**[Finding that Elusive Title: The Many Names of The Great Divorce](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2015/03/09/titles-2/)**

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I am about 50/50 when it comes to titling my own work. Sometimes the title is patently obvious; other times it is a struggle to come up with a pithy phrase that captures what I’ve just written. I have one novel that I haven’t been able to title for three years now.

Occasionally C.S. Lewis struggled with his titles. We know his very first book as *Spirits in Bondage*—now available free in the public domain. The original title, however, was *Spirits in Prison*, referencing 1 Peter 3:19. Lewis was disappointed when he realized that another author, Robert Hitchens, had written *A Spirit in Prison* a decade earlier. Lewis fussed over the problem:

*“I don’t know whether I shall be able to find another that expresses so aptly to the general scheme of the book….” (Sep 18, 1918 letter to his father).*

He struggled with the title and it was his father that finally suggested “[Spirits in Bondage](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2014/05/28/false-starts/),” a phrase from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. He rejected it at first as straying too far from the 1 Peter reference, but eventually used it. Personally, I think *Spirits in Bondage* is a more precise title—evocative of different

kinds of restrictions than “prison” draws to my mind, specifically the kind addressed into the materialistic and spiritual struggles of the poetry—but I’m not sure that he was ever satisfied.

The title of C.S. Lewis’ first Christian book, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, was completely evident to him. It was an allegory patterned after Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* in which Lewis’ return—or [regress](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2011/08/08/the-pilgrim%E2%80%99s-regress-and-the-reader%E2%80%99s-progress/)—is essential to the story. His title of his first academic book, the one that established his career as a careful scholar, was not as easily settled. He wanted to name it *The Allegorical Love Poem*, and referenced it as such in his correspondence. The publisher decided to change it to [*The Allegory of Love*](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2013/05/03/preface-allegory-of-love/)—a more poetic title, perhaps, but one that does not represent the book as well. I have the feeling that it was a point of contention, and the editor of Lewis’ letters, Walter Hooper, notes that he was “eventually convinced” to make the change. I’m uncertain, again, if Lewis was fully content with the change, and he even signed a letter to Owen Barfield—[to whom the book was dedicated](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2013/05/03/preface-allegory-of-love/)—“Yours, The Alligator of Love,” a parody of the title.



Perhaps the most fortuitous struggle for a title is the one that would become [*The Great Divorce*](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2011/08/25/the-marriage-of-now-and-then-a-review-of-c-s-lewis%E2%80%99-the-great-divorce/). This long novella appeared originally as a serial in an Anglican newspaper, *The Guardian*. The editors at *The Guardian* had printed some of Lewis’ essays, and so agreed to print [*The Screwtape Letters*](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2012/06/01/newgenscrewtape/)in 1941. The *Letters* were hugely popular, so when he had an idea for a weekly dream sequence about the choice between heaven and hell, they were pleased to publish it. Each week from November 10, 1944 to April 13, 1945, they printed a part of the story. We have been echoing some of that work since Fall 2014.

It must have been agonizing for the reader, as the chapters often remained unfinished for two or even three weeks, and the story hung in the imaginative air that entire time. The response, however, seemed good, and turned into what I think is one of Lewis’ best books, and certainly the best of his theological fiction.



When I went through the original publication of *The Great Divorce* at the library of [General Theological Seminary](http://library.gts.edu/) in New York, however, I was surprised to see that *The Great Divorce* once bore a different title—two, actually, with a subtitle. Here is an ad I photographed which appeared a week before the first insertion of the story began. Note that it is named both *Who Goes Home?*and *The Grand Divorce*. Throughout the entire run these two titles are left in the byline and the contents listing on the first page, each time with the subtitle, *A New Fantasy by*C.S. Lewis.

Certainly the title *Who Goes Home?*reorients our understanding of the entire story. As a title, it affects me in an entirely different way than *The Great Divorce*. *Who Goes Home?*strikes me as the title of a short story printed on the program at a Senior Citizen’s Home chapel, or an American evangelical film from the 1980s with superbly bad special effects. It falls flat for me, an empty title for a full story.

Still, I wonder if the image of “home” could be an important idea in *The Great Divorce*. We see the theme of “home” pop up here and there throughout, though almost always with the same reference.

The “home” I imagined when I saw the original title was heaven—the great mountainous region far in the distance of the bright, real world in the novel. But that isn’t the reference to home typical in the book. We hear the phrase, “they’d be far happier at home” echoed, as well as the threat “I’ll go home.” In both of these cases, the reference to “home” is the Grey Town, the misty, sallow, threadbare ghostly town where the story begins. “Home” for these people is ethereal and permeable, and yet so real in that it is the voluntary prison in which the spirits live (or, perhaps, where the spirits are in bondage). Most of the ghosts who take a vacation from the dreary, misty Grey Town to the expansive Bright Country simply want to leave, to go home to their hell. Many don’t get off the bus. Heaven is far too real, so Hell has all the comforts of home.

There is one exception to the “home” image in *The Great Divorce*. It is the great goddess Sarah Smith, who tries to welcome the most narcissistic and manipulative of vacationers—this divided soul who demands of the great woman in the same abusive quality that was his standard on earth when she was his subjugated wife. Her response to her abuser is not to tower over him in her inherited greatness. Instead, she condescends to his ghostly substance and reduces herself to his level, bidding him to leave his mental games and follow her. He cannot, and as she rides away a cosmic entourage sings a hymn to the great, humble Lady:

*The Happy Trinity is her home: nothing can trouble her joy….
He details immortal gods to attend her: upon every road where she must travel.
They take her hand at hard places: she will not stub her toes in the dark.
She may walk among Lions and rattlesnakes: among dinosaurs and nurseries of lionets.
He fills her brim full with immensity of life: he leads her to see the world’s desire.*



God is her home. It is neither the Grey Town of self-afflicted misery, nor the house on Earth where her husband held her in terror, nor the Bright Country where she calls the narcissist to follow—what we might call “The Sweet By and By.” God, in God’s fullest relational depth of the Trinity, is her home.

Clearly, the theme of “home” is not missing from the book. But neither is it central to the story. Perhaps “home” is a theme Lewis envisioned when he began the story, but it is not a fully developed idea. Quite apart from the flat or even saccharine quality of the title *Who Goes Home?*, it does not capture fully the central theme of the book.

*The Grand Divorce*as an alternate title comes as a response to William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. While Blake tries to bring together the either-or of the universe, Lewis thinks this to be a “disastrous error.” In the preface to *The Great Divorce* he references Blake, arguing that:

*“You cannot take all luggage with you on all journeys; on one journey even your right hand and your right eye may be among the things you have to leave behind. We are not living in a world where all roads are radii of a circle and where all, if followed long enough, will therefore draw gradually nearer and finally meet at the centre: rather in a world where every road, after a few miles, forks into two, and each of those into two again, and at each fork you must make a decision. Even on the biological level life is not like a pool but like a tree.”*



The “divorce” is the central theme of the book. And although it is not mentioned in the story—the metaphors of a fork in the road or an evolutionary tree are also absent—the idea of choice is everywhere. The divorce between heaven and hell is made of the simple choices of everyday life: a choice to build into self, or a choice to die to self. These choices set one on a path that moves ultimately to the Bright Country or disappears eventually into the Grey Town.

Why did Lewis change the title from *The Grand Divorce*to *The Great Divorce*? We don’t have that conversation still extent in history—or at least I haven’t found it, and the publisher destroyed all of his correspondence with Lewis before 1954, so we are unlikely to discover more. In a letter to Sr. Penelope, one of his literary companions and spiritual letter-mentors, Lewis says that *Who Goes Home?*was already taken, so the name had to change (May 28, 1945). The stolen title was, I believe, fortuitous. The result is *The Great Divorce*.



One suggestion, made by Inklings scholar [Sørina Higgins](http://iambicadmonit.blogspot.ca/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), is that Lewis borrowed the phrase, perhaps unconsciously, from a poem by [Charles Williams](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2012/08/10/the-oddest-inkling-a-guest-blog-by-sorina-higgins/). By this point, Williams was a close personal friend of Lewis and one of his favourite poets. Williams used the phrase “the great divorce” to refer to death in a collection of poems entitled *Divorce*.

Even though the context of “divorce” in Charles Williams is different than in C.S. Lewis, I suspect an influence—whether conscious or not. There were other uses of the title “The Great Divorce.” This was a media buzz phrase in the 1800s. In 1839, a Mrs. Sarah Jarvis petitioned the court for a divorce from her husband, a church minister, causing great controversy and public debate.

Perhaps the most infamous literal divorce in England was the case of Henry VIII, considered by Archbishop Wolsey. One of Lewis’ favourite authors, G.K. Chesterton, actually uses the phrase “The Great Divorce” in his 1917 book, *A Short History of England*. By the early 20th century, the phrase “great divorce” was being used as a superlative metaphor, like “the great divorce between life and practice” or “the great divorce between public and private religion.”

Whatever the influence, the book appears not as *The Grand Divorce: A New Fantasy* but as *The Great Divorce: A Dream*. Both “great” and “grand” have ironic meanings, but I think “great” captures better the cosmic choice offered in *The Great Divorce*. In the end, I think Lewis makes the best choice of title. I, however, have not even found the right title for this blog! Sometimes titles are elusive.

*This post is part of a loose series on*The Great Divorce*, published in*The Guardian*in 1944-45. 70 years later we are echoing the publishing dates. The story of Sarah Smith occupies much of the last month of the series in March-April 1945. –Dr. Brenton Dickieson, A Pilgrim in Narnia*