course, you haven't seen my later works. One be- comes more and more interested in paint for its own sake.

Related Characters: The Artist (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the Narrator witnesses a Spirit talking to a damned soul, the Artist. The Spirit is trying to convince the Artist (who had a long, successful career before he died) to join him in Heaven. However, the Artist is too obsessed with his career and his paintings to want to go to Heaven. In particular, the Artist is afraid that in Heaven, there will be no more need for paintings or art of any kind.

The passage makes an important distinction between means and ends that parallels some of MacDonald's points in the previous quotes. The Artist began to paint because art was a way of expressing the beauty of the universe—and therefore, the beauty of God. But, as the Artist went on in his career, he became less and less concerned with expressing the beauty of the world, and more concerned with expressing "paint for its own sake" (Lewis doesn't say, but the transition in the painter's career from art as a reflection of the real world to the concept of art for art's sake might reflect the growing abstractness of 20th century art). In other words, much like Sir Archibald, the Artist has forgotten about the ultimate "end" of art (expressing the beauty of the world) and become singularly fixated on the "means" (painting itself). As a result, the Artist refuses to go to Heaven, where the "end" of beauty will be self-evident, and wants to return to Hell, where he'll be free to indulge in the "means" of painting for its own sake.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ "I want my boy, and I mean to have him. He is mine, do you understand? Mine, mine, mine, for ever and ever."
"He will be, Pam. Everything will be yours. God Himself will be yours. But not that way. Nothing can be yours by nature."
"What? Not my own son, born out of my own body?"
"And where is your own body now? Didn't you know that Nature draws to an end? Look! The sun is coming, over the mountains there: it will be up any moment now."
"Michael is mine."

Related Characters: Pam, Reginald (speaker), Michael

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

In this challenging passage, the Narrator sees a damned soul named Pam. Pam, we learn, spent the final years of her life mourning the death of her young child, Michael. Pam became so fixated on her beloved child that she turned her back on her other loved ones, included her family and friends. In the afterlife, the Spirit of Pam's brother, Reginald, tries to convince Pam that she was a sinner for fixating on Michael. Here in the afterlife, Reginald advises his sister, she must give up and transform her love for Michael by first loving God. Pam stubbornly refuses to love God—indeed, she insists that it would be a grievous sin to love anyone more than Michael, her son.

The passage is morally challenging because it suggests that loving one's child more than God is a sin. As MacDonald will explain to the Narrator, however, the only way to be a truly loving person is to love God—the being of infinite goodness—above everything and everyone else. Loving God allows human beings to love each other fully and selflessly. On the other hand, parents like Pam who claim to love their

children "more than anything" have turned their backs on God, and therefore will be unable to love their children fully, or live truly moral lives.

It might seem barbaric to accuse a grieving mother of being a sinner—and yet, as the passage suggests, Pam doesn't truly love her son at all. Because Pam has turned her back on God, her supposed "love" for her child is greedy and selfish. She claims that "Michael is mine," and acts as if Michael is a part of her own body. Pam's feeling for her child don't seem like love so much as a desire for power and control. This reinforces MacDonald's argument that true love for other people is only possible when one loves God first and foremost—otherwise, "love" can be just another form of selfishness.

"Brass is mistaken for gold more easily than clay is. And if it finally refuses conversion its corruption will be worse than the corruption of what ye call the lower passions. It is a stronger angel, and therefore, when it falls, a fiercer devil."
"I don't know that I dare repeat this on Earth, Sir," said I. "They'd say I was inhuman: they'd say I believed in total depravity: they'd say I was attacking the best and the holiest things. They'd call me . . ."
"It might do you no harm if they did," said he with (I really thought) a twinkle in his eye.

Related Characters: George MacDonald, The Narrator (speaker), Pam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, MacDonald and the Narrator discuss some of the implications of the exchange they've just witnessed between Pam and the Spirit. The Narrator has seen that, when damned souls give up their sinful desires and impulses, the desires will be "transformed" into strengths and virtues. For instance, when a sinner gives up his lust, the lust is transformed into strength and joyful desire—symbolized by a beautiful stallion that transports the sinner to Heaven. The moral challenge, as the Narrator sees it, is this: it is easier for a lustful sinner to give up his lust than it is for a "loving" mother to give up her love for her child (a love that, as we've seen, can be a dangerous distraction from salvation). This leads us to the seemingly unfair conclusion that a sinful adulterer has an easier time getting into Heaven than a mother who loves her son. As MacDonald puts it, "brass is mistaken for gold more easily than clay is"—in other words, Pam's love for her child, because it's so easily mistaken for virtuous behavior, is a dangerous deterrent to salvation, whereas an adulterer's lust, because it's so *obviously* sinful, isn't as much of a distraction from salvation.

In the passage, Lewis (in the guise of the Narrator) acknowledges that his ideas about love and salvation might seem offensive and wrong to many people. While many people believe that love is inherently good, MacDonald stresses that love can be good or bad—at its worst, it can distract people from their love for God, and therefore, from their chances of getting into Heaven. The passage shows that Lewis isn't afraid to hold controversial opinions, if they stem from Christian doctrine. MacDonald's final statement also reiterates the common Christian idea that it's better to be hated and persecuted on Earth for the sake of the truth than to be popular on Earth but betray one's faith in the process.

Ye must ask, if the risen body even of appetite is as grand a horse as ye saw, what would the risen body of maternal love or friendship be?

Related Characters: George MacDonald (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Narrator and MacDonald continue to discuss what they've witnessed in the Valley of the Shadow of Life. They've seen a man with a lizard—symbolizing his lust—whispering to him and keeping him from Heaven. When the man allows an angel to kill his lust, the lizard transforms into a stallion that carries the man toward Heaven. The implication of this scenario, as MacDonald explains, is that when people sacrifice their desires—whether it's a lustful desire for sex, or a more wholesome love for one's child—God rewards them for their sacrifice, transforming the sacrificed desire into something beautiful, and arguably returning the corrupted virtue of sin to its original, godly quality (just as the lizard was transformed into a stallion). If Pam, the woman who stubbornly refused to give up her love for her dead child,

could only sacrifice her love for Michael, MacDonald explains, her love would be transformed into a "risen body" of incredible beauty and power, and Pam would be amply rewarded in Heaven. Indeed, though it is more difficult to give up her selfish love than it was for the man to give up his clearly sinful lust, that corrupted motherly love has the potential to be transformed into something far more beautiful and powerful than the "stallion" that the lustful lizard became.

The passage, when studied alongside the other three quotes from this chapter, helps to clarify Lewis's complicated, somewhat controversial ideas about love. The notion that a mother who obsessively loves her dead child can be a sinner might strike some people as cruel. Here, Lewis arguably makes this idea more acceptable (and palatable) by showing that Pam's reward for sacrificing her love for Michael would be enormous—since such a sacrifice is very difficult to make. In short, Lewis acknowledges that it's very difficult for a mother to give up her love for her child and "turn back to God"—and it's *because* such an act is so difficult that God rewards people who find the strength to do so.

Chapter 12 Quotes

"Don't you see what nonsense it's talking." Merriment danced in her eyes. She was sharing a joke with the Dwarf, right over the head of the Tragedian. Something not at all unlike a smile struggled to appear on the Dwarf's face. For he was looking at her now. Her laughter was past his first defenses. He was struggling hard to keep it out, bur already with imperfect success. Against his will, he was even growing a little bigger.

Related Characters: Sarah Smith (speaker), Frank / Dwarf / Tragedian

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126-127

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Narrator witnesses a beautiful Spirit named Sarah reunite with a ghost she knew on Earth, Frank. Frank has gone to Hell, but he appears in the Valley of the Shadow of Life in two distinct forms: a Tragedian (an enormous, overly theatrical figure) and a Dwarf (who manipulates the Tragedian with a chain). When "Frank" meets Sarah, he (the Dwarf) manipulates the Tragedian to pretend to be offended and hurt by Sarah's behavior. Whenever Sarah says or does anything, the Tragedian overreacts and tries to manipulate Sarah into pitying him.

In short, "Frank" embodies the artificial, divided nature of self-pity. Human beings who pity themselves, as Frank clearly did, try to manipulate other people into pitying them (not unlike the way the Dwarf tries to manipulate Sarah into feeling sorry for him by moving the Tragedian into offended, hurt "poses"). The key insight of the passage is that self-pity, of the kind embodied by Frank, is a struggle against happiness. On some level, Frank knows that he's being overdramatic and manipulative: deep-down, he *wants* to be happy and join Sarah in Heaven, which is why, when Sarah laughs at his theatrical posing, the Dwarf is tempted to join in.

The passage is a particularly clear example of how Lewis uses metaphor and symbolism to explain complicated psychological and philosophical ideas. By using the surreal image of a dwarf controlling a giant with a chain, Lewis gets to the heart of self-pity, showing that self-pitying people are sometimes just pretending to be hurt in order to pass on their misery to other people. Self-pity is an especially dangerous form of sin, furthermore, because it's rooted in the denial of joy—self-pitying people *could* be happy if they wanted to, but they've become so irrational that they prefer misery.

Furthermore, Lewis suggests in this passage that laughter has a powerful quality and potential for goodness. Just like fear (in some cases), it can cause people to step outside themselves and see their narrow worldviews as ridiculous, potentially allowing them to see the larger truth. As Lewis says here, laughter can slip past even the most stubborn sinner's "first defenses."

Chapter 13 Quotes

"The demand of the loveless and the self-imprisoned that they should be allowed to blackmail the universe: that till they consent to be happy (on their own terms) no one else shall taste joy: that theirs should be the final power; that Hell should be able to veto Heaven."

Related Characters: George MacDonald (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

MacDonald argues that it would be wrong for the virtuous to pity the damned, contrary to what many people would

assume. While one might think that a good Christian should be overcome with sorrow and pity whenever she sees a damned soul, MacDonald explains why this wouldn't be good: if good Christians allowed themselves to pity the damned, then the damned would be able to control the virtuous, passing on their misery and self-hatred to others. As we saw in the previous chapter, there are many who try to manipulate good people into pitying them—effectively trying to "infect" good people with misery. Therefore, it follows that the only way for the virtuous to remain virtuous is for them to refrain from pitying the damned. This certainly doesn't mean that virtuous people shouldn't try to help sinners find God—rather, it suggests that Christians must "lead by example," rather than stooping to the level of the damned.

The passage is important because it addresses a point that Lewis brought up earlier in the book: why don't the Saved come to Hell to rescue the Damned? (and, by the same token, Why doesn't God free sinners from Hell and bring them all to Heaven?). A partial answer to this question, we can now see, is that attempts to save the damned will always be flawed by self-pity. Thus, if Sarah Smith went to Hell to save Frank, her presence would plunge Frank *deeper* into self-pity, and therefore damnation, rather than actually saving his soul. The only way for humans to enter Heaven is to *choose* to love God—good Christians' pity for the damned, while well-meaning, cannot lead the damned to salvation, and sometimes actually leads the damned deeper into sin.

> All Hell is smaller than one pebble of your earthly world: but it is smaller than one atom of this world, the Real World. Look at yon butterfly. If it swallowed all Hell, Hell would not be big enough to do it any harm or to have any taste.

Related Characters: George MacDonald (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

In this crucial passage, MacDonald reveals to the Narrator that Hell is tiny—so tiny, in fact, that it could fit in the mouth of a butterfly in Heaven. On a literal level, MacDonald's point has some interesting implications: during the course of his travels from Hell to Heaven, the Narrator grew physically, with the result that the only way for him to return to Hell would be for him to shrink again.

On a symbolic level, MacDonald's point suggests a number of other things. First, the idea that Hell is smaller than Heaven—indeed, almost *infinitely* smaller—reinforces the most fundamental point of Lewis's novel: that Hell is not a "worthy partner" of Heaven, but a small, banal, and thoroughly insignificant part of the world. The poets and philosophers (such as William Blake) who would place Hell alongside Heaven as a vital part of the human experience are giving Hell too much credit. Evil isn't a vast, majestic force of nature—it's a speck of dust, an ineffectual corruption of true reality and goodness.

Furthermore, the smallness of Hell suggests another reason why the Saved can't travel down to Hell to help the damned—they're "too big." Previously, the Narrator was troubled by the idea that God doesn't send the virtuous to Hell to save the damned. But now, he sees why this should be the case: the only way for the damned to achieve salvation is for them to *choose* salvation: they have to "grow," rather than forcing saved souls to "shrink."

> For every attempt to see the shape of eternity except through the lens of Time destroys your knowledge of Freedom. Witness the doctrine of Predestination which shows (truly enough) that eternal reality is not waiting for a future in which to be real; but at the price of removing Freedom which is the deeper truth of the two. And wouldn't Universalism do the same? Ye cannot know eternal reality by a definition.

Related Characters: George MacDonald (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of this chapter, MacDonald brings up a final point about Christian theology. Throughout the novel, MacDonald has spoken of the importance of free will and choice: the damned, it would appear, have the freedom to choose to go to Heaven. But the Narrator raises an interesting possibility: if God is all-knowing, then surely he knows the names of the souls who will be saved in Heaven and those who will remain in Hell. Thus, it follows that the damned and the virtuous aren't truly "choosing" their fate—God has already planned their decisions in advance.

MacDonald's reply to the Narrator is highly complicated. His most important point is that humans differ from God

because they experience the universe through the "lens" of time—whereas God, being all-powerful, experiences all moments simultaneously. (Lewis borrowed this idea from *The Consolation of Philosophy* by the early Christian philosopher Boethius). So although humans experience reality as a free choice between multiple options, God can see humans' choices and the outcomes of these choices simultaneously. In short, MacDonald argues that human beings experience their decisions as free will as a consequence of their existence in time. Thus, free will exists *from humans' perspective*, even if God already knows the outcome of all human choices. MacDonald's argument parallels the ideas of the poet John Milton (a huge influence on Lewis)—Milton argued that the idea of an all-knowing God and a free humanity are not mutually exclusive at all: mankind is created "sufficient to have stood yet free to fall." Humans "cannot know eternal reality," and therefore they have the burden and the gift of free will.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ Ye saw the choices a bit more clearly than ye could see them on Earth: the lens was clearer. But it was still seen through the lens. Do not ask of a vision in a dream more than a vision in a dream can give.

Related Characters: George MacDonald (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

In the final chapter of the novel, the Narrator witnesses the surreal spectacle of an enormous chessboard, across which move human beings. MacDonald clarifies what the chessboard represents: as he explains here, the chessboard represents the universe as God sees it—a complex, interlocking set of forces and objects. God controls the universe, using his infinite wisdom and power—and yet the universe remains mysterious and unclear to a mere mortal like the Narrator.

The passage accomplishes two major things. First, it clarifies MacDonald's complicated points about time and free will. From the perspective of the Narrator, the world is uncertain, meaning that the Narrator is always choosing what to do next. From the perspective of God, however, the universe is perfectly certain and ordered: God can see every instant in time simultaneously. The difference between God and the Narrator is as profound as the difference between a chess-piece and a chess master.

The second, arguably more important thing that the passage accomplishes is to qualify the analogies and metaphors that Lewis offers, both in this chapter and in the entire book. MacDonald uses the image of a chessboard to explain the concept of omniscience to the Narrator—but even this image, MacDonald acknowledges, can only do so much to educate the Narrator. At the end of the day, understanding the "mind of God" is beyond all human comprehension. By the same token, the surreal images and metaphors that the Narrator has witnessed during his dream might help him understand some complicated ideas and concepts, but they're not *perfect* illustrations of these complicated ideas and concepts. The book itself is just about a "vision in a dream," and not an attempt to portray the literal afterlife or the mind of God.

❝ 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.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novel, the Narrator wakes up from his dream to find that it's early in the morning—he's been asleep at his desk, dreaming about the afterlife.

The final sentence of the novel is very important, because it shows that the Narrator has his work cut out from him. He's learned a lot about Christianity, good, and evil, but it's not enough to experience these concepts in a dream. Now, the Narrator's challenge is to go out into the world, living a life in accordance with the lessons he's learned over the course of the novel. Being a good Christian is more difficult in real life than it is in a dream, because in real life, good and evil come in many different shapes and forms—the Narrator had an easy time separating Spirits and ghosts in his dream, but he might not be able to separate good and evil so easily in his waking life.

The passage is also full of subtle symbolism. The clock "striking three" could be an allusion to the Holy Trinity, one of the key concepts of the Christian faith. Similarly, the echo

of the siren could symbolize the constant presence of death in the Narrator's life (the novel was written during World War II, when nightly sirens alerted the English to German bombers overhead). Note also how the cold, dark room resembles the "Grey Town" of the dream—as the Narrator learned earlier, Earth has the potential to become Hell itself unless one makes the conscious choice to seek Heaven. In short, the passage illustrates the moral challenge ahead of the Narrator, and readers: to be a good Christian in a world full of religion, danger, and temptation.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

An unnamed Narrator finds himself standing by the side of the street in a long line for the bus. The Narrator tries to remember what he's been doing up until now. He recalls walking through dark, dingy streets for hours, vainly hoping to get to a "good part of town." He's come to the bus stop because it seems to be the only place where there are people.

The novel begins on a note of sad desperation—the Narrator is trying to find a happier, more inviting part of a dreary, fantastical town. As in the start of many dreams, the Narrator finds himself standing in a strange place with no memory of how he got there.

The Narrator notices the other people standing in line for the bus. Almost everyone seems to be angry, frustrated, or otherwise unhappy. One couple begins fighting, and eventually they both step out of line and walk away. This pleases the Narrator, since he's now two places closer to boarding the bus. He notices a Short Man grumbling about the unlikable people in line. A Big Man overhears the Short Man and angrily punches him in the face. The Short Man limps away from the line. Finally, the Narrator sees a young, attractive couple leaving the line—clearly, the two lover prefer each other to wherever the bus will take them.

The other people waiting for the bus seem unpleasant in some overt way: they're violent (the Big Man), arrogant (the Short Man), hedonistic (the couple), and so on. Perhaps most importantly, the people waiting in line are self-interested (with the possible exception of the couple; Lewis will discuss the "selfishness" of lust toward the end of the book). Even the Narrator feels selfish pleasure as he advances in line.

Suddenly, the bus arrives. It's a beautiful, **bright** vehicle, driven by a mysterious Driver. The Driver seems "full of light," and waves his hand in front of his face, as if he's fanning away steam. The Driver's behavior irritates many of the people waiting in line—one person grumbles, "Thinks himself too good to look at us."

The Driver's mysteriousness and brightness might suggest his holy, angelic qualities. The passage also reinforces the passengers' irrational, spitefulness meanness—they criticize the Driver for the pettiest reasons.

The passengers board the bus, pushing and shoving to climb aboard. When everyone has taken a seat, only half the seats in the bus are filled. As the Narrator sits down, a Tousle-Headed Poet sits next to him and observes that the "present company" is extremely annoying and unlikable. The Poet explains that many people choose not to ride the bus because they prefer the "**grey town**." The Poet tried to survive in the town by forming a "circle" of intellectuals. But he found that other people didn't care about "intellectual life at all," and when the Poet tried to show them his writing, they ignored him. The Poet tries to show the Narrator some of his writing—he pulls out a wad of papers. Suddenly, the Narrator notices that the bus is flying above the ground. The Narrator peers out of the window and sees the endless "wet roofs" of the grey town he's just left.

Here, we learn more about the novel's setting: the "grey town" is a huge, almost infinitely large place, full of unhappy people. For some reason, only a few people have the resolve to leave the town in search of something better. The passengers push and shove unnecessarily for a seat, reminding us of their greed and selfishness. The Tousle-Headed Poet seems different from the other passengers, since he's relatively polite and well-behaved. Yet he has a clear flaw: he thinks he's better than everyone else. The Poet seems like a stereotypical pretentious intellectual—always complaining about how uncultured other people are.

CHAPTER 2

The Narrator sits on the bus, listening to the Tousle-Headed Poet for a very long time. The Poet has endless complaints. He was born to parents who "didn't understand" him; he went to five different universities, but none of them could understand his "talent"; he believes that capitalism is a danger to all human beings. At the beginning of World War II, the Poet was briefly a Communist, but then he became a conscientious objector. The Poet moved to Sweden, where he had a bad relationship with a woman—as a result of his hardship, he jumped in front of a train. Since throwing himself in front of the train, the Poet has spent his time in the **grey town**.

The Poet is a caricature of the pretentious intellectuals of Lewis's era: scattered, unpredictable, and unwilling to commit to any place, person, or ideology for long. The passage is important because it suggests that the dreamlike characters are in the afterlife; furthermore, the fact that the poet died by committing suicide (a sin, according to Christianity) suggests that he's gone to Hell for his immoral actions.

The Tousle-Headed Poet pauses for a moment—there's a brawl breaking out on the bus. People fight, using guns and knives—but strangely, the fight ends quickly, and the Narrator is completely unharmed. When the fight is over, the Narrator finds that the bus is still flying over the enormous **grey town**, and he's sitting next to a different man, one who's older than the Poet.

The fight implies two things: first, the passengers are nasty, sinful people; second, the Narrator is more of a passive observer than an active participant—he doesn't become involved in many conflicts with the other characters. Put another way, the Narrator exemplifies the "everyman" archetype: he remains a "blank slate" throughout the book, observing the action more often than participating in it.

The Narrator asks his new neighbor, the "Intelligent Man," about the **grey town**, and the neighbor explains that the grey town has existed forever. There are always new people flowing into the town, and almost as soon as they've arrived, they begin arguing and fighting. When newcomers arrive in the grey town, they arrive in the "Civic Center" of town. Then, they either walk toward the bus stop, or slowly drift away from it. Some people have taken centuries to move from the Civic Center to the bus stop, and some people have drifted millions of miles away from the bus stop. Some of these people are quite famous—Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan, Napoleon, etc. The Intelligent Man speculates that the grey town will keep growing bigger and bigger, so long as its people keep drifting away from the bus stop.

The Intelligent Man provides some useful exposition here: we learn that the grey town is a place for dead souls, and it certainly isn't Heaven. When the dead souls arrive in the grey town, they have two options: they can either try to leave by taking the bus, or they can adjust to their new, miserable existences. The grey town could be interpreted as a version of Hell—a place for sinful souls. However, while many Christians would say that Hell is a place for the damned to endure eternal punishment, the novel implies that it's possible to escape from Hell through work and free will.

The Intelligent Man confides in the Narrator: he's trying to find a way to convince the people in the **grey town** to move toward the bus stop instead of drifting away from it. The problem with the people in the grey town is that "they have no Needs"—if they want something, they can summon it to themselves by imagining it. On Earth, human beings have to live close by one another another in order to survive. But in the grey town, people can move wherever they want. The Intelligent Man hopes to bring some "commodities" back to the grey town. By selling these commodities in a store, he could make a "nice little profit," while also convincing people to live close to the store. The Narrator is confused—why would people buy things from a store if they can imagine things for free? The Intelligent Man claims that people will want "houses that really kept out the rain"—as their current houses don't.

So far, each one of characters in the grey town exemplifies a different sin. The Intelligent Man's sin appears to be greed: even in the afterlife, he's trying to find a way to turn a profit, despite the fact that there seems to be no clear reason to spend money in Hell. The Intelligent Man posits that humans live close to one another for practical reasons—commerce, safety, survival, etc. He takes an overly literal, materialistic view of human nature, one that Lewis (and Christianity itself) clearly disagrees with.

Outside, the light is dimming. Suddenly, the Intelligent Man drops his voice and whispers, "It will be dark presently." He warns the Narrator that when it's nighttime, "They" come outside. At this time, everybody in the **grey town** must be indoors for protection. The Narrator is confused—how could their houses keep "Them" out, but not the rain? As the Narrator and the Intelligent Man whisper, the Big Man yells for them to be quiet, addressing the Intelligent Man as "Ikey."

Here the Intelligent Man suggests that there are other, more frightening beings in the grey town. Since grey town seems to be a fictional version of Hell, it follows that "They" are devils. Lewis is essentially telling a morality tale, but he does so in a fantastical, poetic way, and this sudden introduction of dark supernatural forces adds a new element to the story.

A fat man in the seat ahead of the Narrator turns around and informs that Narrator that the Intelligent Man is wrong: it will never be completely dark—instead, it's going to get progressively lighter. Furthermore, the man claims, the Intelligent Man is wrong to try to sell commodities in the **grey town**; commodities are vulgar and "Earth-bound." The man concludes by praising the grey town for allowing human beings to be completely free and creative.

The fat man offers a very different account of life in the grey town than the one we've just heard from the Intelligent Man: where the Intelligent Man is materialistic and pessimistic, the fat man is idealistic and optimistic. And yet, his "vision" seems just as wrong-headed as the Intelligent Man's—from what we've seen, there doesn't seem to be much creativity going on in the grey town.

Hours pass, and slowly, it becomes **brighter** outside. The Narrator opens the bus window to get a better view of the light, but the Intelligent Man shouts for him to close it at once—it's too cold outside. The Narrator looks around, and realizes that everyone on the bus looks idiotic, ferocious, and generally "distorted and faded." It's getting lighter outside, but the light is "cruel."

Light begins to shine on the passengers of the bus, seemingly proving the fat man right. And yet, this light doesn't provide warmth or cheerfulness—instead, it just makes the passenger's sinfulness more apparent. Light is one of the key symbols in the novel, representing how salvation can be painful before it is pleasurable.

CHAPTER 3

The bus flies onward, over a large cliff. Slowly the bus descends, until it lands on the cliff. The Narrator and his fellow passengers get off the bus, and find that they're near a **river**, with green trees and thick grass. The Narrator has a sense of being in a "larger space" than he's ever been in before. He feels free, but also frightened—a feeling that he finds nearly impossible to put into words.

It's noteworthy that the Narrator feels fear while contemplating his own freedom. One of the novel's major themes is the difficulty of exercising free will: as we'll learn, humans can choose to love God, or they can choose to turn away from God altogether. The "stakes" of free will are enormous (damnation versus salvation), so perhaps the Narrator is right to be intimidated.

As the Narrator looks around, he has the feeling that the grass and trees are made of an unusual substance. He tries to pluck a daisy from the earth, but finds that the flower is as hard as a diamond and as heavy as a sack of coal. Suddenly, the Narrator realizes that he has lost his body—he's a transparent "phantom," as are the other passengers from the bus.

Lewis admits that he got the idea for his Heaven's "too-real reality" from a science-fiction story, but (somewhat amusingly) he couldn't remember its title or author. The hardness, reality, and seeming timelessness of even the grass near Heaven makes one of Lewis's most important points—that goodness isn't just about obeying rules, it's about choosing beauty, truth, and reality. Conversely, evil and sin are portrayed as small, weak, and ghostly things.

The Big Man, now a ghost, asks the Driver, "when have we got to be back?" The Driver explains that the passengers are under no obligation to return to the **grey town**. Someone shouts out that the people would be happier back in the grey town, since they have no idea what to do by the **river**.

As the Driver makes plain, the passengers have a choice: they can remain by the river, or they can return to the grey town. While neither option seems particularly attractive, the river at least is beautiful and suggests the possibility *of happiness.*

The Narrator looks up and sees what is either an enormous cloudbank or a **mountain** range. The object is big and **bright**, and the Narrator feels "the promise of sunrise" emanating from it. As he looks up, other ghost gather around, forming a big, lonely crowd. Suddenly the Narrator sees people, with what seem to be real, solid bodies, approaching. The people seem ageless—some are naked, and some are dressed in robes. The Narrator realizes that these people are Spirits who live by the **river**. Some of the ghosts scream at the sight of these Spirits and run back to the bus. But most of the ghosts huddle close to one another.

After being given the option of taking the bus back to the grey town, the sight of the mountains fills the Narrator with hope (the "promise of sunrise") and encourages him to stay by the river. As we'll see, the mountains symbolize the kingdom of Heaven—the river isn't actually Heaven, but just an entryway to it. The beautiful, real bodies of the Heavenly Spirits are contrasted with the unhappy, ineffectual grey phantoms.

CHAPTER 4

The Spirits move closer to the group of ghosts. One of the Spirits, a cheerful, youthful-looking man, greets the Big Man—or rather, the Big Ghost. The Big Ghost recognizes the man, and calls him Len. The Big Ghost reminds Len that Len murdered a man called Jack; Len nods and explains that Jack is here, too.

The characters of the novel can be divided into two major groups: the ghosts (i.e., damned souls who have been offered a chance at Heaven) and Spirits (i.e., redeemed, or partly redeemed souls who've been accepted into Heaven, but linger outside of it to try and persuade ghosts to repent). It's notable that the first Spirit we meet was a murderer during his mortal life—emphasizing that in Christianity, anything can be forgiven if one truly turns to God.

The Big Ghost demands to know why Len has a solid body and gets to walk around the **river**, while he has has to spend his time in the **grey town**. Len explains that the Big Ghost will understand soon enough. The Big Ghost continues to complain that he's led a good life, even if he wasn't particularly religious. He was honest and went "straight" his whole life. And yet he ended up in the grey town. Len encourages the Big Ghost to stop complaining—if the Big Ghost can "make a poor mouth," as Len did before dying, then he'll be rewarded.

The passage distinguishes between two kinds of people: those who lead immoral lives but ultimately repent and find a true love for God (i.e., "make a poor mouth"), and those who lead supposedly moral lives but don't really love God. As the Big Ghost's anger suggests, one of the most challenging features of Christianity is the idea that the former group is more likely to be rewarded in Heaven than the latter.

Len goes on to remind the Big Ghost of some of the things he did in life—for example, he mistreated his wife and children. The Big Ghost sneers and says that he refuses to listen to a murderer like Len. He decides to leave the group of ghosts and "go home." As he moves away, he mutters that he won't take "charity" from anyone, and that he has the "right" to be rewarded.

The Big Ghost arrogantly claims that he led a good life, even after Len makes it clear that he didn't. In all, the passage implies that, almost by definition, humans lead sinful lives (whether the sin is murder or mistreating one's children), and therefore, no human being has an automatic "right" to go to Heaven. Thus, the only way to achieve salvation is to repent one's sins humbly and embrace God.

CHAPTER 5

As the Narrator surveys the **river** and the trees, he hears a sound, and two huge lions emerge from the trees. Quickly, the Narrator moves away from the lions and drifts toward the river. There, he finds a ghost talking with one of the Spirits, or "Bright People." The ghost was the fat man who spoke to the Narrator on the bus.

The chapter is full of symbols whose meaning won't be clear until much later. The lions, we'll later learn, are possibly supposed to "scare" souls toward Heaven. Their presence also echoes a famous Bible verse about the "lion lying down with the lamb" in Heaven, and lions are otherwise common in Biblical symbology.

The fat ghost is talking to one of the Spirits, whom he refers to as Dick. Indeed, the ghost seems to know the spirit well; he refers to the spirit's "father," who lives in the **grey town**, a long way from the bus. The ghost claims that he refuses to believe in a literal Heaven and Hell. He claims that the grey town where he used to spend time is actually a kind of Heaven, "if only we have eyes to see it." Dick insists that the ghost is wrong—the grey town is Hell, plain and simple.

The ghost of the fat man maintains that Hell—the grey town from which he's just come—is actually a kind of Heaven. This bizarre idea parodies the poetry of William Blake, the English author of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. *In part, Lewis wrote* The Great Divorce *to rebut Blake's arguments and, like Dick, reiterate that Hell and Heaven are two entirely different places.*

Dick explains that the fat ghost was sent to the **grey town** because he was an apostate—he committed "sins of intellect." The ghost is confused—he claims that he was honest and bold in his beliefs, rejecting the doctrine of the Resurrection because it didn't make logical sense to him. Dick accuses the ghost of writing provocative criticisms of the Resurrection doctrine so that the ghost could make money and be appointed to "a bishopric." Furthermore, Dick claims, the ghost didn't honestly "come by" his beliefs—in school, he just learned to write challenging essays that got good grades. The fat ghost denies this, claiming that his opinions and beliefs were his own, "sincerely expressed." Dick compares the ghost to a drunkard who has already drunk so much beer that he believes another pint won't hurt him. In life, the ghost reached a point where he sincerely believed his own lies—but in the beginning, he embraced provocative viewpoints just for the sake of being provocative.

The ghost—who, based on his position as a bishop, was a clergyman and a religious scholar—claims that he doubts the doctrine of the Resurrection (i.e., the idea that Jesus Christ died for man's sins and was resurrected three days later). But Dick suggests that the ghost only holds such beliefs because for years he wrote provocative articles questioning Christianity. In other words, the ghost began by lying to other people, until eventually he started lying to himself. Dick's argument is important because it suggests that at first it's difficult to believe in one's own heresies. On some level, sinners know that what they're doing is wrong—even if, later on, they convince themselves otherwise.

Dick asks the fat ghost if he'll repent his sins now that he's seen Hell. The ghost refuses, claiming again that he sincerely believes in his own ideas. Dick offers to show the ghost truth in all its beauty. The ghost claims that he can only be happy in a place where he's constantly being challenged—Heaven, as Dick describes it, sounds dull and stagnated. The ghost refuses to sacrifice "the free play of Mind" to get into Heaven, and claims that Dick is ordering him to become a child again. Dick insists that the ghost must submit to God, but the ghost claims to doubt that God exists, or that "existence" is an adequate way to describe God. Dick begs the ghost to embrace happiness in Heaven, but the ghost insists that he has to be back in the **grey town** to "read a paper." He reminds Dick that Christ was "a very young man" when he died, and would have abandoned some of his naïve beliefs had he lived much longer.

At one point, the ghost believed in Christianity, and only pretended to doubt it in order to write popular articles. But now the ghost has come to believes his own lies, and as a result, can't force himself to accept Heaven (even after he's died and entered the afterlife). The ghost's nonsensical arguments parody the self-conscious radicalism of modern intellectual life (at least as Lewis sees it). The fat ghost is so used to being counterintuitive for its own sake that he's abandoned the concept of truth altogether. Thus, he leaves for the bus and goes back to the grey town.

As the Narrator observes the fat ghost's interaction with Dick, he has an idea—perhaps he could walk on water. When the Narrator tries to walk in the **river**, though, he finds that the river, while solid, is still flowing in one direction—as a result, he falls on his face. The Narrator notices that the river has swept him downstream. By walking on the river upstream very, very quickly, he realizes, he could make "very little progress."

The chapter ends with a key symbol: the Narrator walking on the river, against the flow of the current. The passage alludes to Christ's famous miracle of walking on water, and could be considered a metaphor for the struggle for Christian redemption: the path to Heaven can be difficult, since it involves fighting one's own sinful nature, but ultimately, it is possible to make slow, steady progress toward Heaven. (In the same vein, the "progress" in the passage could be an homage to John Bunyan's novel The Pilgrim's Progress, *an allegory of a Christian's progress toward salvation that inspired Lewis's own writing.)*

CHAPTER 6

The Narrator walks on the **river**, against the flow of the current. After walking for an hour, he's moved a few hundred yards. Eventually, he reaches a large **waterfall**. As the Narrator approaches the waterfall, he realizes that, were he on Earth, he'd be terrified by the sight of the waterfall—it's huge and deafeningly loud. But now, the Narrator finds that he can "take" the waterfall in the same way that a ship can "take" a huge wave.

The Narrator makes slow, steady progress against the flow of the current—perhaps symbolizing the good Christian's progress toward salvation. By the same token, the waterfall, evoking the ritual of baptism, might symbolize this Christian salvation. At times, the concept of salvation can be intimidating and even frightening—thus, the Narrator is intimidated by the waterfall and yet also attracted to it.

The Narrator sees a ghost crouched near a hawthorn bush. The ghost is trying to move toward a big, beautiful **tree**, but because of the heaviness and stiffness of the grass, it's very difficult to move toward the tree. Moving closer, the Narrator realizes that the ghost is the "intelligent man" from the bus—Ikey. Ikey has been trying to approach the tree for hours, and now he's almost there—but there is a heavy wind that keeps pushing him back. As the wind blows, golden apples fall from the tree, and a few hit Ikey, causing him to cry out in pain. Ikey fills his pockets with apples, and then begins limping back to the bus.

Like the Narrator, Ikey is fighting a battle against nature—just as the Narrator is walking against the current, Ikey is pushing through the immovable grass, carrying apples that seem impossibly heavy in his ghostlike state. And yet Ikey's struggle is very different from the Narrator's, because it causes him enormous physical pain—so much pain, indeed, that it's not clear why Ikey is so intent on plucking the golden apples. The apples themselves could be an allusion to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, in which the apples represent humanity's sinful nature (they could also be an allusion to ancient Greek mythology, in which the hero Paris's offer of a golden apple caused a feud between the three most powerful Greek goddesses).

Suddenly, a voice cries, "Fool. Put it down." The voice seems to come from the **waterfall**—and the Narrator realizes that what he'd thought was a waterfall is really a **bright** angel, who floats "like one crucified" in the air. The "Water-Giant" tells Ikey that there is no room for apples in Hell. Instead, Ikey should learn to stay here and eat the apples. Instead of responding, Ikey continues to carry his apples back to the bus, limping in pain.

In this surprising passage, we learn that the waterfall was really an angel (reinforcing the waterfall as a symbol of salvation). Ikey, a materialistic man, is trying to sell apples in Hell ("turn a tidy profit," as he told the Narrator earlier). Notice that the golden apples themselves aren't the true source of evil here: Ikey's desire to sell the apples is evil (as the angel says, he could stay by the river and eat as many apples as he wants). Ikey's actions illustrate the folly of living for material gain: no amount of "profit" can redeem one's soul. Moreover, the pursuit of profit for its own sake causes the soul tremendous pain—symbolized by Ikey's agonizing walk back to the bus. Note also how the Water-Giant's holy power and "crucified" position evoke Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER 7

As Ikey limps away with his apples, the Narrator looks closely at the huge angel. The angel, whom the Narrator calls "the Water-Giant," does not say anything to the Narrator, but the Narrator begins to feel tired as he stares at the Water-Giant. He wishes that he could bathe in the **river** instead of walking on it.

The river could be interpreted as a symbol of salvation—thus, the Narrator's desire to bathe in the river echoes the Christian's desire for baptism and relief, or the longing to go to Heaven immediately (rather than living a long, morally challenging life on Earth).

The Narrator turns and sees another ghost—a tall man with grey hair and a gruff voice. The Narrator has always instinctively trusted people of this kind. The ghost tells the Narrator that there's no point in staying by the **river**. The golden fruit of the **tree** looks delicious, but it's just "propaganda," since it can't be eaten. The "Hard-Bitten ghost" claims that he's come to the river to see it for himself—in life, he traveled around the world in order to see exotic sights. But none of these sights pleased him—he always thought they were "advertisement stunts," run by the same people. Even Hell, according to the ghost, is a "flop"—he was expecting a big, fiery pit full of devils, but it's just a boring town.

The Hard-Bitten Ghost is a compulsive cynic: no matter how beautiful the sights he sees are, he assumes the worst of them. Thus, the ghost claims that the golden apples are useless and inedible—even though, as the Water-Giant has explained, it would be possible to eat the fruit by spending more time by the river. In short, the Hard-Bitten Ghost is a prisoner of his own pessimism. He speaks as if the world is always miserable, but really, the misery is in his own head.

The Narrator guesses that by staying by the **river**, he and the Hard-Bitten Ghost could become "solider," an idea that the ghost promptly rejects. The ghost complains that people have always been telling him to be good and well-behaved—but he's never gotten anything in return for his good behavior. He points out that "the same old people" run everything. It was "the same people" who controlled both sides of "the wars," and it was these same people who were behind "the Jews and the Vatican and the Dictators and the Democracies." He reasons that, if "the official version" were true, "They" could send an army to wipe out Hell forever. The fact that "They" allow Hell to exist at all proves that both sides are controlled by the same people.

The Hard-Bitten Ghost's belief is arguably another caricature of William Blake's The Marriage of Heaven and Hell *(the poem to which* The Great Divorce *responds). The ghost insists that Heaven and Hell are run by the "same people" (somewhat like Blake's idea that good and evil are two sides of the same coin). The Hard-Bitten Ghost poses some valid questions about the nature of evil, but ultimately he's revealed as a paranoid "conspiracy theorist."*

The Hard-Bitten Ghost tells the Narrator he has to be getting along. Before he leaves, though, he tells the Narrator that it's going to **rain** soon—and when it rains, the raindrops will be as hard as bullets. With these words, the ghost moves off, and the Narrator finds himself in a state of "great depression."

The Hard-Bitten Ghost's cynical questions cause the Narrator to question his own desire for salvation. Notice that the Ghost makes the Narrator afraid of water (an important Christian image in in the novel)—symbolically underlining the way he turns the Narrator temporarily into despair.

CHAPTER 8

The Narrator sits by the **river**, feeling miserable after his talk with the Hard-Bitten Ghost. When he first met the Spirits who lived by the river, he assumed that they were essentially benevolent. But now he realizes that the Spirits who live by the river don't care about the ghosts. Perhaps the only purpose of the ghosts' visit to the river is to be mocked by the Spirits there. He remembers what the Hard-Bitten Ghost said about the **rain**, and fears that he could be horribly hurt.

The Hard-Bitten Ghost hasn't given the Narrator many answers, but he's posed some disturbing questions about good and evil, causing the Narrator to fall into a paranoid state of mind. Previously, the Narrator optimistically assumed the best of his new environment—now, he questions everything he sees.

The Narrator decides to move toward the trees, where he might be safe from the rain. He isn't sure if he should get back on the bus or not. As he approaches the trees, he sees another ghost. The ghost is arguing with a Spirit. The Spirit claims that he's just trying to help the ghost, but the ghost insists that the Spirit is taking advantage of her.

The Narrator is in the midst of a crisis—should he go back to the grey town or stay by the river? On a symbolic level, the Narrator's crisis symbolizes the crisis of the Christian skeptic—should he continue on in his faith even when things get hard, or return to what seems easier?

The ghost explains that she's afraid of going to the **mountains** without a solid body. She would be embarrassed if she arrived in the mountains without a body, especially when the Spirits *do* have bodies. The Spirit insists that the ghost will eventually get a solid body. The ghost sobs and cries, "I wish I'd never been born." The Spirit assures the ghost that she'll be able to enter the mountains without a problem—the only obstacle is the ghost's own shame. Shame, the spirit explains, is like a long, hot drink—hard to carry, but very nourishing when it's consumed.

The ghost is afraid of going to the mountains—a symbol of Heaven—because she's ashamed of not having a body. Two things to note: 1) the passage emphasizes how shame and self-hatred can deter souls from worshipping God; 2) the passage features one of the first female characters in the novel. Lewis has been criticized for associating his female characters with stereotypically feminine problems, arguably painting a picture of women as conceited, superficial, and overly concerned with appearances.

The Narrator finds that he's become very invested in the ghost's decision. He hopes the ghost will endure the shame of having no body and go with the Spirit to the **mountains**. But suddenly, the ghost cries out, "I can't!" The Spirit responds by producing a large horn and blowing through it. A loud sound comes out of the horn, and suddenly a herd of unicorns appears in the distance. The Narrator, along with the ghost, tries to run away from the unicorns. In the confusion, the Narrator loses sight of the ghost.

The significance of the Spirit's actions won't be fully clear for a few more chapters, when it's suggested that the Spirit is trying to use surprise and even fear to nudge the female ghost toward the mountains.

CHAPTER 9

The Narrator flees from the herd of unicorns. He then hears a low, Scottish voice, asking, "Where are ye going?" The Narrator turns and sees an enormous man with a long beard. The man is one of the Spirits—a "shining god" with an ageless soul. In reply, the Narrator says he doesn't know. The man introduces himself as George MacDonald (in real life, a famous author). The Narrator is overjoyed to meet MacDonald, one of his favorite writers—he explains that MacDonald's book *Phantastes* was an important formative influence on the Narrator, inspiring him to begin a "new life" in accordance with Christian practices.

George MacDonald was a (relatively) famous 19th century writer, and, much like C. S. Lewis himself, both a talented fantasy author and a passionate defender of Christianity. MacDonald will act as the Narrator's guide for the rest of the novel—an homage to Dante's Divine Comedy, *in which the poet Virgil guides Dante (who arguably sees himself as his protégé) through the afterlife.*

George MacDonald, addressing the Narrator as "Son," thanks the Narrator for his enthusiasm and respect. He explains to the Narrator that "the damned have holidays." Occasionally, the people of Hell are allowed to visit the **river**, although most opt to visit Earth instead. The Narrator asks MacDonald, "Is there really a way out of Hell into Heaven?" MacDonald replies that the people who live in the **grey town** are in Hell. But the people who manage to leave the grey town behind will have been in Purgatory, not Hell. The place in which the Narrator is currently standing is called the Valley of the Shadow of Life. And yet for those who choose to stay here, it will also be Heaven. The Narrator is very confused. MacDonald tries to explain the truth to the Narrator. Good and evil are "retrospective." After a human being experiences good and evil, he can judge for himself whether his experiences were good or evil. A human being who lives a just life on Earth and goes to Heaven would say that his life on Earth *was* Heaven. Similarly, a human being who leads an evil life and goes to Hell would say that life on Earth *was* Hell. In this way, a place can be Heaven to some and Hell to others.

On a narrative level, MacDonald plays an important role in the novel: he acts as the Narrator's guide, explaining the complicated sights and events. (Here, for example, MacDonald explains that the Narrator has been brought to the river on a "vacation" from Hell.) Moreover, MacDonald acts as the Narrator's discussion partner, analyzing the principles of Christianity implied in the exchanges they witness between ghosts and Spirits. Here, for example, MacDonald brings up an important point: the grey town can be Hell to some and Purgatory to others. Another way to express this idea is that salvation is a state of mind; a damned soul can achieve salvation by desiring to be close to God, traveling out of Hell, and entering Heaven. Note also that Lewis plays on the "Valley of the Shadow of Death" from the famous 23rd Psalm of the Bible with his setting of the "Valley of the Shadow of Life."

The Narrator, trying to understand MacDonald, asks if it's true that Heaven and Hell are only states of mind. MacDonald explains that Hell is a state of mind—indeed, any selfish state of mind is a form of Hell. But Heaven, on the other hand, is a literal, real place—indeed, Heaven *is* reality itself.

Here, MacDonald (essentially expressing Lewis's own ideas about Christianity) argues that Heaven is "reality itself." This is a surprising idea, but one that fits with Lewis's overarching argument that Christianity is the "common-sense" way to think about life, love, and goodness.

The Narrator is confused. He asks MacDonald about his Roman Catholic friends, who claim that the souls in Purgatory are already saved, and his Protestant friends, who say, "The tree lies as it falls." MacDonald tells the Narrator not to worry himself with such questions—he won't be able to understand the complexities of choice and time until he's "beyond both."

This passage emphasizes the novel's argument that all sects and denominations of Christianity are fundamentally the same, in spite of some superficial differences between them. Put another way, the passage suggests that Lewis's "model" of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory isn't supposed to be literally true—rather, it's just a way for him to illustrate universal Christian concepts.

The Narrator asks MacDonald about the role of choice in the afterlife. The souls who leave the Valley of the Shadow of Life and go back to the **grey town** have made a choice—but what choice, exactly, have they made? MacDonald replies by quoting the poet John Milton: "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven." All the souls who choose to be in Hell agree with Milton. They're like spoiled children who'd rather sulk than apologize.

MacDonald argues that damnation is a state of mind, not an external action. In other words, damned souls have chosen to be damned by turning their backs on God. For the remainder of the novel, MacDonald will show how sinners deny themselves true happiness by choosing to pursue money, power, and other illusory pleasures (i.e., "to reign in Hell"). Lewis condenses his arguments about Heaven and Hell with a quote from John Milton, whose long poem Paradise Lost was an important influence on Lewis (and the history of Christian thought in general).

The Narrator asks MacDonald about vice and sensual sin. MacDonald explains that some people go to Hell because they practiced sin during their lives. Human beings who "live for pleasure" start out as happy, loving human beings. But at some point in their lives, the humans who live for pleasure stop craving pleasure, and begin to crave the "itch" of pleasure instead. Eventually, these people turn their backs on pleasure and begin to embrace pain and hatred instead—a sin for which they go to Hell.

In this passage, MacDonald makes the surprising argument that "sinful pleasure" isn't truly pleasurable at all—all true pleasures come from God. Therefore, sinners have deluded themselves into thinking that they're getting pleasure from sin—even though once they turn away from innocent pleasure or true happiness, they're just simulating the feeling of pleasure (the "itch," as MacDonald puts it).

MacDonald remembers a man named Sir Archibald. During his life, Archibald was a diligent researcher who wanted to understand "survival." He studied philosophy and psychology and lectured all over the world. He craved knowledge above everything else. But when he died, he came to the Valley of the Shadow of Life. Archibald became dissatisfied. There was no more research to be done, since everybody had "survived" already. Archibald cared about research more than he cared about happiness, so that, in the end, he chose to go to Hell instead of continuing on to Heaven. There are many others like Archibald—people who were so interested in proving the existence of God that they forgot to *love* God. Similarly, there are many people who were so invested in spreading Christian doctrine that they forgot to worship Christ.

Sir Archibald's life symbolizes the dangers of the "life of the mind." Archibald loved to learn about the world—as a result, he became deeply dissatisfied after he died, since in Heaven, everyone is presumably equally knowledgeable and fulfilled. Thus, the danger of living an intellectual life is that one might become more interested in the pursuit of knowledge than in knowledge itself. Knowledge (and, by the same logic, evangelism and worship) is a means to an end—a way of understanding the world, and therefore, God. Much like sinners who mistake the "itch" of pursuing pleasure over pleasure itself, intellectuals like Archibald come to prefer the pursuit of knowledge to the pleasure of knowledge—and therefore, the pleasure of divine salvation.

The Narrator asks MacDonald why the Spirits don't go down to Hell to rescue the damned. MacDonald explains that the Narrator will understand soon enough, but points out that the Spirits have sacrificed their own journeys into the **mountains** in order to help people move out of Hell and journey to the mountains. He also claims that all the people in Hell who truly want to go to the mountains will go there eventually, even if it takes a very long time.

The Narrator's question reflects some of the Hard-Bitten Ghost's positions about divinity. If God is all-powerful, he's essentially asking, why doesn't he send Spirits to "liberate" the damned from Hell? MacDonald's reply to the Narrator underscores the importance of free will: damned souls themselves must choose to go to Heaven.

MacDonald and the Narrator turn to see a ghost talking to one of the solid Spirits. The ghost is complaining about a woman, talking so quickly that the Spirit can't get a word in edgewise. She also complains about having died before her time. The ghost and the Spirit move away, their voices fading into the distance. Alone again, the Narrator asks MacDonald about the ghost who just passed by. He suggests that such a ghost—a "silly garrulous woman"—isn't a sinner at all; she's just an annoying "grumbler." MacDonald says that the question is whether "there is a real woman still there inside the grumbling." If there is, then the woman will go to Heaven. The state of being in Hell, MacDonald goes on, always begins with complaining. Most human beings complain a lot; sometimes, they "repent" and stop complaining, but sometimes they just continue complaining, until they've forgotten what it means to be happy.

MacDonald argues that complaining can be dangerous, because it trains people to enjoy their own unhappiness. MacDonald's argument emphasizes the idea that damnation begins with the corruption of true pleasure—even in a form as innocuous-seeming as complaining. It's also worth noting that, for the second time in the novel, Lewis presents a female character in arguably stereotypical terms—as a bickering, gossipy busybody. While many of the male characters in the novel are also stereotypical (since all the ghosts are basically allegorical figures for different sins), critics have argued that the novel's male characters are more psychologically nuanced and three-dimensional than their female counterparts.

MacDonald invites the Narrator go for a walk—the Narrator grabs MacDonald's arm, and MacDonald carries him around the woods. The Narrator lists many of the ghosts that he and MacDonald see. The first is a female ghost. The ghost talks to many different Spirits, and is always trying to contort her body. Gradually, the Narrator realizes that the ghost is trying to make herself look attractive to the Spirits. But this is impossible—just as it would be impossible to make a corpse look attractive. Eventually, the female ghost gives up, turns back to the bus, and returns to Hell.

The female ghost is so focused on her superficial appearance that she allows her soul to remain damned. Like so many of the inhabitants of the grey town, the female ghost is deeply confused about what matters in life: she values her body (even when she no longer has a body at all) more than her soul.

The Narrator tells MacDonald about the herd of unicorns who frightened away the ghost earlier. MacDonald explains that the Spirit who summoned the unicorns was trying to scare the ghost into running toward Heaven. While fear itself cannot make a ghost turn toward Heaven, fear can sometimes force a ghost to "forget itself" for a moment, allowing the ghost to entertain new ideas about Heaven. Sometimes this technique works.

Here MacDonald suggests that "forgetting one's self," even because of pure fear or surprise, has the potential to cause people to look outside their narrow worldviews and consider God.

MacDonald brings the Narrator to a group of ghosts who have gotten close to Heaven only in order to tell the people of Heaven about Hell. Some of the ghosts were teachers in life (just like the Narrator), and they try to lecture the people of Heaven. They act as if the people of Heaven are weak and sheltered, since they'd never experienced true pain. The ghosts act as if their experiences in Hell give them greater maturity and experience, but they find that none of the people in Heaven take them seriously.

Sometimes, sinners and atheists behave as if they're smarter and worldlier than Christians. But the passage suggests that this idea is absurd: sin is fundamentally irrational, meaning that, if anything, sinners are more naïve and unintelligent than the virtuous.

The Narrator discovers that many of the ghosts he meets with MacDonald have tried to "bring Hell to Heaven." Some of the ghosts have tried to convince the people of Heaven to rebel and seize Heaven for themselves. The Narrator also meets some ghosts who claim that there is no afterlife—their current situation is just a hallucination. Other ghosts enjoy visiting Earth and scaring the living.

Sometimes, the sinners try to "infect" the virtuous with their own sinfulness—essentially trying to cause others pain because they are in pain themselves. The passage also reiterates the idea that sinners are fundamentally irrational: they've deluded themselves into denying the obvious truth that Heaven is preferable to Hell.

The Narrator also meets ghosts who scarcely look like human beings anymore. Some of these ghosts have traveled for thousands of years just to visit the Valley of the Shadow of Life and criticize it. Surprisingly, MacDonald tells the Narrator that some of these ghosts eventually enter Heaven, while there are many gentler ghosts who never enter Heaven.

Apparently, it's better to go to the Valley to criticize it than to not go at all. On a symbolic level, this suggests that people willing to at least engage seriously with issues of God and morality (for example, walking for thousands of years!) are more "truthful" in their lives than those who never do anything too horrible, but also never question the status quo.

MacDonald brings the Narrator to a ghost whom the Narrator recognizes—in life, the ghost was a very famous artist. The Artist is talking to a Spirit—he's dismayed to learn that in Heaven, he won't be allowed to paint anything. The Spirit explains to the ghost that in life, he became famous because he was capable of seeing glimpses of Heaven in Earth. There will no longer be any point in painting these "glimpses" in Heaven, since the real Heaven will be more beautiful. The Artist continues to ask the Spirit about painting in Heaven. He claims that he likes painting more than he likes looking at real objects. The Spirit reminds the Artist that this wasn't always true—as a young man, the Artist only began painting because he loved to look at the visual world. The Artist insists that he no longer cares about light and vision; he paints for the sake of painting.

The Artist, much like Sir Archibald, has become more interested in the means than the ends: in other words, he's become so obsessed with the struggle to depict beauty (and therefore Heaven) that he's forgotten about the pleasure of Heaven itself; he's replaced true happiness with a supposed quest for happiness. The passage could represent Lewis's critique of modern, abstract art, or at least of "art for art's sake" (another good example of means supplanting ends).

The Spirit tells the Artist that in Heaven, there is no ownership or intellectual property—everything that belongs to one person belongs to others. The Artist replies, "That'll be grand" unenthusiastically. He asks if he'll be able to meet the other great painters of history, and the Spirit replies that he's unsure. Everyone in Heaven is "famous"—famous to the "only Mind" that matters.

Another reason why the Artist dislikes the concept of Heaven is that he's obsessed with property—even though, in reality, the world is God's property, and nobody else's. The Artist also dislikes that everyone in Heaven is equal—clearly, he thinks of himself as an especially important person, and therefore resents the idea that in Heaven he'd be equal to the other saved souls.

The Artist mutters that he'll have to be satisfied with his legacy on Earth, since such a legacy won't be respected in Heaven. The Spirit laughs and tells the Artist the truth: on Earth, the Artist is already forgotten—other schools of art have triumphed, leaving the Artist's work highly unfashionable. Furious, the Artist turns back to bus, shouting about how he has to compose a manifesto.

The passage suggests that creative people often place too much stake on earthly fame—even though earthly fame is largely out of their own control. The Artist ends up seeming pretty ridiculous: he struggles for fame, yet ends up being almost completely forgotten. Much like Ikey, he is so used to striving for earthly rewards (the recognition of his peers, e.g.) that he continues to do so long after they've ceased to matter.

CHAPTER 10

George MacDonald continues carrying the Narrator around the Valley of the Shadow of Life. They come to a female Ghost arguing with a female Spirit. The female ghost refuses to forgive a man named Robert. The Spirit, who knows Robert too, wonders why the ghost can't forgive Robert. The ghost, addressing the spirit as Hilda, explains that she spent most of her life working for Robert's sake—yet Robert was ungrateful for her sacrifices. She complains that Robert spent too much time with his friends, ignored her for days at a time, and cared about nothing but food. She insists that in the afterlife, if she were allowed to see Robert, she could "make something of him"—a task she never succeeded in while she was on Earth.

The female spirit in this passage is so petty and small-minded that she continues complaining about her husband, Robert, even after she dies. Much like the female ghost from the previous chapter, she loves to complain for the sake of complaining. But unlike the female ghost from the previous chapter, however, this ghost seems to get a lot of pleasure from controlling other people—"making something" out of others by manipulating their behavior.

The ghost complains that in Hell, she's miserable—she's surrounded by other people, but can't "do anything with them." She begs the spirit to give Robert back to her. As the ghost continues to babble about Robert, she becomes larger and brighter, "like a dying candle-flame." Then, suddenly, she disappears entirely, leaving a sour smell behind.

The ghost's soul shrinks until the only thing left is her desire to complain and control other people. This chapter is short, but it introduces an important theme: there's a fine line between loving someone and wanting to control them. In Chapter 11, MacDonald will suggest that it's only possible to love someone truly selflessly by loving God first.

CHAPTER 11

The Narrator recalls another discussion he overheard while he was with George MacDonald. He saw a woman's ghost talking to a Spirit, her brother, whose name was Reginald. Reginald greets the ghost, and explains that Michael, her son, is up in the **mountains**. The ghost, whom Reginald addresses as Pam, is visibly angry with Reginald. Reginald explains that Pam will be allowed to see Michael as soon as she's ready—she must become solid enough to be with Michael. In order to become solid, Pam must learn to want "someone else" besides Michael. Reginald explains that Pam must begin to feel a desire for God—from there, her progress toward the mountains will be easy.

Pam's sin, it would seem, is that she's turned her back on the other people in her life, including her friends, her family, and God, in order to focus on "loving" her dead child, Michael. Moreover, the passage suggests that the only way to achieve salvation is to love God above all other things. It would seem that a mother who loves her child more than God is a sinner—what Lewis tries to show, then, is that this kind of love isn't true love at all, but just another kind of selfishness.

Pam irritably claims that she'll love God as long as it brings her back to Michael, but Reginald points out that this way of thinking is no good: loving God cannot be a means to the end of reuniting with Michael. The only way to enter the **mountains** for good is to love God for God's own sake. Pam objects that Reginald wouldn't be talking this way if he were a mother, but Reginald claims that Pam isn't *only* a mother—she's still a creature of God. Reginald also suggests that Pam didn't love Michael fully—the only way to truly love another human being is to love God first.

There are many who love God because of what God gives them—love, happiness, wealth, etc. The problem with loving God in this way is that God becomes a means to some other end (material wealth, for example). A true Christian must love God above all other things, including other people—indeed, Lewis suggests, loving God above all else is the only way to love other people fully.

Pam dismisses Reginald's argument as "cruel and wicked nonsense." She insists that she loved her son as much as it is possible to love anyone—she's lived with "his memory" for years. Reginald claims that Pam made a mistake by mourning Michael's death for so long. By refusing to forget Michael, Pam turned her back on her living friends and family, including Dick, her husband. In essence, she "embalmed" her love for Michael and refused to love anyone else, including Reginald himself. Pam insists, "Michael is mine." She scoffs and accuses Reginald of being "hurt" and trying to hurt her in return. Reginald insists that he's not hurt—indeed, it's impossible to hurt anyone here. Pam doesn't reply—instead, she's silent and open-mouthed.

It slowly becomes clear that Pam doesn't really love Michael at all; on the contrary, she thinks of Michael as an extension of her own body and self, even claiming, "Michael is mine." Thus, the passage suggests a reason why it's so important for people to love God above all things: love for God is, by definition, humble and unselfish. If a human being is capable of loving God, she is capable of loving other people unselfishly. People like Pam, who refuse to love God, are only capable of expressing a selfish, controlling "love" for others. (It's also made abundantly clear that what Pam is loving isn't really Michael himself, but only her selfish idea of him, by the fact that the real *Michael is waiting for her in Heaven, and wants her to give up her obsession with his memory.)*

MacDonald carries the Narrator away from Pam and Reginald, explaining that their conversation will go on for a very long time. There is some hope left for Pam, as long as she realizes that her love for her son has turned into something else. MacDonald explains that sometimes, human beings' natural love for one another helps them to love God and enter Heaven. But sometimes, humans' love distracts them from entering Heaven and being truly happy. Love can be good, as long as it's directed primarily at God, but it can also be dangerous.

The chapter steers the Narrator toward the surprising conclusion that what humans consider to be "love" is not by necessity virtuous. Indeed, love can be a distraction from God, and therefore, from salvation. Humans have a bad habit of deluding themselves into thinking that they love one person "more than anything"—which, Lewis, shows, can easily be twisted into a selfish, corrupt sort of love.

MacDonald leads the Narrator on to another ghost, who's carrying something on his shoulder. The ghost is carrying a small hissing **lizard**, and keeps yelling for the lizard to be quiet. As the lizard continues to whisper in the ghost's ear, the ghost smiles, and begins to walk away from the **mountains**.

This passage conveys the divided nature of the human soul—even before we know what the lizard represents, the ghost seems to be fighting his own internal desires, embodied by the lizard. (Interestingly, the author Philip Pullman has mentioned this passage as the inspiration for the daemons *in his rather anti-Christian novel,* The Golden Compass*!)*

A tall, **bright** angel calls out to the ghost, "Off so soon?" The ghost turns and explains to the angel that he won't be able to go to the **mountains** while carrying the **lizard**. He's told his lizard to keep quiet, but unfortunately, the lizard keeps making noise. The angel offers to kill the lizard, but the ghost insists that the angel spare it, claiming that he'll find a way to keep the lizard "in order." The lizard begins to speak—it warns the ghost that the angel will kill it if the ghost gives his assent. Reluctantly, the ghost tells the angel to kill his lizard. The angel closes his hot, **bright** hand around the lizard, and the ghost screams out in agony.

Although we don't yet understand what this passage symbolizes, it's important to notice that the man is deeply conflicted about his lizard—he knows that on some level, it's bad for him, and yet he seems to like having it around. Second, notice that the angel won't kill the lizard until the man asks the angel to do so—as in other parts of the novel, Lewis emphasizes the importance of free will: the man must choose *to sacrifice his lizard.*

After the **lizard** is dead, the ghost begins to change. He becomes solider and bigger, until he's a huge, naked man, almost as big as the angel. The Narrator also notices that the lizard is growing—it changes into a large stallion with a golden mane. The ghost—now a new-made man—embraces his horse with joy. Then he climbs onto his horse, and rides off toward the **mountains**. As he rides off, the Spirits sing, praising the new-made man for his strength and willpower.

The ghost has made a difficult sacrifice, and as a reward, the angel transforms his lizard into something far more beautiful and powerful—a stallion. While we still don't know what this scene symbolizes, it's clear that the man has made a difficult sacrifice and been rewarded for doing so: God rewards people for taking the often-painful "leap of faith" required to truly love him.

MacDonald explains to the Narrator that the **lizard** was lust—a creature who has no home in the **mountains**. With the ghost's assent, the angel crushed lust and transformed it into something much stronger and more beautiful—"that richness and energy of desire which will arise when lust has been killed."

This passage reiterates one of Lewis's most important points—most evil is just a corruption of good, not an equal opposite to good (as might be suggested by William Blake). Thus the lizard of lust isn't killed, *but instead is transformed into its "true" form—the original goodness (which comes from God) that had been corrupted and weakened into mere lust.*

The Narrator is confused. It would seem that the ghost's lust was less of an obstacle to entering the **mountains** than Pam's love for her son. MacDonald explains that Pam loved her son too little, not too much—she only *thought* that she truly loved him. In order to move into Heaven, humans must sacrifice their love for earthly things, so that these feelings can be transformed into new, more beautiful feelings—just as the angel transformed the **lizard** into a beautiful horse. If Pam would temporarily give up her feelings for her son, her feelings would be "reborn" into something far more beautiful. Suddenly, the Narrator asks George MacDonald if there is "another river."

Once again Lewis is being deliberately counterintuitive, showing how sins that seem worse on Earth aren't necessarily greater obstacles to Heaven than those that might even seem moral in worldly terms. Pam's love for her son was close enough to true, virtuous love that it remained a powerful obstacle for her, whereas the man's lust was something obviously harmful, and so easier to cast off. As the lizard was transformed into a stallion, MacDonald suggests that Pam's selfish, possessive love for Michael could potentially be turned into something far more powerful and beautiful.

CHAPTER 12

As George MacDonald walks with the Narrator, the Narrator sees **light** flashing in the trees, as if reflected from a **river** (hence his question at the end of Chapter 11). But then, the Narrator sees that the light is coming from a big group of Spirits. The Spirits sing music so beautiful that, if the Narrator could only have written it down, no one would ever get sick again.

There are several points in the novel (including this passage) when the Narrator claims to experience something so beautiful or sublime that he's unable to convey it literarily. Lewis again delves into the poetic and fantastical here, reminding us that Heaven is beyond human conception—while books can be valuable Christian teaching tools, the best they can do is point to something beyond themselves.

The Narrator sees a lady, and realizes that the Spirits are singing and dancing to celebrate her. The lady is beautiful—MacDonald explains that her name is Sarah Smith. In the afterlife, Sarah has a large "family," because on Earth, she was kind and gracious to many different people, even people whom she barely knew.

Sarah Smith is perhaps the most virtuous character we've met thus far: she's warm, loving, and seemingly capable of infinite kindness. Sarah is also a notable departure from the other female characters in the book: unlike the previous women we've seen, she's not complaining or selfish.

As Sarah approaches the Narrator and MacDonald, she stares off into the distance. Following her gaze, the Narrator sees two old ghosts, one very tall and theatrical looking, like a Tragedian, the other small, like a Dwarf. As the two ghosts approach Sarah, the Narrator notices that the Dwarf is carrying a chain that's attached to the Tragedian's neck. Sarah greets the Dwarf as Frank, and says, "Forgive me." Strangely, it is the Tragedian who replies to Sarah. The Tragedian says, "We all make mistakes," in an annoying theatrical tone. The Tragedian claims that he has spent years worrying about Sarah, thinking that she's "here alone, breaking your heart about me." Sarah replies that Frank must never think such things again—now they're together again.

Like many of the sinners and damned souls in the novel, Frank has a "divided nature"—his being seems split between two figures, the Dwarf and the Tragedian. The Tragedian symbolizes the theatrical, artificial sadness that Frank tried to project during his life, making others feel guilty and deriving pleasure from their guilt. Even in the afterlife, Frank is still pretending to be hurt by Sarah's words in order to make Sarah pity him—but of course, in the Valley, it's clear that Frank is just pretending.

As Sarah smiles at the Dwarf, the ghost becomes more solid. The Dwarf asks, "You missed me?" in a small, ugly voice. Sarah replies, "Dear, you will understand about that very soon." The Dwarf and Tragedian say to each other, in unison, "You'll notice she hasn't answered our question." The Narrator begins to understand what's going on: the small and tall ghosts are two halves of the same human being; "the remains of what had once been a person."

Clearly, Sarah can now see through Frank's theatrical, self-pitying behavior: she's perfectly aware that Frank is just pretending to be offended in a vain attempt to hurt her. Because Sarah is so honest and frank with Frank, she succeeds in getting through to him—thus, the Dwarf momentarily sets aside his theatrical manner and asks if Sarah missed him.

Sarah tells the Dwarf that he can be happy now that he's in the afterlife. The Dwarf becomes more solid for a moment, but then mutters, "We thought she'd remember and see how unselfish we'd been. But she never did." Then, the Dwarf rattles the chain, causing the Tragedian to say, theatrically, "I can't forget it!"

This passage shows Frank fighting his own natural desire to be happy. In the end, Frank's desire to make Sarah feel guilty wins out over his desire for happiness and truth.

Sarah tries to explain herself to the Dwarf. She claims that she's in love with the ghost—and with everything else. She didn't truly love the ghost in "the old days," although she thought she did. The Dwarf asks, dramatically, "You need me no more?" Sarah smiles beautifully and explains that, in the afterlife, there is no such thing as need—and as a result, she and Frank can truly love one another. The Tragedian overreacts to this news, claiming that he wishes Sarah were dead at his feet. In response to the Tragedian's actions, Sarah can only laugh. She stares directly at the Dwarf, and in spite of himself, the Dwarf begins to laugh, too. The Dwarf begins to get even bigger and more solid.

The Dwarf knows, deep down, that he's being ridiculous. He's just pretending to be offended in order to make Sarah feel bad—even the Narrator can see it. (Part of Lewis's project is exaggerating and literalizing certain sins and flaws so that they become more clear to his readers.) At the end of this section, the Dwarf finally seems to give in (if only momentarily) to his desire to be happy in Heaven—it's suggested that laughter, like fear, can sometimes help someone step outside of themselves.

CHAPTER 13

Immediately following the events of the previous chapter, the Narrator watches Sarah laughing. The Dwarf tries his hardest to keep from laughing along with Sarah. He can see how absurd the Tragedian is being—but even so, he jerks the chain, and the Tragedian begins screaming, "You dare to laugh at it!" From this point onward, the Dwarf does not speak, and begins to shrink. Sarah begs the Dwarf to "stop acting" and join her in the **mountains**, but the Dwarf says nothing.

Tragically, Frank's desire to make Sarah feel miserable now seems stronger than his desire for joy. Thus, the Dwarf becomes smaller and the Tragedian grows larger, symbolizing the way that Frank becomes increasingly invested in seeming *hurt and offended, with the goal of eliciting Sarah's pity.*

Sarah begs the Dwarf to reconsider. She tells the ghost that pity can be a dangerous weapon. Pity was created to encourage happy people to help sad people. But pity can also be manipulated dishonestly to "blackmail" happy people into feeling sad for no reason. She reminds the Dwarf—who's barely visible anymore—that he's always been dramatic and manipulative, even as a child. The Tragedian yells, "This is all you have understood of me, after all these years!"

Here Sarah observes that sinners and unhappy people can use pity to control others—essentially, the "moral" of her interaction with Frank. Tragically, Frank refuses to listen to Sarah's reason or respond to her kindness; he's so invested in self-pity that he chooses to continue to act offended, even when that means sacrificing his own soul.

The Tragedian accuses Sarah of not loving him. Sarah turns to the Tragedian, as if seeing him for the first time. Confused, she explains, "I cannot love the thing which is not. I am in Love, and out of it I will not go." With these words, Frank disappears. Sarah continues to walk toward the **mountains**, joined by her friends the Spirits. The Spirits sing about how nothing can frighten or harm Sarah anymore.

It's interesting to consider what Sarah does and doesn't give Frank. She offers him love and kindness—but not pity. Pity is a dangerous emotion, Sarah suggests, because it sometimes means that people distance themselves from God and sink to the level of those they pity—people who are already full of self-pity. Sarah "fails" to save Frank from himself, but after her failure, she doesn't allow Frank's damnation to make her unhappy. Put another way, Spirits like Sarah try to help the damned, but they refuse to move "out of Love."

As Sarah moves away, the Narrator asks MacDonald about Frank—he can't help but think that it's wrong for Sarah to be untouched by Frank's "self-made misery." MacDonald points out that it wouldn't be right for Frank to have the power to torment Sarah with his self-pity. The Narrator says that there are many who believe that "the final loss of one soul gives the lie to all the joy of those who are saved." MacDonald insists that this is not true—the souls who are saved rejoice in their salvation, regardless of what happens to other souls. If it were otherwise, then "Hell should be able to veto Heaven."

The interaction between Sarah and Frank steers the Narrator to a seemingly unjust conclusion: it would be morally wrong for Sarah to pity Frank. While one might think that pity is an important component of love—and thus, of being a good human being—MacDonald argues that pity can sometimes strengthen *the miserable instead of helping them find happiness: the more pity Sarah offered Frank, the more Frank would have rejoiced in his own misery, and brought Sarah down with him.*

The Narrator wonders aloud why Sarah didn't go down to Hell to visit Frank—she could have gone to the bus station to keep him company. In reply, MacDonald lets the Narrator to the ground, and the Narrator remembers how painful it is to walk along the rigid, unmoving grass. MacDonald plucks a blade of grass and shows the Narrator a tiny crack in the soil. All of Hell, MacDonald claims, is contained in this tiny crack. In order to travel from the bus station to the Valley of the Shadow of Life, the Narrator didn't just travel in the bus; he and the other passengers grew *bigger*. MacDonald concludes that if a butterfly swallowed up all of Hell, "it would not be big enough to do it any harm or to have any taste." Hell *seems* huge when you're in it, but in reality it's not. Sarah couldn't have gone to visit Frank in Hell—she was too big.

MacDonald reveals that Hell—quite aside from being the vast, impressive "inferno" that most people picture (and that people like Blake romanticize), is actually a small, insignificant place. Similarly, evil itself is only the corrupt and weakened version of good—not a value of its own. The passage also provides a symbolic answer to the Hard-Bitten Ghost's question about why God doesn't free the damned (and, more generally, why an all-powerful God allows evil to survive): Spirits are too big to go back to Hell. This suggests that God allows evil to survive because the only way to fight evil would be to approach or even become evil (i.e., to "shrink" back to Hell-size). Thus, the only way for human beings to escape evil is to choose to surpass it.

The Narrator asks Macdonald what happens to human beings who remain in Hell instead of choosing to go to Heaven. MacDonald explains that God "preaches" to people in Hell, and some of them hear him. The Narrator asks Macdonald if, in the end, all humans will be saved, and MacDonald replies, "It's ill talking of such questions." Human beings, since they cannot see the future, can only talk about the fate of people by talking about uncertain possibilities—the possibility that people will choose God, or that they will choose Hell. The ability to choose between possibilities is the essence of freedom, and of humanity. Therefore, if human beings *could* see the fate of the universe, the act of doing so would destroy their sense of freedom—and therefore, they would cease to be human. Human beings must live "in time"—they must live each moment, not knowing what "eternal reality" holds.

MacDonald suggests that there are limits to what human beings can understand about "the mind of God." The Narrator wants to know if God knows whether human beings will be saved or damned in the end. This is an interesting question, because, if the answer is yes, then it would seem that humans aren't truly choosing *their own salvation; rather, God is just deciding for them. But it is impossible to answer the Narrator's question about the fate of humanity, because answering this question would involve taking the Narrator "out of time"—in other words, allowing the Narrator to see the past, present, and future of the universe all at once—something only God can do.*

CHAPTER 14

Suddenly the Narrator, still with MacDonald, finds himself surrounded by a "great assembly of gigantic forms." The Narrator gradually realizes that these "forms" are the souls of human beings. The souls are watching a **chessboard**, upon which there are chess pieces representing human beings as they appear to one another. The chess pieces move around the board, and the Narrator realizes that the pieces symbolize the history of the universe itself. The chessboard on which the chess pieces move symbolizes time.

In the previous chapter, the Narrator asked MacDonald whether God knows the ultimate fate of humanity. To illustrate the answer to the Narrator's question, MacDonald shows him a huge chessboard, symbolizing the structure of the universe. The difference between a human being and God is as vast as the difference between a chess piece and a chess master. The crux of the chessboard image is that humans themselves, while they control their own individual actions, don't control the overall actions of the chessboard, and can't even see *the chessboard—only God (the chess master) can.*

The Narrator asks MacDonald about freedom and fate. Were the choices that the ghosts made—choices which sometimes led them into Heaven and sometimes sent them back to Hell—predetermined in the same sense that a chess piece's moves can be planned in advance? MacDonald replies, "Do not ask of a vision in a dream more than a vision in a dream can give." The Narrator is confused, but MacDonald explains that the Narrator has been dreaming this entire time. MacDonald urges the Narrator to make it very clear to other people that his vision of the afterlife was just a dream—*not* the truth about the afterlife.

The Narrator reiterates his concerns about salvation and free will, but MacDonald declines to answer him, suggesting that the answer is beyond human comprehension, and reminding the Narrator that he's just dreaming. MacDonald's refusal to answer the question might suggest that it is *possible for human beings, with their imperfect knowledge of the world, to exercise free will* and *for God, who is all-knowing, to know their fate—the two options aren't mutually exclusive, especially when humans operate only within time, and God operates outside of time, seeing past, present, and future at once.*

The Narrator notices that MacDonald is becoming **brighter**. He hears voices singing, "Sleepers awake!" The sun rises high in the east, and the Narrator tries to hide from the light, since he's only a humble ghost. He tries to hide in the folds of MacDonald's clothing, only to find that he's pressed his face into the cloth of his study table. A book has fallen on his head. He looks around and realizes that he's in a cold room, there's a siren howling overhead, and the clock is striking three.

It's important that the book should end with the Narrator returning to his waking life, emphasizing the fact that the Narrator's work (and our work) isn't done yet: the Narrator must use the lessons he's learned to live morally and truly give up himself to God—a challenging task. Also notice that the Narrator's "real" world seems cold and lonely—in fact, not so different from the grey town. In this way, the novel again implies that Hell and Earth aren't so different, and in fact one can be a continuation of the other (as is the case with Heaven as well).

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