

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

The Great Divorce

by

C. S. Lewis

1. In the first chapter of *The Great Divorce*, the narrator questions how people in the grey-colored town can be satisfied. Why does Lewis portray a town in which any real life is absent, yet there is little desire to move beyond it? (Consider the conversation on p. 5.)
2. Do you see any parallels between the grey town and our world?
3. When the narrator meets George MacDonald as his guide in Chapter 9, there is more of an explanation provided about the grey town and the solid land. If ghosts “leave that grey town behind it will not have been Hell,” MacDonald says. “To any that leaves it, it is Purgatory. And perhaps ye had better not call this country Heaven. Not *Deep Heaven* . . . call it the Valley

of the Shadow of Life” (p. 68). Is it helpful to think about holding places—purgatories? Does the story suggest that we have a real choice after death? What do you think about the idea that there could be “shadows,” or levels of heaven and hell?

4. We learn that grey-town inhabitants can move to a new street and a new house by simply imagining it (p. 10). As a result, there is no interdependency or community, since there is no need to rely on one another. How would you rate the need for community in your life—your neighbors, your local store owners, your church, your area school? Have you seen this need fade due to technology, the busy pace of life, or something else?
5. The story moves from the grey void above and below to the blinding, revealing light of another place in Chapter 3. As they arrive in heaven, the bus passengers are like ghosts, and everything else is solid—rocks, grass, trees, even flowers that are hard like diamonds. What is Lewis trying to say about the importance of our physical bodies and the way they might be changed in the life to come?
6. Why does Lewis use the familiar landscape of earth to describe the reality of heaven? (Look again at pp. 23-24.)
7. As the solid people approach the newly arriving ghosts, a ghost identifies the solid people as murderers on earth (pp. 26-27). The surprise is parallel to the one in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30. Do you

struggle with God's sense of justice and grace? How do you measure the response of the solid person as it relates to the call of faith about personal identity and measure of the self?

8. In Chapter 5, our narrator overhears a solid, bright person talking with the fat, cultured ghost from the bus. The fat ghost wants to be assured that his talents will be used. The solid person responds, "I can promise you none of these things. No sphere of usefulness: you are not needed there at all. No scope of your talents: only forgiveness for having perverted them" (p. 40). How do you feel about the fact that, along with your unworthiness of heaven, you are also not needed, according to Lewis? Does it change your sense of belonging if there's nothing you can do to earn your way into heaven, only the faith that the one providing the way will be loving and forgiving?
9. It's clear that only some ghosts will make the transformation into solid people. Others will return to the bus and go back to the grey town. George MacDonald says, "There is always something they insist on keeping even at the price of misery. There is always something they prefer to joy—that is, to reality" (p. 71). What are the reasons for returning, and is this return final? (Look at p. 74.)
10. Do you agree that "all that are in hell, choose it," (p. 75) as MacDonald tells the narrator? He defines two different people, "those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be

done’” (p. 75). In essence, MacDonald says, “The good man’s past begins to change so that his forgiven sins and remembered sorrows take on the quality of Heaven: the bad man’s past already conforms to his badness and is filled only with dreariness” (p. 69). In the story, is attitude, faith, or works given as the way to become a solid person in heaven?

11. Reread Chapter 10, and count the number of places that the ghost refers to herself as if *her* relationships and the present crisis of eternal consequences revolve around *her*. Compare that with one of the first encounters with a solid person in Chapter 4: “I do not look at myself. I have given up myself” (p. 27). No wonder that, at the end of Chapter 10, the ghost simply vanishes away into nothingness. How does our narrator become solid, and how does that relate to the idea of lessening his own needs, concerns, and fears while strengthening that “germ of a desire for God” (p. 98)?
12. Why does Lewis use a threatened lizard that turns into a great stallion in Chapter 11? Is this a confusing illustration? What’s the significance of using this particular transformation? Think about Eden and this being the new garden.
13. When our narrator gets to heaven, the Lady says, “We shall have no *need* for one another now: we can begin to love truly” (p. 126). What does this mean with regard to community and how Lewis envisions this shifting in heaven?

- Hell is small in comparison to heaven. It's lost in the little cracks that lead to heaven. "All Hell is smaller than one pebble of your earthly world: but it is smaller than one atom of *this* world, the Real World," MacDonald says. "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" (p. 138). How does this help change your perception of the importance and the expansiveness of heaven?