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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). A luminous bus arrives, driven by a shining man. The narrator boards and has just begun a conversation with a poet when they both notice that the bus has begun to rise up 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 new comers, move further and further out, creating houses just by thinking them. As a result, the city is many millions of miles wide (9-14). Further, the man speculates that the dim light of the grey city may sink into a fearsome darkness. Yet a more optimistic passenger disagrees, saying that the dimness is that of an early dawn (15-16). As they speak, the bus achieves an altitude filled with light, a light which makes all passengers feel dim themselves (17).

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, that all, including him, appear as shadows upon the grass and specters among the trees. Some of the visitors panic and reboard the bus. Soon, shining people descend from the distant mountains, making for the ghosts, but 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 and not 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 makes a final refusal and saunters off toward the bus (31). Making his way downstream, the narrator encounters another conversation, this time between a Spirit and a ghost, discussing heaven and hell. The ghost is offended at the bright person'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).

The narrator continues down-stream, and observes the intelligent man from the bus trying to steal apples. The man is warned by an angel to cease his efforts and stay, but he too whimpers his way back to the bus (45-49). Next, the narrator meets a ghost who proposes that all of the green land is propaganda, that there is a vast conspiracy to keep the ghosts unhappy. The skeptical ghost leaves the narrator, having caused him to doubt the safety and goodness of the place (50-58). Deep in troubled thought, the narrator comes upon yet another conversation, this time between a ghost-woman and a bright 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 the scene (62-63).

The narrator is stopped by George Macdonald (65-66). MacDonald explains that the ghosts who come to this place are being granted the grace of 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 (67-70). All depends on the choice, MacDonald says, of joy and God's will over their own (71-74). MacDonald shows the narrator several different ghosts; among them is a ghost with a lizard on his shoulder who is struggling with the decision to let an angel kill the creature, fearing the pain and loss of the separation. When he finally decides, the lizard is remade as a stallion, and all the valley rejoices (106-115).

The narrator witnesses a conversation between a magnificent woman and the dwarf ghost of her husband, who continually rejects the joy that she holds out to him. They talk of love, and the narrator learns from her that love is only truly perfected in heaven (117-135). The dwarf ghost does not learn, and eventually disappears from sight (136). MacDonald explains that hell can never triumph over heaven, for 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 upon all things, 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 (89-95). Here, a continual willing of one's selfish desires leads to a loss of one's existence. Another ghost is challenged to let an angel kill the deceptive lizard on his shoulder. When the man chooses to see the lizard killed, it is transformed 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). Thus, Lewis shows that existence itself is directly connected to and affected by one's choices.