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Through the Lens of “The Four Loves” *The Concept of Love in “The Great Divorce”*

Paulette Sauders

Even though C. S. Lewis wrote his non-fiction book, *The Four Loves*, later than his fiction, I contend that he had been using the concepts of love that he finally wrote about in that book to shape his characters in all of his fiction. I will be examining his fictional *The Great Divorce* to discover which characters personify the kinds of love and their perversions discussed in *The Four Loves* as a way to better understand the novel as well as Lewis’s perceptions of love.

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for C.S. Lewis & Friends Colloquium 6/5/10

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Through the Lens of *The Four Loves*: The Concept of Love in *The Great Divorce*

The Great Divorce was published in 1946, fourteen years before the 1960 publication of The Four Loves. But this dream fantasy novel contains many of the same ideas about love and their perversions found in The Four Loves. Clearly, several of the characters in the novel personify the various types of love and their perversions presented in The Four Loves, and Lewis must have had these representations in mind when he finally collected all his ideas about love together in a systematic way in The Four Loves. An examination of The Great Divorce through the lens of The Four Loves is a way to better understand one of the themes of the novel while giving us more examples to help clarify the concepts in The Four Loves.

Clyde Kilby restates some of Lewis's ideas from The Four Loves when he discusses The Great Divorce in his book, Images of Salvation in the Fiction of C. S. Lewis. Kilby writes that throughout The Great Divorce, "Lewis always clearly shows the difference between sentimentalized affection and the strong, firm love which is of God. Indeed, he implies that love for God must precede any genuine love for a fellow creature" (85).

The narrative starts in Hell where the narrator, Lewis himself, describes the dingy, empty city set in constant rainy twilight. There, he and a group of quarreling people board a bus that transports them through the air to Heaven. No love is shown at all among those on the bus—not even common courtesy; instead, quarrels and bickering constantly occur. However, once the bus reaches the beautiful, bright land of Heaven, all of the inhabitants there, the "Bright People," talk of love and personify love.

In the first scene in Heaven, the man from Hell called the "Big Ghost" encounters a "Bright Person," an old acquaintance named Len. While the Big Ghost remains argumentative and defensive, Len exudes to his former earthly boss, warmth and agape love (called Gift-love in The Four Loves). Len is concerned only with making the Big Ghost happy by leading him further into Heaven, closer to God.

Len also refers to Jack, another of the Big Ghost's former employees, a Bright Person who wants to see his old boss. Len says of Jack, "He sent you his love" (Great Divorce 32). Unfortunately, the Big Ghost rejects all of the love offered him because he does not want to be loved by those he considers to be inferior to himself. So he decides to return to hell.

After overhearing several similar encounters between the Bright People sent to welcome specific bus travelers from Hell, Lewis meets George Macdonald who is the Bright Person sent to speak to him and teach him about Heaven. Immediately Lewis expresses his "Appreciative love" to Macdonald for his books and how much they have led him toward

Christianity. Macdonald acknowledges Lewis's expression of love with "'Son,' he said, 'your love—all love—is of inexpressible value to me'" (65).

While Lewis and Macdonald converse, more meetings between Ghosts from Hell and Bright Persons from Heaven take place nearby, and the two writers overhear them and discuss them. This is the basic premise of the novel, but the overriding theme of the novel is love. In nearly every encounter in Heaven, love is the key as to whether each Ghost from Hell continues on into Heaven or refuses the offer and returns to Hell.

Robert's wife, a Ghost from Hell, and Robert's sister, a Bright Person named Hilda, are the first two that Lewis and Macdonald hear talking, but it is a really one-sided conversation. Robert's wife keeps telling Hilda about all of the sacrifices she made for Robert when he was alive and about how little he appreciated them. She tells how she loved him so much that she "Sacrificed [her] whole life to him!" (85). She goes on and on repeating how she pushed him and nagged him to take on more and more work, and work longer and longer hours in order to get a better position. She ridiculed his old friends and brought new, "useful" friends into their home (87). Soon she nagged him into buying a larger home, beyond their means, for the sake of entertaining more elegantly and impressing his new "friends" and business associates (87). She claims, "I was doing it all for his sake. Every useful friend he ever made was due to me" (87). She tells how hard she worked to make him successful, including discouraging him from writing a book he wanted to write, forcing him "to take exercise," warning him not to walk with a stoop, and reminding him a hundred times that "he hadn't always been like that" (88).

Robert's wife's love for her husband is a perverted, excessive Need-love and possessive Affection. She reveals this when she finally begs to have him back, though he is in Heaven, for "I must have someone to – to do things to" (89). "Put me in charge of him," she pleads, and "Don't consult him: just give him to me. I'm his wife, aren't I? I was only beginning. There's lots, lots, lots of things I still want to do with him," and adds, "I will take up my burden once more. . . Give him back to me. Why should he have everything his own way?" (89). To the Bright Person, Robert's sister Hilda, she says, "I hate you," and "I know him better than you do"; "It isn't right, it's not fair. I want Robert" (89).

Robert's wife sounds very much like Orual in Till We Have Faces when Orual speaks to the gods and says that they have been unfair for taking Psyche from her, for "She's mine! Mine!" (Till We 292). When Robert's wife says, ". . . all the time I was working my fingers to the bone for him: and without the slightest appreciation" (GD 85), she also sounds like the mother, Mrs. Fidget, in the section on perverted Affection in The Four Loves, because Mrs. Fidget also would "'work her fingers to the bone' for her family" (FL 75).

At least Orual finally recognizes what she has been and done through the visions the gods give her toward the end of Till We Have Faces. But Robert's wife never does, even though Hilda, the Bright Person, tries to get her to see what she has done. Instead, she exclaims, "How could I help it if he did have a nervous breakdown in the end? My conscience is clear. I've done my duty by him, if ever a woman has" (88-89).

Robert's wife definitely personifies the perverted, possessive love Lewis refers to in The Four Loves when he writes there:

Every human love, at its height, has a tendency to claim for itself a divine authority. Its voice tends to sound as if it were the will of God Himself . . . It demands of us a total commitment, it attempts to over-ride all other claims and insinuates that any action which is sincerely done "for love's sake" is thereby lawful and even meritorious. (FL 18)

About perverted Affection, Lewis adds, on later pages of The Four Loves: "If Affection is made the absolute sovereign of a human life, the seeds will germinate. Love, having become a god, becomes a demon" (FL 83).

In The Four Loves, Lewis says that Need-love, though good in itself, can become selfish, greedy, and possessive when one feels the need to have others dependent on him or her (178). Critic Margaret Hannay agrees with Lewis that, in The Great Divorce, selfishness "may masquerade as love" (C.S. Lewis 113).

After Robert's wife disappears when her Ghost "snapped suddenly" after all her ranting and raving (Great Divorce 89), Lewis and Macdonald witness what they call "one of the most painful meetings" in Heaven when a ghost named Pam talks with a "Bright Spirit who had apparently been her brother" (90).

Pam is the mother of Michael who is further up in the mountains of Heaven and upon whom she has doted. Pam's brother tells her that for Michael to be able to see her in her wispy, ghostly state, she must "learn to want someone else besides Michael." He says, "It's only the little germ of a desire for God that we need to start the process" (91). However, she loves Michael so much that she cares for no one else—not the other members of her family nor God.

Speaking constantly of her strong love for her son Michael, Pam says, "I'm sure I did my best to make Michael happy. I gave up my whole life . . ." (92), and "How could anyone love their son more than I did?" (94). She adds that "Mother-love . . . is the highest and holiest feeling in human nature" (93).

However, Pam's brother, the Bright Person, responds to her, "Pam, Pam—no natural feelings are high or low, holy or unholy, in themselves. They are holy when God's hand is on

the rein. They all go bad when they set up on their own and make themselves into false gods" (93). This idea is repeated by Lewis in several passages in The Four Loves (e.g., see page 13). Margaret Hannay agrees that Pam's "mother love has become a false god to her" (C.S. Lewis 109).

But Pam cannot recognize that she has done that very thing—set up her selfish love as a god. She is like Robert's wife in that she does not recognize what she has done; she just insists that Michael is hers and wants him back: "Give me my boy. . . I want my boy, and I mean to have him. He is mine, do you understand? Mine, mine, mine, for ever and ever" (95). She even blasphemes God when she says, "I don't believe in a God who keeps mother and son apart." To her brother she says, "I hate and despise your religion and I hate and despise your God." (95). In response to her brother's statement about God's love for her, Pam adds, "If He loved me, He'd let me see my boy. If He loved me, why did He take Michael away from me?" (92).

Obviously, Pam personifies the perverted Affection Lewis discusses in The Four Loves. Again, she is like Orual of Till We Have Faces in that she has become extremely possessive and self-centered in relation to her son, just as Orual became possessive of Psyche. Instead of being concerned about Michael's welfare, instead of wanting the best for him, as Gift-love does, Pam wants him for herself, for her own gratification. And when Michael dies, she never thinks of her husband or her daughter or her mother and their feelings. She says that "they didn't care" and felt "no real sympathy . . ." (GD 94); but her brother, the Bright Person, tells her, "No man every felt his son's death more than Dick. Not many girls loved their brothers better than Muriel." What they disliked was her "ten years' ritual of grief" that resulted in "having their whole life dominated by the tyranny of the past: and not really even Michael's past, but your [Pam's] past" (94).

Critic Evan Gibson feels that this possessive mother's problem is that "her love for her son Michael had excluded and dried up her love for all else" (123). She greets her own brother with disappointment and, later, rage, and has no kindness for her husband, her mother, and even her daughter. And yet she calls mother-love "the highest and holiest feeling in human nature" (GD 93). Lewis suggests that it is obviously not the highest and holiest when it causes her not to love the other members of her family, even her daughter.

In blaspheming and hating God, Pam is also like Orual, for she, too, blames the gods for taking Psyche away from her and for the fact that Psyche loves the gods more (or at least as much as) she loves Orual. Both Pam and Orual want their "loved" ones with them at all times, never willing to share them with others—not even God. Neither woman can understand God's kind of Gift-love which wants the best for the beloved even if separation or temporary sorrow

results. Her brother, the Bright Person, tells Pam that part of the reason God allowed Michael to die was for her sake. “He wanted your merely instinctive love for your child (tigresses share that, you know!) to turn into something better. He wanted you to love Michael as He understands love.” And here her brother adds Lewis’s idea found in The Four Loves: “You cannot love a fellow-creature fully till you love God” (GD 92).

After witnessing this confrontation between the Bright Person and his sister Pam, Lewis asks Macdonald about Pam’s natural feelings as a mother, and the resulting conversation mirrors even more of the discussion about love found in The Four Loves.

Lewis, the narrator, asks if some natural or instinctive feelings “are really better than others—I mean, are a better starting-point for the real thing?” (GD 96). But Macdonald responds that often natural Affection is mistaken “for the heavenly. Brass is mistaken for gold more easily than clay is. And if it finally refuses conversion, its corruption will be worse than the corruption of what ye call the lower passions. It is a stronger angel, and therefore, when it falls, a fiercer devil” (97).

Macdonald reflects another concept found in The Four Loves when he tells Lewis that “love, as mortals understand the word, isn’t enough. Every natural love will rise again and live forever in this country: but none will rise again until it has been buried” in love for God (GD 97). Macdonald adds,

There is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from Him. And the higher and mightier it is in the natural order, the more demoniac it will be if it rebels . . . The false religion of lust is baser than the false religion of mother-love or patriotism or art: but lust is less likely to be made into a religion. (98)

Macdonald’s words again reflect Lewis’s statements in The Four Loves: Love “begins to be a demon the moment he begins to be a god” (FL 18), and “Every human love, at its height, has a tendency to claim for itself a divine authority. Its voice tends to sound as if it were the will of God Himself. . .” and “family affection may do the same” (FL 18).

Neither the reader nor Lewis is told the outcome of the meeting between Michael’s mother Pam and her brother, the Bright Person. But Macdonald suggests to Lewis that since Pam’s possessive, perverted Affection is a “defect” of love, “it may well be that at this moment she’s demanding to have him down with her in Hell. That kind is sometimes perfectly ready to plunge the soul they say they love in endless misery if only they can still in some fashion possess it” (GD 105). Pam truly is a personification of perverted Affection, just as Orual was.

The reader and Lewis do witness the outcome of the next encounter in Heaven. This time the encounter is between a Ghost with “a little red lizard” sitting on his shoulder, whispering in his ear, and a flaming Angel—not just a Bright Person (98). This Ghost recognizes

that the lizard is bad and a bad influence on him, but he hesitates when the Angel offers to kill it. The Ghost rationalizes and says that he will gradually get rid of it or that he needs a second opinion from someone back home (in Hell), but the Angel keeps telling him that killing the lizard is the only way and that it must be done now.

While the Angel is urging the Ghost to let him kill the lizard, the lizard tries to get the Ghost to stop the Angel by whispering that to live without it would not be “natural,” for he would not be a “real man” (even though he is actually a ghost). The lizard continues to whisper in the Ghost’s ear:

I know there are no real pleasures now, only dreams. But aren’t they better than nothing? And I’ll be so good. I admit I’ve sometimes gone too far in the past, but I promise I won’t do it again. I’ll give you nothing but really nice dreams—all sweet and fresh and almost innocent. You might say, quite innocent. . . . (101)

This speech gives the first hint of what the lizard might stand for. When it speaks of “pleasures” and of “dreams” about lost pleasures, the reader gets the idea that the lizard is referring to desires of some sort. And since the Angel says the lizard (the symbol of these desires) must be killed, then the idea that these are evil desires becomes clearer. The symbolism is made perfectly clear when Macdonald explains to Lewis that the lizard stands for lust—i.e., “Venus” as it is called in The Four Loves, and perverted Eros (romantic love). Macdonald calls the lizard “lust” and says that “Lust is a poor, weak, whimpering, whispering thing . . .” (GD 104). Lewis responds, calling it “sensuality” (105).

When the Angel then assures the Ghost that killing the lizard will not kill him too (though it might hurt him), the Ghost finally gives in and gives permission for the Angel to kill it. After a scream of pain, the wispy Ghost is transformed into “an immense man,” solid, and “not much smaller than the Angel” (102). The lizard is also transformed (after its death) into what Lewis the narrator calls “the greatest stallion I have ever seen, silvery white but with mane and tail of gold” (102).

Macdonald does not explicitly say what the stallion stands for, but critic Michael Christensen believes, “On a simple allegorical level, the little red lizard represents the vice called lust, and the white stallion, the virtue love” (“On Lizards” 3). Christensen does not identify which one of the four loves the stallion symbolizes, but it seems to me to be Gift-love, Agape love, which wants only the best for all those around it because the horse energetically takes the “new-made man” further and higher into Heaven, closer to God, as the young man’s face shines with “the liquid love and brightness . . . which flowed from him” (GD 103).

This episode in the novel suggests that, in order to be admitted to heaven, man’s lust or Venus (perverted Eros) must be killed and turned into the kind of love closest to God’s love:

agape or Gift-love. In any case, the lizard and the stallion each represent two of the kinds of loves and their perversions found in The Four Loves.

In the next chapter, Lewis sees a Bright Person approaching, a woman, followed by a large procession of people, Angels, and animals—all of them singing and expressing great love and appreciation for her. Sarah Smith of Golders Green was such a loving person on earth that she affected all those with whom she came in contact, even children and animals. For example, Macdonald calls all of the boys and girls following Sarah her children because she loved them and treated them as her own, and yet they “went back to their natural parents loving them more” (108). Even cats, dogs, birds, and horses follow Sarah in the heavenly procession, for “Every beast and bird that came near her had its place in her love” (108).

Then Sarah meets her earthly husband Frank, a dwarfish Ghost leading a tall, thin Ghost (a “Tragedian”) on a chain. As she sees him, “Love shone not from her face only, but from all her limbs . . .” (109-10). Several times throughout their conversation, Lewis notes that “love and courtesy flowed from her” (111).

The two Ghosts are really the two personalities of Sarah’s husband, the tall, thin one representing the theatrical façade Frank often assumes to call attention to himself. Sarah knows this and speaks directly to the dwarfish ghost, always with love. She continually invites him to partake of the new Love she has found there—“Love Himself”—Christ (GD113). Sarah personifies Gift-love as she shows her love and concern for Frank. She wants the best for him: heaven.

However, Sarah does ask Frank’s forgiveness for her imperfect love while on earth. She admits that she loved then “in a poor sort of way . . . There was a little real love in it. But what we called love down there was mostly craving to be loved. In the main I loved you for my own sake: because I needed you” (113). She confesses that she was controlled, at least to a degree, by Need-love when she was alive on earth. So perhaps we could say that Sarah personified Need-love in her earthly body and Gift-love in her heavenly body—although the testimony of others in her procession, as well as Macdonald, suggests she really did personify Gift-love on earth. She merely knows now how weak human Gift-love can be, compared with God’s Gift-love, since human love is also mixed with Need-love. Sarah says, “Yes, now I love truly . . . I am in Love Himself . . .” (113). And she offers this love to her husband: “You shall be the same. Come and see. We shall have no need for one another now: we can begin to love truly” (113).

Critic Evan Gibson elaborates on Sarah, writing that Sarah Smith of Golders Green is surrounded by joyous angels, humans, and animals “who delight to respond to her love” (125). “Sarah Smith is Lewis’s picture of one whose abundant love on Earth has been transfigured to radiant heavenly love” (Gibson 125).

The reader wonders, then, how Frank, Sarah's husband, cannot give in to her words of love and join her in Heaven instead of returning to Hell. But he resists by hiding behind his "actor" façade and having the Tragedian Ghost on his chain twist all of Sarah's words around to make them sound as though she does not need or want him anymore, as though she does not love him and he is not welcome in Heaven.

Sarah Smith tries to get Frank to be himself and not act out his self-pity. But he is so much in the habit of doing this, he cannot break the pattern. Sarah reminds Frank of his habit of

using pity, other people's pity in the wrong way. . .It can be used for a kind of blackmailing. Those who choose misery can hold joy up to ransom, by pity. You see, I know now. Even as a child you did it. Instead of saying you were sorry, you went and sulked in the attic . . . because you knew that sooner or later one of your sisters would say, "I can't bear to think of him sitting up there alone, crying." You used your pity to blackmail them, and they gave in in the end. And afterwards, when we were married . . . (117)

She concludes, "Can you really have thought that love and joy would always be at the mercy of frowns and sighs?" (118).

Though Sarah does not dwell on it, Macdonald points out to Lewis that Frank "had the power of tormenting" her with his constant need for pity. "He did it many a day and many a year in their earthly life" (120). As Macdonald explains what Frank and others like him really do with their self-pity, it becomes clear that Frank is a personification of perverted Need-love.

In The Four Loves, when Lewis writes of perverted Affection or perverted Need-love, he refers to those who "produce in us a sense of guilt (they are intended to do so)" by means of "their manifest sense of injury, their reproaches, whether loud and clamorous or merely implicit in every look and gesture of resentful self-pity . . ." (Four Loves 65). This describes Frank very accurately.

Frank constantly accuses Sarah of not loving him or of not knowing what love really means; he says, "You do not love me," (GD 119) and "Love? How dare you use that sacred word" (118), and "Love! Do you know the meaning of the word?" (113). He also tries to gain her pity when he says, "You who can be happy without me [in Heaven], forgetting me! You don't want even to hear of my sufferings . . . And this is the reward—" and ". . .I see that my going will make no difference to you. It is nothing to you that I go back to the cold and the gloom, the lonely, lonely streets" of Hell (116). Frank tries every ploy to make Sarah pity him to the point of making her miserable along with him, but he cannot succeed now.

Macdonald explains to Lewis Frank's approach, calling it

The demand of the loveless and the self-imprisoned that they should be allowed to blackmail the universe: that till they consent to be happy (on their own terms) no one else shall taste joy: that theirs should be the final power. . . .(120)

Frank definitely does all of these things and clearly personifies perverted Need-love.

Frank Smith is like Orual of Till We Have Faces. When Orual tries to make Psyche feel guilty that she loves the gods and wants to stay with her God of Love instead of returning to Glome with her, she uses self-pity just as Frank does when he speaks of his return to Hell and to the “cold and the gloom, the lonely, lonely streets” (GD 116). Both Frank and Orual accuse their loved ones of not loving them: Frank does it when he constantly says, “You do not love me” (119) and Orual does it when she says to Psyche before her sacrifice, “Is it nothing to you that you leave me here alone? Psyche: did you ever love me at all?” (Till We 73).

Orual also makes the Fox feel guilty when he plans to leave Glome and Orual to return to his family in Greece after Orual grants him his freedom. She thinks, “And yet, how could he leave us, after so much love?” and she wanders about the palace in gloom and sorrow. Her groans and sighs are enough to make the Fox change his mind and stay with her. This is the same kind of self-pity that Frank tries to use on Sarah, though unsuccessfully in Heaven. Both Frank and Orual obviously personify the self-pitying Need-love that Lewis writes about in The Four Loves.

Interestingly, in addition to these personifications of various kinds of love found in The Four Loves, The Great Divorce also uses some actual phrases Lewis chose to use in The Four Loves when he wrote it fourteen years later. For example, in Sarah Smith’s dialogue, she refers to Jesus Christ as “Love Himself” (GD 113). Lewis uses this expression to refer to Christ in The Four Loves at least five times throughout the book (on pages 153, 176, 183, 184, and 188).

Also, in Sarah Smith’s encounter with her former husband, she laughs in merriment as she tries to explain truth and love from a heavenly point of view. As she tries to tell him how ridiculous the Tragedian (his alter ego) is being, in light of the truth, “Merriment danced in her eyes. She was sharing a joke with the Dwarf, right over the head of the Tragedian Her laughter was past his first defences” (GD 114). Then, “For one moment, while she looked at him in her love and mirth, he saw the absurdity of the Tragedian. For one moment he did not at all misunderstand her laughter: he too must once have known that no people find each other more absurd than lovers” (GD 15).

These same concepts of absurdity, laughter, and merriment between lovers are discussed in The Four Loves (on pages 141 to 143 and on pages 150 to 151) where Lewis

discusses “the playfulness” of Eros or romantic love:

Even when the circumstances of the two lovers are so tragic that no bystander could keep back his tears, they themselves will sometimes be surprised by a merriment which strikes the onlooker (but not them) as unbearably pathetic. . . . lovers are always laughing at each other. (151)

Thus, The Great Divorce gives a good example of the concepts of love and their perversions discussed in The Four Loves—through the personifications of Gift-love in Sara Smith, perverted Need-love in Frank Smith, Venus in the Ghost and his red lizard, Gift-love in the newly made man and his white stallion, excessive, perverted, possessive Affection in Michael’s mother Pam, as well as in Robert’s wife, and through Lewis and Macdonald’s discussions of the kinds of love they see exhibited in the Ghosts and Bright People in Heaven.

After examining The Great Divorce in light of The Four Loves, the reader will agree with critic Thomas Howard that many of the damned souls from Hell who are visiting Heaven “love their anger and their grief more than they love what they see” in Heaven (Achievement 178), and will also agree with Chad Walsh that “the most common reason for residence in the gray town [Hell] is selfish love masquerading as altruism” (76).

In fact, love is at the core of Lewis’s fiction. Love is the “peg” upon which he hung most of his plots and themes and characterizations. Understanding Lewis’s systematic “doctrine” of love will help any reader better understand and appreciate all of his fiction.

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