An Argument for *The Great Divorce*

in the Public High School Ninth Grade English Classroom

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Abstract

C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce* (1946) can provide a useful supplement for ninth grade English instruction because of its quality as a literary work, the ideas it represents, its commentary on enduring human questions, and its connections to its historical context. At its core, the book reflects on recurring philosophical and religious ideas in a way that simultaneously links to and transcends its time. It also exhibits hallmarks of literary excellence, such as formal consistency and a comprehensive view of its themes. *The Great Divorce*'s skillful use of literary elements suits it for instruction, adapting form to purpose. The many criteria for selecting works for the classroom prove *The Great Divorce* to be worthy of inclusion in ninth grade instruction.

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Public school curriculum requires students and teachers to meet a variety of standards, and English teachers typically draw from a broad range of classic works in order to instruct students in recognizing literary elements, interpreting meaning, and interacting with the text by making historical and literary connections. Ultimately each teacher must decide what pieces to include in his or her classroom based on student needs, educational criteria, and objectives. For the ninth grade English class, standards focus on literary knowledge displayed "in the student's own writing and in the analysis of literature" ("Grade Nine"), so pieces that are chosen should be accessible to the student while complex enough to foster critical thinking. These characteristics are evident in C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce* (1946), making it a valuable addition to existing curriculum as it lends itself well to helping educators meet these objectives and foster student learning. *The Great Divorce* should be included in the ninth grade public high school English classroom because of its literary importance, representation of ideas, historical value, literary quality, and stylistic elements.

Preliminary Considerations

Even though it has religious themes, *The Great Divorce*'s place as a Christian work does not disqualify it from a public school setting. Educational law has confirmed that teaching religious works is constitutional, provided they are taught only in the instructional sense. In the 1963 Supreme Court case School District of Abington Township, Pennsylvania v. Schempp, the court ruled that

> It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.

Students can benefit from learning about biblical themes when those themes are treated with respect and studied in a neutral way. Religion is an important area of study, one that is necessary for well-rounded knowledge. The *Journal of Law and Religion* notes that "[b]ecause religion plays a significant role in history and society, study about religion is essential to understanding both the nation and the world.…Failure to understand even the basic symbols, practices, and concepts of various religions makes much of history, literature, art, and contemporary life unintelligible" ("Religion" 310). Belief systems affect the way people live daily, and the English classroom is a fitting place to cover this basic knowledge through literature such as *The Great Divorce.* The book portrays the fundamental ideas of heaven and hell in ways that are similar to *Paradise Lost* and *The Divine Comedy*, both studied in schools, and it has the same right to be in the classroom. Still, *The Great Divorce* is valuable in its own right because of Lewis's distinct perspective. If taught in a scholarly, academic manner, it can be acceptable and even useful in a public school setting.

Not only are teachers free to teach religious texts, but they also are not bound to any certain collection of works by state or national standards, allowing room for *The Great Divorce* within the curriculum. Educators have flexibility in what works they choose to teach, making it possible to incorporate the piece without neglecting

educational requirements. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's K-12 Curriculum and Instruction guidelines say that "NCDPI does not require or recommend any particular texts for students to read at any level. The selection of materials is a local, school, and individual teacher responsibility." Teachers have flexibility within their schools and districts as they write their curriculum and choose works. The Common Core guidelines of complexity, quality, and range are the universal standard for most states (Appendix B 2), and even those who outline their own criteria hold to the same principles. New York standards select recommended texts based on "[g]rade level text complexity," "balance of gender and a diversity of voices representing a spectrum of cultures, perspectives, orientations, races, ages, time-periods, and geographies," and "[a]ppropriate matches for mastery of individual and collective standards" ("Text List"). Alabama standards state that "[t]o become college and career ready, students must grapple with works of exceptional craft and thought whose range extends across genres, cultures, and centuries" ("English Language Literacy" 69). While these states may word their specifications slightly differently, each essentially seeks works of literary merit that are diverse and reach an appropriate level of difficulty. Once the school system, individual classroom, instructional goals, and content appropriateness are taken into account, educators have a great deal of freedom in selecting pieces that suit instruction, leaving room for inclusion of *The Great Divorce* for educational development.

The Great Divorce also fits into the desirable range of difficulty for ninth graders, fitting the text complexity requirement for classroom works. Its sentence structure and wording are fairly easy for students to understand, but its concepts are sufficiently challenging. Some of the most fundamental ideas of the work are written relatively

simplistically: "[A] damned soul is nearly nothing; it is shrunk, shut up in itself. Good beats upon the damned incessantly as sound waves beat on the ears of the deaf, but they cannot receive it. Their fists are clenched, their teeth are clenched, their eyes fast shut" (Lewis 139). While the sentences are short and words mainly straightforward, they carry a great deal of weight in their description of the condemned—Lewis fully communicates their hostility toward all that is good without being wordy. The work pairs substance and clarity as it describes abstract concepts, allowing students to grow in their understanding instead of losing meaning behind complicated writing. The language and syntax fall slightly below a ninth grade level, according to the Fry Readability Chart. Beginning with the first one hundred words of the story on each page, the chart places the passage on page 34 at a fifth grade reading level, pages 5 and 122 at a seventh grade level, and pages 57 and 117 at ninth grade level (Fry 249). While this may rank *The Great Divorce* closer to an eighth grade level, the abstract nature of the book's content—such as heaven, hell, good, and evil—establishes a reasonable place in the ninth grade realm. Students can more fully grasp the book's ideas as they age because of the process of brain development, particularly the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex "appears to be the seat of what we can term deliberate cognitive activity, which is what we try to encourage in the classroom. Interestingly enough, this region is structurally immature even in adolescence…white matter…is still being remodeled well into early adulthood" (Slavin 157). As students begin to take on the responsibilities of high school, their brains are closer to full development, and students can begin to cultivate a higher quality of discourse due to a higher ability to process and use analytical thinking skills. *The Great Divorce* could feasibly be taught at a middle school level in a simplified way, but

students could not think quite as deeply and complexly about its meaning. Moreover, its simpler sentence structure benefits a young adult's understanding by allowing its concepts and symbolic resonance to shine through. *The Great Divorce* offers a good balance of challenging ideas in an approachable format suitable for ninth graders.

In addition to reading level, *The Great Divorce*'s themes and length also make it approachable and suitable for ninth grade study. Unlike the Narnia series or *The Screwtape Letters* that draw on the biblical concepts of the Resurrection and Salvation, *Divorce* may be understood with little background knowledge of Christian doctrine, the book's drawing mainly on the well-known ideas of heaven and hell. Working with these common views of the afterlife allows students to use their prior knowledge and expand it through studying the book. The work's length also allows for a more thorough exploration of its many facets, as well. The HarperOne edition is a brief 146 pages, making it manageable for the classroom—it offers a great deal of significant material in a compact package and can easily be discussed more fully because it is not part of a series. Lastly, C. S. Lewis's intelligence and creativity shine through in the work. According to Owen Barfield, "in that book, as perhaps not quite in any other, this ever diverse pair—atomically rational Lewis and mythopoeic Lewis—I will not say unite, but they do at least join hands" (7). He paints a tangible picture of heaven and hell, each characteristic linked with theological significance leading up to a very powerful illustration of the importance of human choice, a creative demonstration of good and evil. Because of its subject matter and length, *The Great Divorce* is fitting for ninth grade study.

Importance

Aside from these instructional considerations, *The Great Divorce* merits inclusion in the curriculum for a variety of reasons, including its representation of its genre and the ideas it illustrates. Literature that is studied and taught must be varied and have value in being examined. Joan Brown comments, "An exemplary work can stand for or illustrate a literary form or tradition, it can represent a critical principle or theory, and it can symbolize an ideological principle" (542). First, a piece included in the curriculum should contain characteristic features of its form. *The Great Divorce* is a strong example of fantasy, Lewis's primary focus: "I beg readers to remember that this is a fantasy" (x). It is a story full of the extraordinary and adventurous—the very setting in which it operates and the characters it uses are unusual. The bus ride and arrival in Heaven set the scene in a world foreign to the reader (17-21), and the characters get stranger as the story progresses. After the succession of relatively ordinary ghosts, the talking Lizard makes an appearance, ultimately turning into a horse (106, 112). Later on, Sarah the ethereal, wise Spirit enters the story along with many other singing Spirits (118). These characters are far different from everyday people, conveying a picture of human nature that is exaggerated in various ways. The action also supports the fantastical elements of the story. *The Great Divorce*'s conclusion takes place as time is turned on its head and the narrator experiences a heightened sense of reality (143-144), distorting the everyday, normal aspects of life. In the spirit of the fantasy novel, Lewis takes an extraordinary setting and plot and mixes in characters that range from common to unusual. *The Great Divorce*'s literary elements that fulfill Brown's second qualification will be explored later in this thesis. In addition to these factors, a worthy piece must also reveal a greater system of ideas. *The Great Divorce*'s portrayals of the difference between good and evil

and the power of choice are its philosophical aim: "Evil can be undone, but it cannot 'develop' into good" (viii). In painting a picture of the afterlife, Lewis incorporates a great deal of Christian doctrine–mainly the human need to accept God and deny the self. The story presents a complete emblematic image of heaven and hell as well as the decisions that place people in one or the other. The human ability to choose is the foundation of the work and of the Christian faith, and the book incorporates these points well, covering a great deal of biblical thought woven throughout the text. Overall, *The Great Divorce* is characteristic of its form and demonstrates a thorough system of thought, making it valuable to the curriculum.

In addition to these representative traits, *The Great Divorce* exhibits societal and thematic significance, meeting Common Core's standard of quality defined as "classic or historically significant texts as well as contemporary works of comparable literary merit, cultural significance, and rich content" (Appendix B 2). The work's literary elements will be addressed later in this thesis; its context and message certainly fit these specifications. For the moment, one might notice that *The Great Divorce* has societal consequence—it is essentially a response to William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, speaking to the themes of good and evil that have been discussed throughout history (Lewis vii). It is a valuable part of the dialogue about free will, morality, and the afterlife, making it nearly as meaningful to society as similar works that came before it. The work's content is also laden with depth and symbolic substance because of its fantastical nature, speaking to important metaphysical concerns. It completely spans its subject matter, giving a full picture of the nature of heaven and hell as well as those who inhabit them. *The Great*

Divorce is worthy of study because it is packed with strong messages, ones that take from past ideas and critique them in a relevant way.

Not only is *The Great Divorce* important because of its themes, but it also contributes to the range of works in the classroom. Common Core seeks variety in pieces that are taught, a "broad range of sufficiently complex, high-quality texts….Among the factors considered were initial publication date, authorship, and subject matter" (Appendix B 2). As *The Great Divorce* is a more contemporary piece published in 1945, making it able to introduce a modern perspective in the classroom and balance out classic works from earlier periods. By offering a new take on classic themes, it can allow students to see the timelessness of those themes while giving a fresh look at them and demonstrating their relevance. While similarity of topic allows students to smoothly compare and contrast *The Great Divorce* with other older works, the book's relative modernity can give depth to the study of literature.

The Great Divorce is influenced by its place in history, as well, making it an important part of the curriculum. Works of merit reveal truth about their context, giving clarity about the society in which they were written. This characteristic aids understanding in a variety of ways: "Another canonical function is the provision of what is regarded as the basic cultural knowledge necessary to interpret past texts, see current issues in historical perspective, and orient oneself to the aesthetic achievements, social and political changes, and philosophical debates that have gone on for centuries"[1] (W. Harris 115-116). A worthy piece gives insight about its time as well as transcendent truth, offering a lens for readers to use in reflecting on the past. *The Great Divorce* relates to

[1] While canonicity certainly relates to curriculum, the discussion about canon will not be directly addressed due to space limitations. This thesis argues that there is space for *The Great Divorce* in the classroom, not that it necessarily fits exactly into any type of canon.

the state of twentieth-century thought about the afterlife at the time it was written, reinforcing the importance of spiritual matters in contrast to a society focused on the conflict surrounding it in the form of World War II. Religion was strongly attached to the war in England in that the war was seen as protection of the religious beliefs of the nation (Field 474). Outward religious expression may have been common because of the fighting, but personal motives were not always pure. Clive Field notes that the war reinforced spirituality in some and caused those who were not so devout to retain a semblance of faith in order to maintain a feeling of security. Though genuine religion may not have been strong, it allowed citizens to have a foundation for their lives (475). In light of England's religious climate in the 1940s, Lewis may have written *The Great Divorce* to remind his country about the importance of authentic faith. The book's suggestion of a literal heaven and hell and destiny affected by everyday human choice implies that religious motives should be based on transcendent reality and an intrinsic stimulus, not shallow faith based on external circumstances. In a nation that was navigating a war and becoming full of stale religion, *The Great Divorce* is Lewis's argument that faith is much more than a support to get through life. As the book reveals, personal decisions have great consequence, a timely reminder at a time when a strong group mindset was so prevalent.

The Great Divorce also comments on how emphasis on national unity translated into views about society. As the conflict drew people together, they saw themselves more as one unit, working together against corruption. The British put aside their individual differences for a common cause: "The war is widely regarded as perhaps the only period in the whole of British history during which the British people came together as a

metaphysical entity…which transcended the divisions of class, sect, self-interest and libertarian individualism that normally constitute the highly pluralistic and fragmented structure of British society" (J. Harris 17). Though this view of history may be idealistic, the fact that England saw life during the war in this way shows that they valued the idea of national solidarity and harmony. Jose Harris also states that the atmosphere of instability caused people to focus on others and be willing to help (17). World War II changed the way the British people thought about their nation and daily life, envisioning a culture oriented toward community and putting differences aside. In the midst of this intellectual environment of acceptance, *The Great Divorce* focuses on rigid moral lines. Lewis emphasizes transcendent spiritual matters, reminding England of his belief that right and wrong still exist and that earthly circumstances are secondary in light of eternity. In the work, the Teacher places responsibility of choice on the narrator: "The choice of ways is before you. Neither is closed. Any man may choose eternal death. Those who choose it will have it" (Lewis 140). His exhortation reveals the view that there is definite good and definite evil in the world and that everyone must choose a side. Later on, he reinforces the importance of this choice by stating that time is merely "a picture of moments following one another and yourself in each moment making some choice that might have been otherwise. Neither the temporal succession nor the phantom of what ye might have chosen and didn't is itself Freedom. They are a lens" (141). In the story, humans are unable to comprehend the reality of eternal matters except through time, communicating that the spiritual realm is much larger and more significant. Lewis uses these explanations to present his view of a moral code based on the idea that good and evil are based on a greater objective standard, not on national concerns or earthly

situations. Barfield notes that Lewis's logical perspective "was badly needed, because it was relentlessly either/or in a mushy intellectual milieu where (provided it is the non-material you are talking about) nothing is definite, and anybody can always have everything both ways" (7). Lewis sees past the romantic view of society that focused on similarities and sees objective values—some ideas (such as good and evil) simply are not compatible with each other. *The Great Divorce* does not strictly mirror the views of its culture, but it does address prominent views and issues of the time and exhibits a distinct approach in its criticism, making it a profitable contribution to the curriculum.

Just as *The Great Divorce* offers dimension to the classroom because it of its relation to its society, it also has lasting merit as it addresses timeless philosophical and literary concepts. The book is part of an ongoing conversation about good and evil, and it can shed light on the attempt to reconcile the two ideas. Lewis's work is a response to William Blake, who argued that good and evil must not necessarily be completely separated. According to Lewis, the matter lies in the choice of one or the other: "I do not think that all who choose wrong roads perish; but their rescue consists in being put back on the right road….It is still 'either-or'" (Lewis viii). There is no intermediate space, and as the story reveals, Lewis believes that choosing good (God) at the expense of evil is the way to virtue. In responding to this system of thought, he gives a new dimension to a subject that has been debated throughout time. In his introduction, Lewis alludes to the history of thought on the topic: "[I]n some sense or other the attempt to make that marriage is perennial.…some way of embracing both alternatives can always be found" (vii). He knows that there is a long history of dialogue regarding morality and is

presenting his own take on the idea. The importance of *The Great Divorce*'s subject matter makes it fit for classroom study as it speaks directly to time-honored themes.

Literary Excellence

Attributes of Literary Quality

Wholeness in form and content is a major consideration when determining literary quality, a major consideration when choosing pieces for instruction. Form must support content in a consistent manner, complementing it so that the ideas of the work are presented in a clear and compelling manner. Duncan Robertson observes, "The criterion of 'unity,' for example, which figures prominently in much modern criticism, is a matter of 'form,' but not form as opposed to content, since it demands that the form be appropriate to the content" (278). The work's formal elements should highlight its message, not detract from it—there should be a smooth connection between both qualities that conveys meaning in the most fitting way. When these two sides meet, they give the message the greatest possible influence. Form should also be consistent with itself: "Form, then, must consist, not in a selection of certain parts of the poem, but in the relations among the parts, and among all the parts" (276). Each element of the piece must work together to display the content well, every component contributing to a cohesive whole. The more these parts coalesce, the stronger the work is as it seeks to reach a singular goal. In a worthy piece, form complements content in a seamless, uniform way.

As it fulfills these formalistic qualifications, a literary work of merit gives a complete, comprehensive view of its topic, an especially useful trait for the academic study of a work. A candid, sincere perspective of the subject from various angles allows for a nuanced look at the matter at hand, making the work richer and more meaningful. In

his essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," noted Victorian critic Matthew Arnold concludes, "The rule may be summed up in one word,—*disinterestedness*. And how is criticism to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from practice; to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches…to create a current of true and fresh ideas. Its business is to do this with inflexible honesty" (21). There is no room for bias in a truly good piece—it represents all things fairly and judges accordingly. As writers maintain a detached view, they sustain conclusions of a higher quality by presenting things completely and fairly. To do this, the author must maintain a holistic viewpoint. According to Eugene Goodheart, "Objectivity, for Arnold, means clear-seeing…it also implies a view of the object, that is, of what is seen, as something whole and harmonious" (417). Studying ideas from a limited position does not do them justice and creates a distorted picture that lacks validity. A work that does so is hardly worth reading as it does not present the full truth and does more harm than good by misinforming and presenting faulty conclusions. When carried out over time, however, fair and equitable investigation of the world is the means by which truly great pieces are born:

> It is the business of the critical power…to see the object itself as it really is…to make the best ideas prevail. Presently these new ideas reach society, the touch of truth is the touch of life, and there is a stir and growth everywhere; out of this stir and growth come the creative epochs of literature. (Arnold 12)

As authors continue use their writing to communicate what is real to the public, readers will perpetuate good ideas and dismiss bad ones, creating an atmosphere that cultivates better writing. The principle of seeing ideas from multiple angles applies to the way they

are presented and analyzed in works, as well. George Levine comments on the way Arnold views the types of examination, concluding that "this very essay, while it seems to argue for the superiority of creative powers over critical and analytic powers, blurs the distinction after all" (471). Though in theory Arnold argues for the importance of imaginative writing, in practice, both artistic and rational perspectives must be considered. A valuable piece of literature sees its object from all sides and holds nothing back, maintaining integrity of ideas. Not only does this ensure that the truth is represented, but it allows for a deeper understanding of that truth, leading to purposeful literary dialogue, especially in an academic setting.

As these literary stipulations characterize a valuable work for the classroom, they line up nicely with ninth grade English educational goals. Formal consistency is a main factor in literary evaluation, ensuring that students know the types of literary elements and how they interact with one another. The English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools require students to be able to "[e]xplain the relationships between and among elements of literature: characters, plot, setting, tone, point of view, and theme" ("Grade Nine"). A work of quality manifests these characteristics and aids student examination of formal features. Common Core standards focus more on the work's main concern, determining that students should be able to "[d]etermine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details" ("English Language Arts"). A text that has merit and is useful in the classroom will demonstrate a comprehensive view of its overriding message. The interaction between formalistic elements and the

progression of theme are some of the key components of analyzing literature for ninth graders, and *The Great Divorce* stands up well to this type of analysis.

Consistency of Form in The Great Divorce

Throughout the book, Lewis's form consistently reveals his message as he contrasts the nature of good and evil through his portrayal of heaven, hell, and their respective inhabitants. His purpose can be described as "to provide multiple contrasts as a way of highlighting both hellish and heavenly qualities, contrasts between physical things like landscapes and bodies, and contrasts in the character of the people....How real is Heaven, how much more substantial?" (Martindale 145). These qualities work together to fully illustrate both concepts through the medium of the story—every feature from the setting to the characters is meaningful. From the beginning, hell is described as "always in the rain and always in evening twilight" (Lewis 1), while one of the first things the narrator notices about heaven has to do with its glow: "The light and coolness that drenched me were like those of a summer morning" (19). Unlike the dreary, almost oppressive light of hell, heaven's radiance is refreshing and pleasant. Even more specifically, the twilight of hell is contrasted with the dawn of heaven: "The promise—or threat—of sunrise rested immovably up there" (23). The very means by which the narrator sees the landscape—light—is fundamentally different in both places, demonstrating the disagreeable aspects of hell and the pleasing quality of heaven. The matter of hell is also insubstantial when compared to that of heaven, the direct opposite of the hyperrealism the passengers find once they reach their destination. A passenger on the bus remarks, "But if I can come back with some real commodities—anything at all that you could really bite or drink or sit on—why, at once you'd get a demand down in our

town" (13). While hell's residents can will objects to exist just by thinking about them, their possessions lack solidity and are ultimately unfulfilling. The ghosts' dissatisfaction suggests a general lack of contentment in hell and the ultimate emptiness of evil. This insubstantiality is why the travelers appear to be ghosts in the new land, as well, exposing the disparities between hell and heaven. Wayne Martindale states,

> Because people in Hell are really remains of their human selves with the potential shriveled by sin, when they are expanded to the size of a normal person in heaven, they are so thin and unsubstantial that they look like ghosts. This is a very effective technique for showing that heaven is ultimate reality and Hell is so nearly nothing. (145)

Heaven's realness exposes hell's inferiority in every way, with the ghosts being far less material than their surroundings. Because of the material of their original realm, they have trouble acclimating to heaven's environment as it is fundamentally different. The narrator explains, "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…A bird ran across in front of me and I envied it. It belonged to that country and was as real as the grass. It could bend the stalks and spatter itself with the dew" (Lewis 25). The very matter that heaven is made of is almost too real for him, incompatible with his spectral form, and he (as well as his companions) cannot enjoy the delights of heaven unless they choose to stay and renounce hell forever. Both cannot coincide because they conflict at their core. Every aspect of hell conflicts with that of heaven and lacks substance, paling in comparison to the bright, beautiful world of paradise. By depicting

hell as sparse and insufficient, Lewis portrays clear meaning and supports his message through plot, setting, and description.

Not only does the story exemplify quality through its action and place, but the characters also support the story's purpose as they fall into clearly delineated categories—those from hell are proud and discontented while those in heaven exude joy and peace. The very essence of their personalities and perspectives is different. According to Martindale, "[T]he most telling contrast comes in the character of the people.…Those from Heaven are fulfilled, content, overflowing with love and the reflected glory of Christ, which makes them luminous. The Ghosts have all come to Heaven for some bogus and selfish reason" (145). The ghosts' driving motives seem so small and insignificant in light of the charity of the Spirits, yet they are determined to hold on to what they think is true, choosing their pride over what is right and good. The gap between hell's false perspective and heaven's authenticity is showcased toward the end of the bus ride. As the vehicle nears heaven, the narrator observes,

> [T]he bus was full of light. It was cruel light. I shrank from the faces and forms by which I was surrounded. They were all fixed faces, full not of possibilities but impossibilities, some gaunt, some bloated, some glaring with idiotic ferocity, some drowned beyond recovery in dreams; but all, in one way or another, distorted and faded. (Lewis 17)

For the first time, he sees the full reality of his companions when heaven's light reaches them—deformed and ugly. Their true essence is only exposed once the radiance of heaven reaches them and reveals the truth. As the narrator demonstrates, the inhabitants of hell do not realize the extent of their depravity and degeneracy. One ghost does not

care to admit that he has been in hell, replying, "You mean that the grey town with its continual hope of morning…with its field for indefinite progress, is, in a sense, Heaven, if only we have eyes to see it?" (34-35). His pride has clouded his judgment, and he cannot or does not wish to see the truth, attempting to justify his situation and maintain what he believes is a semblance of dignity. Once their perspectives are broken, many ghosts even get defensive and burst out in anger. One replies, "So that's the trick, is it?...I thought there'd be some damned nonsense. It's all a clique, all a bloody clique. Tell them I'm not coming, see?" (30-31). The realization that he was wrong—that things are not as he thinks they should be—causes him to blame others instead of changing his own perspective. The inhabitants of hell do not like to have their worldview threatened, and their egotism causes them to lash out instead of being rational and giving heaven a chance. In contrast to the ghosts' ignorance, the Spirits have a great deal of wisdom. They do not want to focus on the past as the ghosts do, but pay attention to the matter at hand—the final choices of the visitors. They see reality as it is because they know the One who made it. One Spirit explains, "That's what we all find when we reach this country. We've all been wrong! That's the great joke. There's no need to go on pretending one was right! After that we begin living" (102). The Spirits are free to admit their mistakes because their trust is in God, not their own intellect. Where the ghosts are set in their ways, they have completely accepted the truths of heaven. The ghosts and Spirits differ in every way; they each characterize their native setting and expose the gulf separating heaven and hell. Lewis exhibits excellence as a writer by exposing this divide through his characters, making *The Great Divorce* a work of craftsmanship that justifies its place in the classroom.

As Lewis displays the gap between good and evil, he also highlights the element of free will to decide between the two, the heart of the story. The characters control their own fates, no matter how wrong they are or how destructive their choices can be. Martindale concludes, "The theme that runs through each of the meetings between the solid people of Heaven and the ghosts of Hell is choice" (144), and that theme is the framework that holds the work together. No matter how different each conversation is, they are all essentially about the question of repenting of sin and remaining in heaven or staying in sin and returning to hell. One Spirit implores, "I have been talking of the past (your past and mine) only in order that you may turn from it forever. One wrench and the tooth will be out. You can begin as if nothing had ever gone wrong. White as snow. It's all true, you know.…You have seen Hell: you are in sight of Heaven. Will you even now, repent and believe?" (Lewis 38-39). The ghosts are urged to turn from their immorality toward God, but they must let go of their own pride and submit to Him—the choice belongs to them. The possibility of redemption is clear, yet in order to stress both potential outcomes, Lewis does not clearly state which ghosts choose to stay in heaven and which choose to leave. Again, we see Lewis's greatness of perspective at work. The fact that it is a dream also allows the narrator to make his choice when he is still alive; just as the fates of many ghosts are never revealed, the narrator's decision is never explicitly mentioned. Lewis leaves the ending open in order to emphasize the individual's freedom to choose and place responsibility on the reader as to what they will do with their newfound knowledge. Throughout *The Great Divorce*, Lewis uses plot and dialogue to highlight free will, emphasizing that every single person must eventually choose right

or wrong. His skill in suiting form to his message in the book qualifies it as a work deserving of scholastic analysis.

Holistic View in The Great Divorce

The Great Divorce manifests its quality as it gives a full perspective of its topic, exploring good and evil poignantly. The way Lewis distinguishes characters reveals truths about the condition of their souls, whether they be virtuous or immoral. From the beginning, the inhabitants of hell are manipulative and self-seeking, choosing to go to heaven for reasons such as fame (9), money (13), informing the saved about hell (79), and inciting a rebellion (80). Their motives are not pure in the least, and the ghosts are far from goodness—by assigning these intentions to those who choose to take the bus to heaven, Lewis conveys the variety of evil in the group. Conversations between residents of heaven and hell also give a unique insight into both sides of the opportunity to follow God: those who have and those who have not. The author's greatness of perspective also appears in the moral conditions of the characters. Michael Raiger argues that the story's meaning "can also be seen in the process by which the Ghosts become a form of their worst character flaw and in losing their substantiality in a process of abstraction become a 'frigid personification' of an action" (121). The residents of hell actually become their shortcomings, showing them as representative of a larger body of people. The first ghost the narrator watches in heaven embodies an excess of personal pride by declaring, "I'd rather be damned than go along with you. I came here to get my rights, see?" (Lewis 31). The bitterness of his heart has stopped him from forgiving Len, and his self-importance keeps him holding onto his anger over the murder. Ultimately, he cannot stand the thought of partaking in the same fate as someone who has committed such an act—his

hatred has overtaken him and prevents him from seeing his own flaws and turning from them. In contrast, Len the Spirit is selfless and embodies goodness: "That is why I have been sent to you now: to ask your forgiveness and to be your servant as long as you need one, and longer if it pleases you. I was the worst" (29-30). He demonstrates humility in the face of arrogance, admitting his wrongs and offering to give of himself regardless of whether or not the ghost expresses gratitude. The exchange between the two reveals a narcissistic facet of evil and the generous quality of good. Intellectual pride is also a dimension of immorality as the next ghost considers accepting the invitation into heaven. His emphasis on intelligence and reason has distorted his point of view: "Will it leave me the free play of the Mind, Dick? I must insist on that, you know" (41). He does not want to give up his mind and will, regardless of how good heaven is. Conversely, Dick the Spirit sees things clearly, knowing that he has found truth and does not have to search anymore. He answers, "Thirst was made for water; inquiry for truth" (41). He knows that God is much higher than any attempt at scholarly exploration—God is truth. While the ghost emphasizes reason to the point of pride, keeping him out of heaven, Dick demonstrates epistemic humility because of his relationship with God. Still another ghost distorts love into a different aspect of evil. Pam reveals her character defect by telling the Spirit, "Give me my boy….I don't believe in a God who keeps mother and son apart. I believe in a God of love. No one had a right to come between me and my son. Not even God" (102-103). While she claims to love her son, her view of love has morphed into a possessive type of relationship that has become more important than God. The Spirit, however, knows real, three-dimensional love in its fullest sense: "You cannot love a fellow-creature fully till you love God" (100). Where Pam's version of love is self-

seeking, the ghost's comes straight from God himself, the example of sacrifice. The ghosts all have different attitudes that keep them from immediately accepting the call to remain in heaven forever, communicating that evil has many forms. Similarly, the Spirits exhibit different components of truth that combat the wrongs they encounter, and the interactions between them and the ghosts indicates that some people may choose evil even when good is right in front of them. Through giving insight into the mentality of the characters and exposing their variations, Lewis fully investigates the nature of virtue and vice, and this lends itself well to academic investigation of the work.

Navigating Religious Ground

While *The Great Divorce* is of thematic and historical importance as well as literary quality, some may be hesitant to include it in the classroom for fear of the appearance of religious favoritism. Public schools are required to treat each religion fairly and must be careful in the way they treat various beliefs. Haynes and Thomas explain, "Public schools may not inculcate nor inhibit religion. They must be places where religion and religious conviction are treated with fairness and respect….Schools demonstrate fairness when they ensure that the curriculum includes study about religion, where appropriate, as an important part of a complete education" (12). This thesis has already addressed the necessity of an objective lens when teaching about religion, but instruction from such a viewpoint is not always a safeguard from the accusation of religious bent. To avoid this, a teacher can ignore all religious works in order to appear equal, but to do so is to rob students from learning valuable knowledge about commonly held beliefs. When a teacher uses *The Great Divorce* or a similar work, the principle of fairness can instead act as a safeguard because it demands that every religion be treated

fairly, including teaching a work with Christian values. If the piece is linked closely with instructional goals and taught as such, it has a legitimate place in the classroom. Teaching a Christian work with a clear educational purpose is compatible with the guideline of fairness and is a valid academic enterprise, leaving space to include *The Great Divorce* in the English curriculum.

Literary Elements

The Great Divorce lends itself well to the curriculum and instructional goals as it includes many literary devices favorable for classroom study. The book's chronology strays from the norm in places, supporting the enigmatic nature and message of the story. Common Core requires that students "Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise" ("English Language Arts"). In *The Great Divorce*, Lewis presents time as something removed from the spiritual world, something that applies only to the natural realm and is necessary for human comprehension. In the story, George tells the narrator that "[t]ime is the very lens through which ye see—small and clear, as men see through the wrong end of a telescope—something that would otherwise be too big for ye to see at all" (Lewis 140-141). Lewis's choice to portray time this way shows how small human minds are in light of eternity and how the spiritual world is greater than anyone could imagine. Later on, time is interrupted as the narrator finds out that his experiences were simply a dream: "Next moment the folds of my Teacher's garment were only the folds of the old ink-stained cloth on my study table" (145). Lewis distorts time and places the narrator back in the present to highlight the fantastical nature of the story—the Spirit tells the narrator not

to present his adventure as absolute truth—and leave time for him to make a choice while alive. The relationship between time and the afterlife in the work allows for an interesting study in structure as well as reinforcing the story's plot and meaning.

Lewis's writing also supports academic goals in the way it achieves dramatic impact. By the end of ninth grade, students should be able to "[e]xplain the relationship between the author's style and literary effect" ("Grade Nine"), and *The Great Divorce* is a good study in different approaches to writing. As the narrator describes hell, he observes, "I seemed to be standing in a busy queue by the side of a long, mean street. Evening was just closing in and it was raining. I had been wandering for hours in similar mean streets" (Lewis 1). The language is short and clipped with specific, factual wording such as "mean" and "closing in" to describe the sights around him, highlighting the bleak atmosphere of hell. The sights are not aesthetically pleasing, so the language is not ornate, either. In contrast, language referencing heaven is more appealing:

> The light and coolness that drenched me were like those of a summer morning, early morning a minute or two before the sunrise…I had the sense of being in a larger space, 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. (19-20)

While detailing the beautiful, spacious landscape of heaven, Lewis's wording flows in order to capture the splendor of the land through language. He uses long sentences and elevated language such as "drenched" and "extent" to indicate that heaven is different from hell, more sophisticated. Finally, when describing the transformation of the lizard, Lewis transitions to a shorter sentence structure for dramatic effect. The narrator

comments, "At first I thought the operation had failed. So far from dying, the creature was still struggling and even growing bigger as it struggled. And as it grew it changed. Its hinder parts grew rounder. The tail, still flickering, became a tail of hair that flickered between huge and glossy buttocks. Suddenly I started back, rubbing my eyes" (111). These choppy sentences create a sense of surprise, and their briskness echoes how suddenly the transformation happens. By taking advantage of different word choices and sentence structures to create distinct moods, Lewis brings out the content of the story and makes it more captivating, and the variation in the work makes it fitting for a study of writing style.

The strong use of imagery in *The Great Divorce* offers students a chance to examine use of strong sensory language to tell a story. Virginia standards require that students "Compare and contrast the use of…imagery and other literary devices to convey a message and elicit the reader's emotion" ("Grade Nine"), and the *The Great Divorce* offers a varied use of detail to support the study of imagery. At the beginning of the story, the narrator describes hell as "always in the rain and always in evening twilight.…I found only dingy lodging houses, small tobacconists, hoardings from which posters hung in rags, windowless warehouses, goods stations without trains, and bookshops…But for the little crowd at the bus stop, the whole town seemed to be empty" (Lewis 1). The visual picture that the words produce creates a full experience—the reader can plainly see the grey sky and shabby buildings, the dreary, desolate city of eternal misery. Heaven is illustrated in a way that piques the senses, as well. The narrator remarks, "Two velvet-footed lions came bouncing into the open space…Their manes looked as if they had been just dipped in the river whose noise I could hear close at hand, though the tree hid

it….smooth as the Thames but flowed swiftly like a mountain stream: pale green where trees overhung it but so clear that I could count the pebbles at the bottom" (53). Lewis relates the babble and purity of the stream in a way that is tangible—feeling, sound, and sight come together as he describes the scenery of heaven so that the reader can experience it. Using real, detailed language in this way brings familiar sensations to an abstract concept and makes the idea more powerful. Toward the end of the story, Lewis describes the lizard by saying, "What sat on his shoulder was a little red lizard, and it was twitching its tail like a whip and whispering things in his ear. As we caught sight of him he turned his head to the reptile with a snarl of impatience" (106). As he gives information about how the lizard looks and sounds, his use of detail gives a clear picture of the antagonist and portrays him in an engaging way so that the reader is invested. Because the book is fantastical, taking place in a setting far removed from the real world, Lewis's use of concrete detail is crucial for a full understanding of the story, and it adds greater dimension to the work.

The Great Divorce's allusions to history and classic works also make it useful for the classroom. Standards require that students be able to "[i]dentify literary and classical allusions and figurative language in text" ("Grade Nine"). Lewis incorporates these into the story in order to aid understanding and increase depth. In the first part of the book, a ghost mentions that in hell are "Tamberlaine and Genghis Khan, or Julius Caesar, or Henry the Fifth" (Lewis 11), this comment reminding the reader of the reality of hell and the types of people in it. Mentioning these famous historical figures suggests that even the greatest, most famous people on Earth are not exempt from spiritual judgment and makes the concept seem more real. Later on, Lewis references *The Divine Comedy* to

draw parallels to the work. The narrator explains, "I tried to tell how a certain frosty afternoon at Leatherhead Station when I first bought a copy of *Phantastes*…had been to me what the first sight of Beatrice had been to Dante (66). The mention of *The Divine Comedy* links Beatrice to George MacDonald and reveals the similarity between the structures of the two stories—a man on a journey from hell to heaven who meets a helpful guide in paradise. By noting that the works are similar, the reader gains a greater sense of understanding through comparison. *Paradise Lost*, a similar work, is quoted later: "'Milton was right,' said my Teacher. 'The choice of every lost soul can be expressed in the words 'Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven'" (71). Quoting the famous poem ties each conversation between ghost and Spirit together and reveals the mentality of those who choose to return to live out eternity in hell. The ghosts' pride mirrors Satan's during the Fall in Milton's work, indicating that they are part of the same evil. Lewis's references serve different purposes, and they can help students learn about allusion as it is used to achieve various effects.

The Great Divorce's literary features fit the ninth grade standards well, making it fitting for the classroom. As students are introduced to more complex terms and ideas, the works they read must exhibit those characteristics well. Virginia ninth grade standards say, "Knowledge of literary terms and genres will be applied in the student's own writing and in the analysis of literature" ("Grade Nine"). Students are establishing literary knowledge that will help them examine what they read, so they need to study works that exhibit characteristics of these elements. If students do not read *The Great Divorce* and books like it, they will miss out on the opportunity to explore timeless themes such as good, evil, and choice in order to cultivate their critical thinking skills and to work

toward their own conclusions. Incorporating the book into the curriculum can prove advantageous as students explore its meaning and its implications, and its stylistic features can acquaint them with literary devices and how they can build dramatic effect. The book's themes, literary quality, social significance, and literary elements make it worthy of study, offering many possible angles for students to analyze and examine. Because it meets these guidelines of merit, *The Great Divorce* can prove a worthy addition to the ninth grade public school English classroom.

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