
STUDY GUIDE FOR *THE GREAT DIVORCE*

BY C.S. LEWIS

PRE-READING REFLECTIONS AND THEMES

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK

C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce* is an imaginative theological allegory exploring the nature of heaven, hell, and human choice. The book follows a narrator who takes a bus ride from a dreary, ghost-like world (a representation of hell or purgatory) to the outskirts of heaven. There, he observes interactions between "ghosts" (souls from the gray town) and "solid people" (heavenly inhabitants who try to persuade them to stay).

The Great Divorce is deeply concerned with the dynamics of idolatry—how people cling to created things instead of the Creator, refusing to surrender even when joy is offered. Lewis masterfully depicts how idols distort human nature, making souls less real, less solid, and ultimately, less free.

Lewis challenges our assumptions about good, evil, human nature, and the afterlife, using vivid imagery to depict the weight of sin and the joy of surrender to God.

- Approach the book as a dream or parable, not a systematic theology of heaven and hell.
- Pay close attention to the conversations between the ghosts and the solid people. Each encounter teaches something profound about human nature and the gospel.
- Be patient with the imagery—Lewis is painting theological truths through fiction.

DISCUSSION PREPARATION

As you read, jot down:

- A quote or passage that stood out to you.
- A character (ghost or solid person) you resonated with.
- A question or theme you want to discuss further.

I. Pre-Reading Considerations

Before reading, reflect on these questions to prepare your mind for Lewis's imaginative journey:

1. The Nature of Choice and Consequences

- Lewis suggests that human choices—especially about God—carry eternal significance.
 - **Reflection:** How do you think our choices in life shape us? Are we becoming more "solid" or more "ghostly" in our moral and spiritual lives?

2. Imagery: Ghosts vs. Solid People

- The "ghosts" in *The Great Divorce* are insubstantial, reflecting their self-centered existence. The "solid people" are more real, representing those who have fully embraced God's will.
 - **Reflection:** What do you think Lewis means by portraying some people as "solid" and others as "ghostly"? How might this reflect our own spiritual growth?

3. The Nature of Heaven and Hell

- Lewis suggests hell is not a place where people are trapped against their will, but rather a state of self-imposed separation from God. Heaven, by contrast, is a place of overwhelming joy—but one that requires humility and transformation to enter.
 - **Reflection:** How does this view of heaven and hell compare to your own?

4. The Role of the Bright Spirits (Solid People)

- Each ghost encounters a heavenly being who invites them to let go of their sins and step into greater joy.
 - **Reflection:** Why do some ghosts refuse to stay in heaven? What do you think keeps people from surrendering to God, even when the invitation is clear?

II. Key Themes to Watch For

1. Pride and Self-Deception

- Many ghosts cling to their old selves, unwilling to change.
- Look for how Lewis portrays pride as a barrier to joy.

2. Freedom and the Will

- Ghosts are technically "free" to stay in heaven, but many reject it.
- Consider what Lewis is saying about the nature of free will in salvation.

3. Sin as a Choice

- Each ghost has a particular struggle (pride, vanity, bitterness, intellectual arrogance).
- Think about how Lewis portrays sin as something people hold onto rather than something imposed on them.

4. Transformation and Surrender

- The solid people invite the ghosts to let go of their burdens and become more real.

- What does Lewis suggest about true transformation in Christ?
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III. Idolatry and the Ghosts' Clinging

1. Idolatry as a Disordered Love

- The Bible describes idolatry not just as worshiping false gods but our hearts **elevating some good thing to the ultimate thing** (Romans 1:25).
 - Augustine taught that sin is a disordering of love—loving something in the wrong way or above God.
 - **Reflection:** How does idolatry deform the human soul? In what ways do we see this in our own lives?

2. How Idolatry Appears in *The Great Divorce*

Each ghost's struggle represents a different kind of idolatry — something they will not surrender, even in the presence of heaven's joy. Here are a few examples:

a. The Mother (Disordered Love for Family)

- This ghost clings to her grief and her possessive love for her son, refusing to accept the joy of heaven unless she gets him on her own terms.
 - **Idol:** Love for family replaces love for God.
 - **Biblical Connection:** Jesus says, "*Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me*" (Matthew 10:37).

b. The Intellectual Ghost (Pride in One's Own Thinking)

- This ghost refuses to surrender his self-made identity as a "seeker of truth" and despises the idea of final answers.
 - **Idol:** Intellectual pride and the need to be right.
 - **Biblical Connection:** "*Claiming to be wise, they became fools*" (Romans 1:22).

c. The Lizard Ghost (Desire and the Flesh)

- A ghost has a lizard on his shoulder (symbolizing sinful desire). A bright spirit offers to kill it, but he hesitates, fearing what will happen if he lets go.
 - **Idol:** Fleshly pleasure and self-indulgence.
 - **Biblical Connection:** "*Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires*" (Galatians 5:24).

d. The Artist (Worshipping the Gift Instead of the Giver)

- A painter who once loved beauty for God's sake now only cares about being recognized for his work.
 - **Idol:** Art, reputation, and personal legacy.
 - **Biblical Connection:** "*You shall have no other gods before me*" (Exodus 20:3).
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3. Idolatry Replaces God as Lover, Lord, and Savior

Each ghost is **meant** to find fulfillment in God as:

- **Lover** – the source of our deepest affection.
- **Lord** – the one who defines our identity.
- **Savior** – the one who rescues and satisfies us.

But instead, they seek these things in lesser loves—family, intellect, pleasure, success—only to find that these things cannot bear the weight of ultimate meaning.

4. The Invitation: Letting Go and Becoming Solid

The solid people continually urge the ghosts to *let go* and embrace God's love. The tragedy is that many ghosts choose their idols over joy.

- **Reflection:** What does this say about our own struggles with idolatry? How does the gospel free us from our false masters?
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