

# 'The Great Divorce': What C.S. Lewis Would Say About Modern 'Love'

The plot of C.S. Lewis' [\*The Great Divorce\*](#) is straightforward. The narrator, who strongly resembles Lewis, boards a bus along with some others traveling from Hell to Heaven. Once they've arrived at their destination, the quarrelsome passengers disembark, become Ghosts, and find themselves scarcely able to bear the reality of their physical environment—even the unbending grass hurts their feet as they walk. They are then given the opportunity to enter Heaven forever, invited and encouraged by Spirits they once knew as fellow human beings.

The narrator eventually meets George MacDonald, the Scots writer whose books had helped bring about Lewis's conversion to Christianity. MacDonald, referred to as the Teacher, acts as a Virgil to the narrator's Dante: guiding him, answering questions, and offering commentary on some of the events and conversations taking place around them. Like the narrator, we quickly realize that few of the travelling Ghosts wish to remain in Heaven. They are still wrapped up in their earthly lives—those ambitions and desires by which they have first condemned themselves to hell.

Beyond this, many of the Ghosts are gripped by false conceptions of love. Consider the overbearing female Ghost, who in her earthly life so "loved" her husband by seeking his improvement that she badgered him into a nervous breakdown. Seeing that her husband now resides in heaven, she declares that "I've done my duty by him, if ever a woman has. ... With all the time one would have here, I believe I could make something of him. ... What right have you to keep him from me? I hate you. How can I pay him out if you won't let me have him?"

Another Ghost, a mother named Pam, is still possessed by her obsessive love for her son. "I'm sure I did my best to make Michael happy," she says. "I gave up my whole life." Her brother, a Spirit, explains that her "love" for Michael was "uncontrolled and fierce and monomaniac." It perverted, too, her love for others, including her husband and her own mother. The brother's attempts at persuasion fall on deaf ears.

Unable to ascertain and judge their own sins and failings, many of these Ghosts wonder how—with their ostensibly deep love and compassion—they are not already living in Heaven. They are blind to their own faults, and their own desires cloud their ability to taste the greater joy offered by genuine love.

Ultimately, the perverted "love" of the visitors from Hell seeks to negate the joy of those in Heaven. On this point, the narrator remarks, "What some people say on earth is that the final loss of one soul gives the lie to all the joy of those who are saved."

The Teacher replies: "That sounds very merciful: but see what lurks behind it." The narrator responds "What?" and the Teacher explains: "The demands of the loveless and the self-imprisoned," he says, is "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."

The story ends with the narrator waking from his dream, "hunched on the floor beside a black and empty grate, the clock striking three, and the siren howling overhead." The siren is, ominously, a reference to the warnings of German air raids during the Second World War, when Lewis wrote his book.

Eighty years have passed since he put pen to paper, and *The Great Divorce* remains as pertinent as ever. Disturbingly, the

amorous perversions of Lewis' Ghosts parallel the inclinations of our modern-day society.

Like the overbearing woman, we can be tempted to try and "fix" the character and ideas of the people around us, believing that constant badgering will change mind and hearts. Especially in the context of our current [political climate](#), it can be easy to engage in loud and ongoing debates—so insistent on perfecting the perceived "flaws" of others that we fail to see even our loved ones in their humanity.

Like the mother, too, we can be tempted to elevate certain loves—our love of [comfort](#), our partner, our [self-esteem](#), or of being correct—above other loves, forsaking some worthy objects of affection in favor of our own self-constructed gods.

We are now victims of what the Teacher calls "the passion of pity, the pity we merely suffer, the ache that draws men to concede what should not be conceded and to flatter when they should speak the truth, the pity that cheated many a woman out of her virginity and many a statesman out of his honesty." Because it is conceived wrongly, compassion has given us abortion, euthanasia, transgender women demanding all the rights of women (such as playing in [female sports](#)), an education system failing to hold to strict [standards of merit](#), and much more.

Lewis' air raid siren is still howling. Let's pray that more people hear it.

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