

# The Mormon Review



Books and culture from an LDS perspective

## Death is Lighter than a Feather: A Review of C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*

C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*. (Simon & Schuster, Touchstone 1st Ed., 1996)

By Adam Greenwood

C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce* is one of those books that, like a poem, you re-read with pleasure even remembering exactly how it goes. The book is C.S. Lewis' story of a tour a busful of the damned take to heaven. The blessed try to persuade the damned tourists to forsake their sins and stay, instead of going back to hell. Hence the title. For each of these tourists the absolute moment of choice has arrived. Heaven and Hell can no longer mingle in each one's will and each one's desires.

The book opens in the drizzle that endlessly falls on the gray, drab streets of the tourists' hell—its brilliant opening line, "I seemed to be standing in a bus queue . . ." immediately establish the setting and also the book's dreamlike or

even visionary character—but soon C.S. Lewis (for Lewis himself is the narrator and main character) and the other tourists are exiting the bus in heaven.

We do not meet the Father or the Son or the Holy Ghost in heaven. The tourists have come to something like heaven's park-like far outskirts. We are soon introduced to Lewis' brilliant conceit. The bodies of the damned (and of Lewis) have very little substance compared to the solid reality of heaven. You see through the tourists from their heads down to their feet standing on unbent blades of grass. The damned are just ghosts of people. If they repent, they solidify.

The moral point is the diminution that sin works, but Lewis is not content to make just a moral point (here or elsewhere, which is what saves the book from allegory). He treats the conceit of damned insubstantiality as a science-fiction what-if. Flowers

swaying in a breeze can batter a ghost while a calm stretch of river is like a rapid moving walkway that is cool to tourist feet—and

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there's the woman ghost who feels immodest because she's see-through. The sun has yet to rise in this heavenly early morning to which these tourists have come. When it does, we are told, even the light would be crushing.

Lewis' treatment of damned insubstantiality is typical of the book. *The Great Divorce* is a moral and theological work, but also an imaginative work with an apparent science-fictional or fantastic sensibility. Both aspects need discussing.

Besides *The Great Divorce's* science-fictional use of what-ifs, the story also has a science fiction sense of wonder at the immensity of time and space. The damned in their drizzly, drab city can't stand each other, so they are always picking up stakes and moving further away. We hear of two ghosts who walked a hundred years to see Napoleon. We hear of other ghosts who are literally light-years away. Yet all this hellish expanse is contained in a crack in the soil between two random blades of heavenly grass. And heaven is not only vast in comparison to hell, but on its own terms. Some of the blessed have traveled outward for weeks to meet the damned tourists, and

one can spend mortal lifetimes traveling in. As for time . . . we are told that all moments and all times, past and future, are present in each one of the damned's moment of choice.

If the kind of wonder that is breathtaking is a mark of science-fiction, the kind of wonder that is heartbreaking is the mark of good fantasy. *The Great Divorce* has that too. The laughing water angel who continually pours himself down as a waterfall is one of the most desirable images in imaginative fiction. But while *The Great Divorce* is akin to science fiction and fantasy, it's clearly neither, and it's not just a mix of the elements from the two. Speculative or imaginative fiction is normally thought to have two main genres: science fiction and fantasy. *The Great Divorce* ought to lead us to recognize a third genre of whatever it is Lewis is doing. Call it vision fiction or theological fiction or parable fiction.

Knowing about a book's genre means knowing more about the book. Off the top of my head I would class as theological fiction (or TF) the *Divine Comedy*, some of George McDonald's work, some of Charles Williams',

some of Lord Dunsany's, "The Devil and Daniel Webster," some of Eve Tushnet's, maybe "Leaf by Niggle". Old-time devil tales too, or at least they bear the same relation to theological fiction that fairy tales bear to fantasy. I could also include modern popular works like the awful *Left Behind* series, Dreisl's *Angel stories* (not awful, just dreckish), the *Father Elijah* books (still dreckish), and perhaps even a book like the *Summa Elvetica*, though this last is really a fantasy/TF mix. Maybe it would help to define the genre a little better if I said that I doubt the *Left Behind* series and even the *Father Elijah* books might not qualify as TF because I doubt whether they're works of imaginative or speculative fiction at all. I get the sense that the authors intended them to be realistic fiction.

(Curiously, my wife just picked up for me *The Hugo Winners*, volumes 1 and 2, edited by Isaac Asimov—the Hugo is a prestigious yearly award for best SF—and discovered that two of the stories were modern riffs on the old-time devil tales. "The Hell Bound Train," by Robert Bloch, and "Gonna Roll the

Bones,” by Fritz Lieber, if you’re interested.)

SF, TF, and Fantasy are all imaginative fiction and are all going to share and swap properties, just like *The Great Divorce* uses SF tropes (vast space and time) and fantasy tropes (paradisiacal golden apples, bodies of water that are simultaneously supernatural beings with parallels to the river gods of Greek mythology). But a useful classification might be that science fiction is the imaginative fiction of the various myths of modernity: Man, Progress, Science, the uncaring universe, atheism, millions of years and millions of miles, meaninglessness, the Enlightenment, the rise and fall of Empire, that kind of thing. Fantasy is the imaginative fiction of the no longer believed myths of pre-modernity, of elves and gods and live things in the woods. Because we have a nostalgia for these dead myths, fantasy is therefore the imaginative fiction of poignancy, “the horns of elfland blowing,” wistfulness, longing, strangeness, beauty, loss, the sense of enchantment, living nature, and past glories. Tolkien is the master of fantasy precisely because he makes the loss

of enchantment the theme of his work. (Ironically, this classification scheme suggests that only a post-Christian can write genuine Christian fantasy). Because we are most aware of myths as myths once we no longer believe in them, fantasy is also the quintessential imaginative fiction of archetypes.

Theological fiction is the imaginative fiction that straddles the modern/pre-modern divide: its myths are pre-modern myths that are still true. TF is therefore didactic, involves moral and theological speculation, and uses the living myths of believed religion for its properties. Lehi’s Dream is arguably a powerful, beautiful example of TF. *Saturday’s Warrior* and that “Footsteps” poem also fit. BYU’s abortive web project [The Book of Jer3miah](#) is another strong example.

Even as a distinct genre, TF is still a kind of *imaginative* fiction. The writer makes stuff up. His fancy runs free. So, though the Christian myths are true, the writer of Christian theological fiction is not simply writing realistic fiction within the expanded, supernatural Christian reality (which is what I argue the *Left Behind* books are meant to be). Someone

could write *A Day in the Life of the Angel Gabriel*, or *Three Nephites in a Boat*, just as someone wrote *The Robe* and *Ben-Hur*, but that’s not what Lewis or any other TF writer is about. Lewis:

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. The last thing I wish to arouse is factual curiosity about the details of the after-world.

TF is therefore ticklish stuff, since it’s make-believe fiction about true religion. Lewis is well aware of this. As noted above, he is careful to explain to his presumably Christian audience what he’s doing. It helps that he mixes in fantastic and science-fictional elements that the reader is already conditioned to accept as imaginative. Even so, Lewis does not do things like include the Father and the Son as characters. He easily could have. The Godhead could have pleaded with the ghosts to repent just as well as the angels and the

blessed to whom Lewis allots this task. But including the Father or the Son (or Mary) would be dynamite with a lit fuse. Not to mention that in other works Lewis analogizes the relationship between Creator and Created to the relationship between an author and his characters, so for Lewis including God in his cast would be perverse and blasphemous. (Even in the Namia books, Aslan appears only as a Christ-figure, not Christ himself, and we only find out differently in a passing and oblique reference in a later book).<sup>1</sup> The strengths of TF—its ability to draw on the reader’s beliefs—also make it a dangerously delicate thing to write. Lewis’ authorial choices in *The Great Divorce* are easier to understand once you understand the tightrope he’s walking between imagination and offense.

TF’s didacticism is also delicate. For one, didacticism can be boring. *The Great Divorce* counters that by taking its imaginative elements just as seriously as its moral and

religious ideas. Imagination and story save *The Great Divorce* from allegory and, ultimately, are what makes it a reader-affecting, visceral vehicle for theological and moral reflection.

Lewis also enlivens his didacticism by including uncomfortable religious ideas. We meet a murderer in heaven, for example, who laughs off his past life because he’s repented of it. Elsewhere Lewis has written, paraphrasing that anyone who can read the Sermon on the Mount without flinching has as little self-awareness as a gnat, and in *The Great Divorce* Lewis does not shy away from getting the reader to flinch. But didacticism, especially of doctrine that has been described as a stumbling block and an offense, like the doctrine that salvation is preached even to obvious sinners, can also put off readers who disagree with the theological and moral points being taught. This is of concern to Lewis. Lewis the character at one point tells his guide, “I don’t know that I dare repeat this on earth, Sir. They’d say I was inhuman. . . .” He is obviously concerned as an author about the reader’s response to his ideas.

Lewis’ solution is an innovation on the conventions of theological fiction. I have already mentioned that, like in the *Divine Comedy* or in Lehi’s Dream, Lewis is the main character of the story and the story takes the form of a dream or a vision he’s having. As in these stories, Lewis also has a guide. The utility of these conventions to the genre is obvious, especially the convention that the story is a dream or a vision. Scripture has already primed the believing reader to accept that dreams and visions are not to be understood literally. Lewis’ Mormon readers, for example, might get huffy about the idea of a river-angel (angels are men, not rivers!), but in Lewis’ “dream” we can accept it as a symbolic figure representing the joy, intelligence, and personality of redeemed Nature in heaven, or even just as a fillip, just as we can accept that the proud do not literally live in a floaty apartment complex called the Great and Spacious.

But these conventions do not relieve the trouble the reader might have with Lewis’ religious ideas. Here’s where Lewis’ innovation comes in. Lewis’ guide does not show Lewis

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<sup>1</sup> Compare to the Church Handbook’s general ban on portraying the Godhead in theatricals.

things and explain their moral or theological meaning. Lewis largely observes on his own, and the didactic meaning is usually clear enough on its own. Instead, the guide *justifies* the meaning, giving Lewis the chance, as an author, to defend some of the story's ideas. Lewis the character, meanwhile, argues with his guide or at least expresses some reluctance to accept what the guide is saying, in effect giving the doubtful reader some representation inside the story.

So what of the story's ideas and themes? In the main they are simpatico to Mormonism. They are the littleness and stupidity of sin; the great question, God or the devil? that everyone must answer and is answering now and at all moments, like the 'choose ye this day' cross-stitches hanging on the walls of Mormon homes; and the hard sacrifices that must be made for the sinner to leave behind his sins (à la the Mormon idea of the Abrahamic trial and of "a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never ha[ving] power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation"). The fundamental theme of *The*

*Great Divorce* is the fundamental theme of Alma's great chiasmus in Alma 36, of Lehi's "awful gulf" which separates the wicked from the tree of life. Repent and be saved, refuse and be damned. Mormons will very much benefit.

Nevertheless, Lewis is preaching some things that just aren't so, at least in my opinion. His heaven or hell absolutism is the most obvious. (This is ironic, because *The Great Divorce's* plot assumes the possibility of salvation for the dead, which Mormons usually associate with a rejection of that kind of absolutism. But Lewis is pretty clear that this necessary feature of *The Great Divorce's* plot is not one of the ideas he's advocating. It's just plot.)

Lewis assumes that any final rejection of God in any sphere of life is tantamount to total rejection. Yet Joseph Smith in vision saw that very few would totally reject God and be cast out to dwell with Satan and his angels. In this vision of the three kingdoms of glory in D&C 76, he learned that even murderers and libertines embrace some good and enjoy a (lower) kingdom of glory; likewise with those who are merely not very active in doing good. And

the scriptures are full of those who are half way between heaven and hell, like the Jaredite king who ruled his people in righteousness and himself in wickedness, or the rich young man who did good works but couldn't surrender himself totally into God's hands by giving up all his wealth. Lewis asserts that the purpose of creation is either to say yes or no to God, and that there is no middle ground. This assertion has support in ancient scripture. *[W]o, wo, wo be unto them, saith the Lord God Almighty, for they shall be thrust down to hell! No man can serve two masters. Because thou art lukewarm, I will spew thee out of my mouth.* Modern scripture, however, has shown that the actual destiny of souls is more complicated, just as God's creation of multiple human creatures, endowed with multiple gifts and passions, in a world itself created in many facets, makes for decisions and relations much more complex than Lewis' simple relation of the soul to God and the single decision yes or no. Lewis is no simpleton, so he recognizes these complexities, but he treats them all as just differing vehicles for saying yes or no to God (though sometimes

he seems to be saying that they are *merely* vehicles, on which more anon). What Lewis never fully addresses is the situation where a soul says yes in one area and no in other. *The Great Divorce* would hold that an ultimate refusal in one area ultimately eliminates the soul's ability to say yes in any other, but Lewis provides no argument for why this would necessarily be so.

His portrayal of the extreme psychological tension of saying partly yes and partly no is vivid and convincing, however. It has helped to persuade me that existence in the telestial and terrestrial kingdoms is unnatural enough—as President Monson observed, it's easier to live the gospel 100% than 98%—that such existence must require some continued infusion of grace to make stable that which would otherwise not be; or else that the coincidence of the final judgment and resurrection occurring at the same time is no coincidence, a determination of the spheres and relations in which a soul will say yes to God naturally accompanying the total remaking of that soul into a

being which only acts in those spheres and relations.

Lewis' view that everything reduces to one yes or one no nonetheless makes it hard to explain why God would have created so much complexity in the first place. Contrariwise, recognizing that our God will cherish and preserve even a tiny yes in a minor part of life helps us understand why in His mercy and His desire He has given us so much life with so many minor parts in it.

This is not to say that the LDS cannot find truth and spiritual value in *The Great Divorce*, any more than they cannot find truth and spiritual worth in the absolutist heaven or hell preaching of ancient scripture. *The Great Divorce* shows us, as the prophets have warned us, that there is nothing safe or stable in long halting between two opinions. Revealed theology has its own binaries in Spirit Prison and Spirit Paradise, in the divide between the exalted who have completely said yes to God and everyone else (*he that is not with me is against me*), and in the divide between those who have completely said no to God and everyone else (*he that is not against us is on our part*). If my tiniest yes

matters so much to Almighty God that He will preserve it despite my roaring NO in the rest of my life, as the doctrine of multiple kingdoms of glory implies, then each of my decisions does have the immeasurable significance that Lewis gives it.

As I mentioned earlier, Lewis sometimes seems to err in making our relations with our fellow creatures merely a vehicle for saying yes or no to God, of no intrinsic value themselves. This is at its most egregious in the episode of the Saint and the Tragedian. The Saint is one of the blessed who in life was wife to the Tragedian, a ghost whose sin is using pity to manipulate. The Saint rightly tries to get her husband to stop using pity as a weapon. But she also is completely unmoved by her husband and untouched by his decision to reject God and be damned forever. She just leaves, and her retinue dances around her singing “nothing can trouble her joy.” Lewis the character is a little shocked, just like we are. The explanation Lewis gets does nothing to make it better: “the day must come when joy prevails and all the makers of misery are no longer able to infect it.” I assert that this statement is

not compatible with sainthood nor joy, both of which are ultimately founded on love, because love by nature cannot be unmoved. I refer the reader to Mr. Eugene England's *The Weeping God of Mormonism*. Here and elsewhere in his writing, Lewis is horrified by the idea of sorrow in heaven because it would mean that in some sense the wicked would have a little power over the righteous to prey on their pity. Somewhere along the line Lewis must have had a pretty nasty experience with someone who did just that, perhaps the older woman he used to live with at Oxford. But unless I mistake the meaning of a certain episode on a cross, the story of Christianity is essentially the story of a God who has put himself and his happiness in our power. Indeed, as Eve learned, joy without the possibility of misery is impossible. The joy of heaven is immense, but it is not and should not be untouched with sadness, as long as any loved one is astray. The LDS therefore have something to learn from the sins of the Tragedian, but from the self-contained "virtue" of the Saint nothing at all. Paradoxically, Lewis himself

uses pity to great effect. His story affects us because we are moved by the damned spirits.

Lewis enjoyed himself with the episode of the Artist, and the reader does too. It comically skewers its era's artistic mania for movements and manifestos and shows the artist's temptation to mistake the methods of his art for its purpose to be, literally, temptation. (Could Bill Watterson be a *Great Divorce* reader? Both the Artist episode and a Calvin and Hobbes' strip I just read feature the invented art movement "Neo-Regionalism"). But there is a minor worm in the apple, an uncharacteristic slip on Lewis' part. The Artist's angel tells him heaven requires him to drink the waters of Lethe. He can still create, but he will thereafter only enjoy his own works as he would anyone's, apparently without any sense of ownership or relationship: "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."

This idea, I submit, is an error, not only in the fuller light of Mormon Christianity, but also in light of mere Christianity. Lewis

the author has in effect instructed the Artist to love himself only as his neighbor, whereas he ought to have told the Artist to love his neighbor as himself. Our individuality and our relations, including our relations with our creations, including an artist's love for his own art, are not distractions to be left behind on our way to salvation, but blessings to be enhanced immeasurably as part of our salvation. When in *The Great Divorce* the Lustful Ghost lets the angel kill his lizard (his sin), it transforms into a strong white horse belonging to the man. The man and the horse rejoice in each other and gallop deep into heaven. Something like this should have been on offer for the Artist. He should have been told that if he was willing to lose his art, he would finally have found it.

Mormons exalt motherhood, so some Mormon readers may think Lewis goes astray with the episode of the Damned Mother. One could make an argument based on D&C 132:19 that true motherhood will inevitably lead a mother back to God even if she temporarily puts her child before God, as Lewis' Damned Mother

does. In Lewisian terms, we might say that in saying yes to God in marriage and family, a mother will ultimately ineluctably say yes to him in everything else. But the Damned Mother is really no mother at all. In Lewis' view, if a soul rejects God for something else, the soul loses both. So Lewis' Damned Mother really has no motherly instincts left and no natural affection. She cares about her self-conception as a mother, but for her child not at all. This is a powerful theological point that Mormons can appreciate.

I have focused on those few points in which Lewis may have been

mistaken from my Mormon perspective, but they really are few. If this review ever comes to the notice of Lewis in, I presume, heaven, I hope he will pardon this flea these bites. The great majority of the episodes in *The Great Divorce* are full of insight and sound wisdom.

I recommend *The Great Divorce* to Mormon readers of all ages. Its strengths are many and its weaknesses are few. The book is an imaginative delight to read and the theology and morality taught are strong and good.

I also recommend it as a model to Mormon writers trying to do something for the Kingdom.



*Adam Greenwood's elaborate vocabulary and baroque humor are symptomatic of his manifold genius, or of his addiction to Wodehouse novels. He is afflicted with the space bug: mention NASA and watch him gnash. He suffers from Anglo-Catholic Fiction Disorder: mention Waugh and watch him slaver. Uxorious and philoprogenitive, he lives with his wife and daughters in central New Mexico near the ranch his great-grandfather lost in the Great Depression. He blogs at [www.jrganymede.com](http://www.jrganymede.com).*