The Great Divorce Précis

Summary:

The narrator finds himself in a grey city where he joins a queue of people waiting for a bus (1). When the people board the luminous bus, driven by a shining man, the bus rises into the air (4–5). A fight erupts, and the narrator ends up next to a man who tells him about the nature of the grey city: its oldest inhabitants arrived thousands of years ago and, not wanting to be surrounded by newcomers, move further and further out, creating houses just by thinking them. As a result, the city is many millions of miles wide (9–14). As they speak, the bus achieves an altitude filled with light that makes the passengers feel dim (17).

Soon the bus reaches its destination, coming to rest on a grassy plain (19). Immediately, the narrator sees that the plain is more real than the travelers, and that all, including him, appear as shadows upon the grass and specters among the trees. Some of the visitors panic and reboard the bus as shining people descend from the distant mountains, making for the ghosts. The narrator decides to steal away and explore (23–25).

As the narrator explores the forest, he observes a conversation between a ghost and a bright person. The ghost is impudent, claiming that he wants his rights, that it is unfair that the bright person should be in the green country instead of him, and that he neither needs nor wants charity. The bright person tries to convince the ghost to give up himself and accompany him to the mountains (26–30). The ghost refuses and returns to the bus (31). Following a river, the narrator encounters another conversation, this time between a spirit and a ghost discussing heaven and hell. The ghost is offended at the spirit’s conviction that heaven and hell are real and significant (33–35). He claims that his honest opinion about such matters should not be held against him, and refuses the offer of heading toward the mountains (36–44).

Continuing downstream, the narrator observes one man from the bus trying to steal apples. The man is warned by an angel to cease his efforts and stay, but he whimpers his way back to the bus (45–49). Next, the narrator meets a skeptical ghost who proposes that all of the green land is propaganda, and there is a vast conspiracy to keep the ghosts unhappy. He leaves, causing the narrator to doubt the safety and goodness of the place (50–58). Deep in troubled thought, the narrator overhears another conversation, this time between a ghost-woman and a spirit. The woman is afraid of being seen in her ghostly state, yet the spirit assures her that shame should not hinder her from becoming real (59–61). In order to get the ghost’s mind off of herself, the spirit calls forth a herd of unicorns, and the narrator flees (62–63).

George MacDonald intercepts the narrator and explains that the ghosts who come to this place are being graciously granted a vacation from the grey city, and if they stay, the city will have only been purgatory, but if they choose to go back, it will be hell (65–70). All depends on the choice of joy and God’s will over one’s own (71–74). MacDonald shows the narrator several different ghosts, among whom is a ghost with a lizard on his shoulder. He struggles with the
decision to let an angel kill the creature, fearing the pain and loss of separation. When he finally chooses, the lizard is remade as a stallion, and the valley rejoices (106–115).

Then the narrator witnesses a conversation between a magnificent woman and the dwarf-ghost of her husband, who continually rejects the joy she offers him. They talk of love, and the narrator learns that love is only truly perfected in heaven (117–135). The dwarf ghost does not learn, and eventually shrinks from sight entirely (136). MacDonald explains that hell can never triumph over heaven because it is too small: a tiny crack in the soil filled with tiny passions and desires (137–140). As the narrator has a final vision of timeless choices, it is revealed that he has been dreaming, and as the sun rises, he awakes in his own study (140–146).

Theme Explication:

A theme in The Great Divorce is that one’s choices affect one’s existence. Lewis illustrates this by describing the souls who rejected God in life as transparent specters once they reach the green outskirts of heaven (17). Those who accepted God in life are shining spirits whose bodies match, in glory and density, the green valley (23–24). Further, the choices that the ghosts make while they are in the green valley also affect them. One jealous ghost is continually unwilling to listen to the spirit who has been sent to help her. She finally disappears: “The Ghost which had towered up like a dying candle-flame snapped suddenly. A sour, dry smell lingered in the air for a moment and then there was no ghost to be seen” (95). The ghost, because she continually wills her own selfish desires, loses her existence entirely. Her sinful choices negatively affect her existence.

On the other hand, good choices positively affect one’s existence. When the ghost with the lizard on his shoulder chooses to see the lizard killed by the angel, it transforms into a white stallion, and he also becomes more real. He is now able because of his choice to ascend the hills on horseback (106–115). Lewis makes it clear, however, that he does not mean that each person gets a second chance at heaven after he dies. Rather, the choices one makes on earth are “anticipations of a choice to be made at the end of all things” (144). In each choice one makes on earth, one is always choosing heaven or hell.