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*The Great Divorce: A Battle of Reality*

As a devout Christian, C.S. Lewis principally valued a genuine relationship with God and advertised goodness in his own life and throughout his writings, particularly *The Great Divorce*. Throughout this dream vision, the characters continually struggle with grasping reality, and they seem to be oblivious of the ever-flowing fountain of joy that accompanies the acceptance of Christ. Lewis was fully aware of the importance of living authentically, and he hoped to share his knowledge with others through this Dantean analogy. In search of ultimate truth, Lewis may have looked to Galatians as inspiration for renouncing the unreal, that is, evil; in his letter to Galatia, Paul says, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel– which is really no gospel at all” (*New International Version*, Gal. 1:6-7). Just as Paul is aiding the Galatians to see the true good news, through his clear analogies and vivid scenes, Lewis helps his readers understand that evil is simply a ruse, for real Truth is found in goodness. The battle between real and unreal takes on a physical quality in *The Great Divorce* which helps the reader to see the strange, mystical, and sometimes painful path to discovering God’s ultimate Reality in his or her own life.

Lewis’s defines Reality in *The Problem of Pain*, but throughout *The Great Divorce*, he contrasts the ghosts with this definition to show evil as a false reality. Throughout *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis describes Reality as self-giving, righteous, loving, unexpected, willful, unexplainable, and acting through grace and nature. These virtues are characteristics of both the solid people and Heaven, but Lewis wants his readers to see the exaggerated contrast to the vices

of the phantoms. These beings have a deceived perception of reality and reject Lewis's virtuous characteristics, making them physically unreal as their integrity deteriorates further. The end of the story in particular shows a unique perspective on this, as one of the ghosts begins to disappear completely. Chapter thirteen describes how the dwarf ghost began to shrink until he was almost impossible to distinguish from the chain he was holding; he was clinging so desperately to his sense of reality, in which his wife loved him above all others, that he faded away. Sarah Smith, who had both accepted and embodied Reality, found a new way to love through the joy of Christ. As the dwarf began to blackmail her with pity, Sarah said, "pity was meant to be a spur that drives joy to help misery . . . but those who choose misery can hold joy up to ransom, by pity (Lewis, *The Great* 108). The dwarf ghost rejected the true form of love, an aspect of Reality, in exchange for misery, and because he continually chose to corrupt rightful pity, his physical form became nonexistent. Lewis explains the morality behind this by saying "in order to be bad [one] must have good things to want and then to pursue in the wrong way: [one] must have impulses which were originally good in order to be able to pervert them" (Lewis, *Mere* 28). The dwarf intended to love Sarah but used pity against her, and in becoming this polluting agent against Reality, he disappeared like the essence of evil. By creating characters that literally act as Lewis's school of thought, his allegory aids the reader in understanding the benefits of a genuine vision of Reality.

Not only is evil a misuse of good, it is also an infectious agent that corrupts a true vision of Reality. He mentions this in many of his philosophical writings including *Mere Christianity* where he describes evil as a "parasite" (Lewis, *Mere* 28). Just as the uninvited organism inserts itself into a host and destroys it, unreal, that is, false good, inserts itself into the minds of the unsuspecting and twists their reality into believing the unreal is real. This idea materializes in the

mind of the phantom, Pam; in this analogy, love is the host, the innate good, and instinctive love is the parasite. The solid spirit, Reginald, tries to describe the fallacies of instinctive love by saying, ““you cannot love a fellow-creature fully till you love God. Sometimes this conversion can be done while the instinctive love is still gratified. But there was, it seems, no chance of that in your case. The instinct was uncontrolled and fierce and monomaniac”” (Lewis, *The Great* 84). The parasite of instinctive love raged throughout Pam’s mind; in fact, she only thought of Michael, even far after his death. Reginald attempts to paint the reality of Godly love, but it has been fiercely infected by the unreality of superficial love. Pam, who is merely a ghost, was convinced by the parasite that instinctive love was real, and when she was presented with true Reality, she pronounced it a lie. The unreal became a false reality which kept her from true joy; to rid this woman of the parasite “[would be] a case for surgery” (Lewis, *The Great* 84). A physical change had to happen for this ghost to find Reality, but unfortunately, she never accepted it. Pam was so absorbed into a lie, she had no hope of escaping without a surgery, and through this, Lewis warns his readers of how convincing these parasites can be.

Lewis also cautions his readers of the overwhelming nature of unreality in the preface. He warns against absolutes by saying, “I beg readers to remember that this is a fantasy. It has of course—or I intended it to have—a moral. But the transmortal conditions are solely an imaginative supposal: they are not even a guess or a speculation at what may actually await us” (Lewis, *The Great* 9). Lewis’s writing is often quite literal, but he seems to take extra precautions into ensuring his audience knows the quality of unreal that this story possesses. In admitting his humanity, Lewis thought that he himself could have been deceived by unreality, and he inadvertently warns his readers of this in the preface. The moral theme of alerting against evil still accurately applies; however, he does not want his readers to be misled by a fictitious

representation of the afterlife. Furthermore, Lewis realizes “the danger [in] readers and authors [substituting] fictional representations of the heavenly for the real heaven, and fanciful representations of God for God” (Tiffany 364). As no man can truly describe God, Lewis evades sacrilegious unrealities of this type by inserting this disclaimer. He does not want his reader to fall into an unreal perception of God or heaven through his allegory, and he is careful to emphasize this. False reality is everywhere and is, as aforementioned, very convincing, but eternal Reality is something more difficult to find. Some critics say that he believed evil to be everywhere, and one should always be on guard; “Lewis was well aware of the force of evil in the world, and he thought that evil, while not self-sustaining, was neither accidental nor occasional” (Kort 112). Evil requires a human host to survive, and if that host ceases to exist, the falsities die also. Kort does not say this to suggest that Lewis supports genocide to rid the earth of evil, but rather, Lewis does everything he can to help his readers see the ultimate Truth which cuts out unreality. Humanity is corruptible but also has a potential for good, and, through the preface, Lewis ensures that his story is not a parasite that demoralizes the reader but rather a moral encourager. Just as the solid people convince the ghosts of the eternal joy in the mountains, Lewis’s allegory opens his readers to a physical representation of Reality without the potential for falsities.

The characters that Lewis creates encounter Reality both abruptly and painfully as a parallel for the reader’s potential experience. The narrator himself is a ghost; however, unlike all the other phantoms who step off the bus, the reader never knows what particular vice of his is “unreal.” The narrator’s first encounter with the setting is somewhat painful; the process of recognizing Reality has just begun. In describing this experience, he said, “walking proved difficult. The grass, hard as diamonds to my unsubstantial feet, made me feel as if I were walking

on wrinkled rock, and I suffered pains like those of the mermaid in Hans Andersen. A bird ran across in front of me and I envied it. It belonged to that country and was as real as the grass” (Lewis, *The Great* 30). While in Hell, the narrator believed he was real; however, this abrupt change in setting proved him to be false. He is injured by Reality in the form of the grass, as this encounter is foreign to his falsified senses; and he takes a distinct notice of the bird. At this moment, the narrator sees that the bird possesses realness—goodness—and immediately envies it. This concept is present also in Lewis’s *The Problem of Pain*. The narrator’s pain is, in fact, a recognition of evil within himself. Lewis says, “if evil is present, pain at recognition of the evil, being a kind of knowledge, is relatively good; for the alternative is that the soul should be ignorant of the evil, or ignorant that the evil is contrary to its nature (Lewis, *The Problem* 78). In *The Great Divorce*, evil causes physical pain. It is not the realness of the grass that causes the narrator pain but rather the force of Reality, in nature, awakening Reality in the phantom which causes his feet to hurt. Lewis adds this detail so the reader is prepared for the initial shock of Reality to the corrupted mind. The reader is never made aware of the specific unreality that the narrator believes, but the fact that he is both a phantom, like the others, and is subject to the painful effects of Reality, make it obvious that he is unaware of the unreal aspect inside of him. The narrator and the reader alike are made painfully aware of the vices of the other phantoms, and through this, Lewis introspectively awakens the reader. A false reality in his or her own life is much more difficult to realize than the ostentatious faults of others; however, as the narrator eventually accepts joyous Reality, so can the reader.

The ghosts have specific vices that add to their perception of unreal which Lewis reveals quite clearly. Principally, the ghosts do not seem to realize the situation they are in; the Episcopal ghost even denies that he is in Heaven. The dialogue between the solid man and the Episcopal

ghost reveals that the phantom does not believe he has been in Hell. He believes the grey town to be a “mythological Heaven” (Lewis, *The Great* 36). In an ironic sense, Lewis created a ghost who is not only physically “unreal,” that is, a phantom, but who also disregards his locational reality; he does not believe in the existence of the Heaven he is standing in. This ultimately confused bishop is Lewis’s way of pointing out the evils of spiritualism. The Episcopal ghost is supposed to be a man of God, yet he does not have a personal relationship with the giver of ultimate joy; and he, therefore, remains in Hell. Lewis is in support of the unashamed, childlike faith and warns his readers of people who possess a “skeptical spirit of modernity” and pompously “destroy the Church of Christ from within” (Wicher 95-96). As unreality always symbolizes evil in *The Great Divorce*, this ghost parallels the Pharisees who contemptuously parade around their “spiritualism” without truly understanding Christ and the relationship he brings. The genuine faith of true believers is not dogmatic, but simple. Those who overcomplicate the love of Christ corrupt the faith, and Lewis makes this character perhaps the most unreal and unaware of all.

The phantoms clearly have no physical substance, but by showing the flaws of this species, Lewis ensures that the reader can clearly see what it means to be Real. Lewis begins with a somewhat harsh description of these beings. When the narrator is first absorbing Heaven, he noticed that the others “were in fact ghosts: man-shaped stains on the brightness of that air” (Lewis, *The Great* 27). Lewis is intentional in using the word “stains” so that the reader does not view them as simply translucent humans; compared to the beauty and perfection of Reality, these characters are filth. However, just as a stain can be cleaned, these character-blemishes can be washed and brought into completeness with a new set of virtues. In addition, Lewis subtly shows the imperfections of the phantoms in comparison to the solid people. The absence of triviality in

those who have assumed realness is discussed by Steven Pickett in a critique of *The Great Divorce*. He said that after a ghost has accepted Reality and become solid, the trivial happenings of the unreal are disregarded, and “the fictions which brought them [to heaven] are unimportant” (Pickett 195). This is in reference to the narrator and his solid guide, George MacDonald. MacDonald becomes the guide for the narrator because he was an inspiration to the young author, but MacDonald, who has accepted Reality, disregards all praise of material things and goes so far as to verbally cut the narrator off when discussing his books (Lewis, *The Great* 60). An aspect of accepting Truth is abandoning superficiality, and while MacDonald might have appreciated the narrator’s praise on Earth, he has surpassed that thinking. Reality comes with a sense of simplicity, and Lewis is saying that true goodness is not concerned with self-admiration; its humility and authenticity come from the heart and spread, through MacDonald, to the narrator himself.

Lewis beautifully guides the reader through Reality in *The Great Divorce*. With a further understanding of Lewis’s morality, he or she can fully realize the distinction between real and unreal. Things that are real are good, and those that are unreal are simply the corruption of real; because evil requires the corrupted qualities of good, the absence of good would destroy evil, making evil a simple illusion. Through the dwarf ghost, Pam, the preface, the Episcopal ghost, the phantoms’ flaws, and pain itself, Lewis reveals the beauty of Reality and the path one must take to enter into it. He even recognizes the potential unreality within himself and warns the reader of the dangers of blind belief; however, Lewis knows it is difficult to grasp Truth when falsities are so convincing. For this, Lewis prescribes the help of others. Whether the solid people represent the guiding hand of angels or simply fellow Christian examples, Lewis gives his

readers hope of achieving eternal joy through community and inspiration. *The Great Divorce* is not simply an analogy of Heaven and Hell, it is the ultimate revelation of Reality.

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