

ART HOUSE LOCAL

The Great Divorce by C.S. Lewis

Introduction

The Great Divorce was originally published as a serial in The Guardian from November 10, 1944 to April 13, 1945. A bus-load of inhabitants from the Grey Town (or Hell) have the opportunity to visit the outskirts of Heaven. Because of their semi-transparent appearance, the passengers are referred to as ghosts, while the citizens of Heaven have solid bodies. A representative of Heaven greets each visitor and a conversation ensues during which the solid person tries to persuade the ghost to stay. Each ghost has taken a virtue or natural impulse and elevated it above all else to the point of becoming distorted and destructive. In pride, they cling to self-righteousness, mother love, artistic talent, and doing one's duty, rather than grasp the joy and grace offered in Heaven. Only one ghost decides to stay and surrender the obstacle that separates him from God. Who will it be? In the preface, Lewis explains how he arrived at the title. William Blake wrote "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"; Lewis would write of their divorce. Lewis believed that life presented some either/or choices. The attempt to embrace both alternatives and somehow transform evil into good, Lewis saw as error. "If we insist on keeping Hell (or even earth) we shall not see Heaven: if we accept Heaven we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenirs of Hell." This book offers insight into the human condition and the seemingly innocent things that can separate us from God.

Chapter 9 Excerpt

"Whisht, now!" said my Teacher suddenly. We were standing close to some bushes and beyond them I saw one of the Solid People and a Ghost who had apparently just that moment met. The outlines of the Ghost looked vaguely familiar, but I soon realized that what I had seen on earth was not the man himself but photographs of him in the papers. He had been a famous artist.

"God!" said the Ghost, glancing round the landscape.

"God what?" asked the Spirit.

"What do you mean, 'God what?'" asked the Ghost.

"In our grammar God is a noun."

"Oh-I see. I only meant 'By Gum' or something of the sort. I meant . . . well, all this. It's . . . it's ... I should like to paint this."

“I shouldn’t bother about that just at present if I were you.”

“Look here; isn’t one going to be allowed to go on painting?”

“Looking comes first.” “But I’ve had my look. I’ve seen just what I want to do. God!-I wish I’d thought of bringing my things with me!”

The Spirit shook his head, scattering light from his hair as he did so. “That sort of thing’s no good here,” he said.

“What do you mean?” said the Ghost.

“When you painted on earth-at least in your earlier days-it was because you caught glimpses of Heaven in the earthly landscape. The success of your painting was that it enabled others to see the glimpses too. But here you are having the thing itself. It is from here that the messages came. There is no good telling us about this country, for we see it already. In fact we see it better than you do.”

“Then there’s never going to be any point in painting here?”

“I don’t say that. When you’ve grown into a Person (it’s all right, we all had to do it) there’ll be some things which you’ll see better than anyone else. One of the things you’ll want to do will be to tell us about them. But not yet. At present your business is to see. Come and see. He is endless. Come and feed.”

There was a little pause. “That will be delightful,” said the Ghost presently in a rather dull voice.

“Come, then,” said the Spirit, offering it his arm.

“How soon do you think I could begin painting?” it asked.

The Spirit broke into laughter. “Don’t you see you’ll never paint at all if that’s what you’re thinking about?” he said.

“What do you mean?” asked the Ghost.

“Why, if you are interested in the country only for the sake of painting it, you’ll never learn to see the country.”

“But that’s just how a real artist is interested in the country.”

“No. You’re forgetting,” said the Spirit. “That was not how you began. Light itself was your first love: you loved paint only as a means of telling about light.”

“Oh, that’s ages ago,” said the Ghost. “One grows out of that. Of course, you haven’t seen my later works. One becomes more and more interested in paint for its own sake.”

“One does, indeed. I also have had to recover from that. It was all a snare. Ink and catgut and paint were necessary down there, but they are also dangerous stimulants. Every poet and musician and artist, but for Grace, is drawn away from love of the thing he tells, to love of the telling till, down in Deep Hell, they cannot be interested in God at all but only in what they say about Him. For it doesn’t stop at being interested in paint, you know. They sink lower-become interested in their own personalities and then in nothing but their own reputations.”

“I don’t think I’m much troubled in that way,” said the Ghost stiffly.

“That’s excellent,” said the Spirit. “Not many of us had quite got over it when we first arrived. But if there is any of that inflammation left it will be cured when you come to the fountain.”

“What fountain’s that?”

“It is up there in the mountains,” said the Spirit. “Very cold and clear, between two green hills. A little like Lethe. When you have drunk of it you forget forever all proprietorship in your own works. You enjoy them just as if they were someone else’s: without pride and without modesty.”

“That’ll be grand,” said the Ghost without enthusiasm.

“Well, come,” said the Spirit: and for a few paces he supported the hobbling shadow forward to the East.

“Of course,” said the Ghost, as if speaking to itself, “there’ll always be interesting people to meet. . .”

“Everyone will be interesting.”

“Oh-ah-yes, to be sure. I was thinking of people in our own line. Shall I meet Claude? Or Cezanne? Or-----”

“Sooner or later-if they’re here.”

“But don’t you know?”

“Well, of course not. I’ve only been here a few years. All the chances are against my having run across them . . . there are a good many of us, you know.”

“But surely in the case of distinguished people, you’d hear?”

“But they aren’t distinguished-no more than anyone else. Don’t you understand? The Glory flows into everyone, and back from everyone: like light and mirrors. But the light’s the thing.”

“Do you mean there are no famous men?”

“They are all famous. They are all known, remembered, recognized by the only Mind that can give a perfect judgment.”

“Of, of course, in that sense . . .” said the Ghost.

“Don’t stop,” said the Spirit, making to lead him still forward.

“One must be content with one’s reputation among posterity, then,” said the Ghost.

“My friend,” said the Spirit. “Don’t you know?”

“Know what?”

“That you and I are already completely forgotten on the Earth?”

“Eh? What’s that?” exclaimed the Ghost, disengaging its arm. “Do you mean those damned Neo-Regionalists have won after all?”

“Lord love you, yes!” said the Spirit, once more shaking and shining with laughter. “You couldn’t get five pounds for any picture of mine or even of yours in Europe or America to-day. We’re dead out of fashion.”

“I must be off at once,” said the Ghost. “Let me go! Damn it all, one has one’s duty to the future of Art. I must go back to my friends. I must write an article. There must be a manifesto. We must start a periodical. We must have publicity. Let me go. This is beyond a joke!”

And without listening to the Spirit’s reply, the spectre vanished.

Discussion Questions

1. The Ghost, who had been a famous artist, was moved by the beauty of Heaven and wanted to paint it. His question, “isn’t one going to be allowed to go on painting?” signals his reluctance to give up something he loved. Consider your creative habit. Where do you think it came from? Do you love it? Could you put it on hold, or change the way you use it, if asked?
2. The Solid Person tells the ghost that, early on, his painterly success came from an ability to catch glimpses of Heaven in the earthly landscape and enable others to see them. In your art, have you focused on such themes? Have you helped others to see something they otherwise might have missed? Has your work improved as a result?
3. Should the Ghost “grow into a Person”, he’s told he will see some things better than anyone else. As you grow in your walk with God, do you feel you see some things better than others do? How does this special ability affirm your role as an artist and responsible servant?
4. The Solid Person warns that “Every poet and musician and artist, but for Grace, is drawn away from the love of the thing he tells to the love of the telling.” What subject initially enticed you to “tell”, and what was your means of “telling” about it? Is that subject still relevant to you and your art?
5. A drink from the “fountain” could have cured the Ghost of any “inflammation”, but he chose to leave instead, citing his duty to the future of art. How can we find that fountain in our daily lives? How can we return often to keep our sights set on God and His glory, instead of our own?