

3-2004

C.S. Lewis as Plagiarist: Some Grey Areas in the Grey Town

Thom Satterlee
Taylor University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Satterlee, Thom (2004) "C.S. Lewis as Plagiarist: Some Grey Areas in the Grey Town," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 4 , Article 32.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol4/iss1/32

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis & Friends at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inklings Forever* by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.

INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume IV

A Collection of Essays Presented at
The Fourth

FRANCES WHITE EWBank COLLOQUIUM

ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2004

Upland, Indiana

**C.S. Lewis as Plagiarist:
Some Grey Areas in the Grey Town**

Thom Satterlee

C.S. Lewis as Plagiarist: Some Grey Areas in the Grey Town¹

Thom Satterlee

Two years ago, at the third Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis and Friends, I learned that Lewis's novel The Great Divorce was informed by an obscure source, a novel I'd never heard of before called Letters from Hell (Hill 20). Since I teach Lewis's novel in my World Literature course, I decided to read Letters from Hell, hoping that I might make some use of it in class. If I had any specific use in mind before actually reading Letters from Hell, it was to show my students that writers, whether expository or creative, draw on earlier sources to help create their own work. In fact, the key idea that shapes my course is this notion that literature doesn't come out of a vacuum, but instead develops through a centuries-old conversation. On my syllabus I had already paired Lewis's novel with Dante's Inferno and had written a lecture on how the English novel, in a broad sense, translates the Italian poem. At the start of my investigation, the word plagiarism wasn't on my mind at all.

I feel I have to say the above because, honestly, I fear that some readers might think I'm on a literary witch-hunt². I'm not. I began, innocently enough, by looking for grist for the lecture mill. And let me also say, in order to set some limits, that I'm not interested in claiming Lewis as a hardened criminal of literary theft. Just the opposite, I've discovered through researching this paper that in almost every instance I know of in which Lewis makes use of an earlier source he does so with such a transparency and generosity towards fellow writers that his practice should be considered a model for other writers. In the case of this one source though, this little-known book that now seems to me to have been more influential on the writing of The Great Divorce than the Inferno, here in this one isolated incident one could say that Lewis failed to be as scrupulous as he normally was. He's guilty, let's say, of a minor case of plagiarism—a literary misdemeanor in which he failed to give credit to an obscure source.³

When I say that Letters from Hell is an obscure source I meant that it is so to us today and was so to *Lewis and his readers in the 1940s when his novel was published*[look into this. one world cat reference gives a 17th printing by 1940-1949] In the late 1860s, though, when Letters from Hell first appeared in its original language, Danish, it had a whole country's attention. Granted, Denmark is a small country, only a few million, but Valdemar Thisted's *Breve fra Helvede* went through three printings in its first year and counted among its admirers Hans Christian Andersen, who compared the author's vision to those in his own world-famous fairytales (1867). In Germany, too, Thisted's novel had enormous success, and in one year the German translation passed through twelve printings (Macdonald 5).

At the same time when the Danish and German versions received acclaim, the English translation, commercially speaking, sputtered. Letters from Hell had been released in London by Richard Bentley publishing house in 1866, the year that the original first appeared in Copenhagen. But English readers weren't, in 1866, ready to see the word hell in the title of a book. Letters from Hell was banned, and didn't appear again until 1884, when it was released in a new edition with a preface by George Macdonald (Hordern). The Scottish writer noted that the book serves an evangelical end through its depiction of a "ghastly hell," the purpose of the novel being "to make a righteous use of the element of horror; and in this, so far as I know, it is unparalleled" (9).

Lewis owned a copy of this later edition, and at least one writer has noticed its similarities to The Great Divorce (Hill 20). The questions I want to pursue now are these: How similar are parts of The Great Divorce to Letters from Hell? Should Lewis have given credit to Thisted for "borrowed" material? And if the two works do share important similarities, why didn't Lewis ever mention his debt?

C.S. Lewis as Plagiarist: Some Grey Areas in the Grey Town • Thom Satterlee

When I first read The Great Divorce, I was intrigued by the novel's original vision of hell. The first-person narrator, a newcomer to hell, finds himself not in the stereotypical fiery pit with horned devils and pitchforks and loud screams of tormented sinners, but in a grey town, on streets lined with abandoned houses and bookstores. Lewis's is a curiously banal hell, I remember thinking. And yet a banal hell, compared to those I'd encountered in other works, was a well-imagined hell—to me, a new hell. I especially admired the scene in which the narrator speaks with another soul, that of an "intelligent man," and discovers the reason for all the abandoned houses:

"It seems a deuce of a town," I volunteered, "and that's what I can't understand. The parts of it that I saw were so empty. Was there once a much larger population?"

"Not at all," said my neighbour. "The trouble is that they're so quarrelsome. As soon as anyone arrives he settles in some street. Before the week is over he's quarreled so badly that he decides to move. Very like he finds the next street empty because all the people there have quarreled with *their* neighbors—and moved. So he settles in. If by any chance the street is full, he goes further. But even if he stays, it makes no odds. He's sure to have another quarrel pretty soon and then he'll move on again. Finally he'll move right out to the edge of the town and build a new house. You see, it's easy here. You've only got to *think* a house and there it is." (20)

As the Intelligent Man later explains, the power of wishing goes well beyond posthumous homes. "You get every thing you want," he tells the narrator, "by just imagining it" (23). The list includes cinemas and fish and chip shops, and whatever the residents of hell would like.

Lewis, I believe, did not get the notion that hell operates on wish-fulfillment "by just imagining it." He borrowed the idea from Thisted's novel. Like The Great Divorce, Letters from Hell is told through a first-person narrator who has newly arrived in hell. Among his first discoveries is the principle that souls can have whatever they want by imagining it. The following scene may not be a mirror image of Lewis's, but the similarities certainly struck me when I first read it. The narrator, on his first day in hell, walks into a tavern. After a short while he asks the owner, who has already proven belligerent, to tell him about the tavern's origins:

"What house is this?" I asked, with a voice as unpleasant and gnarling as his own.

"It's *my* house!"

That was not much of information, so I asked again after a while: "How did it come to be here—the house I mean—and everything?"

The landlord looked at me with a sneer that plainly said, "You greenhorn, you!" vouchsafing however presently: "How came it here?—why, I thought of it, and then it was."

That was light on the subject. "Then the house is merely an idea?" I went on.

"Yes, of course; what else should it be?"

"Ah, indeed, youngster," cried one of the gamblers, turning upon me, "here we are in the true land of magic, the like of which was never heard of on earth. We need but imagine a thing, and then we have it. Hurrah, I say, 'tis a merry place!" And with frightful laughter that betokened anything but satisfaction, he threw the dice upon the table. (10-11)

It's important to note that these passages share an idea rather than exact wording. Lewis, if he borrowed from Thisted (as I believe he did) did so without lifting the Dane's language, not even in translation. He adopts, instead, a unique notion found in Letters from Hell. With this distinction in mind, I want to say that the type of plagiarism I see in The Great Divorce falls into the gray—or grayer—area, a plagiarism of a different sort than that of the bold thief. To use an analogy, Lewis hasn't robbed the grocery store blind, he's simply dropped an apple in his coat pocket and left the store without paying.

But there are other apples in other pockets. I see another striking similarity, for instance, in the fact that both novels use the same symbol to represent the approach of final judgment. In both novels, a growing darkness tells the residents of hell that this important event is approaching. In Letters from Hell we find an early, rather ambiguous reference to the fading light. The narrator has encountered another soul, a man with a rope around his neck:

"The light is decreasing," I said, pointing in the direction whence the pale glimmer emanated. "I fear we shall be quite in the dark presently."

"Yes," said the figure, with a gurgling voice; "it will be night directly."

"How long will it last?"

"How should I know? It may be some hours, it may be a hundred years."

"Is there such a difference of duration?"

“We don’t perceive the difference; it is always long, frightfully long,” said the figure, with a dismal moan.

“But it is quite certain, is it not, that daylight will reappear?”

“If you call that daylight which we used to call dusk upon earth, we never get more. I strongly suspect that it is not daylight at all; however, that matters little. I see you are a newcomer here.” (13)

Later the newcomer realizes the significance of darkness in hell, and says, “I tremble, I tremble at the coming darkness. This fear is chiefly born from a feeling that a night to come—we know not how soon—will usher in the day of judgment” (340).

Similarly, in The Great Divorce the narrator first learns of a final judgment by suggestion and in connection with darkness. He has asked the Intelligent Man why souls in hell go to all the trouble of building houses that, as it turns out, don’t keep out the rain.

The Intelligent Man put his head closer to mine. “Safety again,” he muttered. “At least the feeling of safety. It’s all right *now*: but later on . . . you understand.”

“What?” said I, almost involuntarily sinking my own voice to a whisper.

He articulated noiselessly as if expecting that I understood lip-reading. I put my ear close to his mouth. “Speak up,” I said. “It will be dark presently,” he mouthed.

“You mean the evening is really going to turn into a night in the end?”

He nodded. (24)

I realize that to connect the final judgment with something foreboding, such as darkness, is hardly unique. There may, in fact, only be a handful of symbols available to writers who attempt to describe hell and the fears of its inhabitants. If not darkness, then what? Lewis might have asked himself. And yet the coincidence in both narrators learning this law of hell early on in each novel, progressing to understand it more clearly as the novels move forward, and recalling its significance at the end of the novel (Thisted 343; Lewis 124-125) suggests that Lewis may have borrowed not just Thisted’s symbol, but also his narrative technique.

By chapter three of The Great Divorce, Lewis’s narrator has traveled away from hell and arrives in the foothills of heaven, where the remainder of the novel takes place. The narrator of Thisted’s novel, on the other hand, never leaves hell. One would assume, then, that the similarities between the novels would end here; but they don’t. Lewis’s narrator may have left hell, but

hell in a sense goes with him. We learn something about Lewis’s hell from the way the ghosts who accompany the narrator on the omnibus behave once they arrive in the foothills. The narrator, observing an old woman who has been in hell, says to his Guide (none other than George Macdonald) “I am troubled, Sir . . . because that unhappy creature doesn’t seem to me to be the sort of soul that ought to be even in danger of damnation. She isn’t wicked: she’s only a silly, garrulous old woman who has got into the habit of grumbling . . .” (24). In another encounter, the narrator finds that a woman who lost her son and has spent her life grieving for him in a selfish way has also lived in the Grey Town. The narrator tells his Guide, “I don’t know if I’d repeat this on Earth, Sir . . . They’d say I was inhuman: they’d say I believed in total depravity: they’d say I was attacking the best and holiest of things” (95).

Thisted’s hell provides similar surprising lessons about the sort of people who populate that region. The narrator tells us, “It is strange how many of the so-called respectable people one meets here; in fact, they form the nucleus of society in hell as they do on earth . . . You little think that daily life, with its legitimate cares,—ay, even what you call your duty by house and home,—may be the snare to bring your soul to hell!” (47). And in language similar to the narrator’s comment about the old woman, one finds this: “It is, indeed, a strange fancy, prevalent among men, that only the wicked go to hell” (48).

Certainly, Lewis’s scenes are more vivid than the pronouncements of Thisted’s narrator, and so the two versions differ in that respect; and yet the characters in the latter part of The Great Divorce are in a certain way reminiscent of Letters from Hell. It’s as though these characters were first sketched by Thisted, then later filled in by Lewis. Perhaps even the mention in Letters from Hell that “there is no lack here even of theological writings—especially of the modern commentaries, but also of the dogmatic and homiletical kind” (95) gave inspiration for Lewis’s Episcopal Ghost, the one who tells his guide, “We have a little Theological Society down there. Oh yes! There is plenty of intellectual life” (46).

Though the narrator in Letters from Hell stays in hell throughout the novel, he is still able to see heaven. Fairly early in the novel we learn of this fact:

“And at times, as though a curtain of mist and cloud were suddenly rent asunder, a cataract of light bursts forth victoriously, overflowing from the heart of glory. Hell stands dazzled, struck to the core as it were. For in beauty and bliss eternal a vision of Paradise is given to the damned ones—no, not the damned ones, for though cast into hell we are not yet judged; it is given to those who, like the rich man, lift

up their eyes in torment. And it is not only Paradise we see, but the blessed ones who dwell there.” (29)

Here, as in all of the foregoing examples, I can only conjecture that Thisted’s portrayal of hell as a place where heaven can be seen but not reached might have been a creative catalyst for Lewis. Maybe Lewis has taken Thisted’s idea one step further by giving the residents of hell not only a vision of heaven but an actual field trip. Maybe. And here’s one of the problems in trying to say that Lewis is indebted to Thisted: Lewis might actually have gotten the idea from somewhere else, maybe from the same parable that Thisted’s narrator alludes to.

And actually, even if I could prove that all of the parallel passages I’ve quoted and discussed above were, indeed, instances in which Lewis borrowed from Thisted, many writers on plagiarism would excuse Lewis from charges of plagiarism. William Allan Edwards, whose Plagiarism: An Essay on Good and Bad Borrowing appeared from a Cambridge publisher about ten years before Lewis’s novel, sums up centuries of commentaries on the subject and addresses contemporary opinion. His conclusion might sound radical, especially to those of us familiar with recent cases of plagiarism reported through the media, but his position falls within a long tradition:

Without being any the less original for it, and without sacrificing his integrity, a genuine artist may borrow the ideas, the themes, the methods, and sometimes even the very words of others, but he must always borrow imaginatively if he is to escape censure: he must have such an individual mind that all he borrows is recreated; and he must weld his thefts into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from the “source” from which it was taken. (114)

Edwards’ words echo those of another Englishman from nearly two centuries earlier, those of Dr. Johnson, who said that it is permissible for a writer to “pursue the paths of the antients, provided he declines to tread in their footsteps” (qtd. in Mallon 10). And both Edwards and Johnson can be joined by the voice of a more recent author on this subject. In Stolen Words: Forays into the Origins and Ravages of Plagiarism, Thomas Mallon says, “The point . . . is always that the writer need not blush about stealing if he makes what he takes completely his, if he alchemizes it into something that is, finally, thoroughly new” (25). All three writers agree that the key in determining plagiarism is originality—has the writer made new “footsteps,” is the new work “unique, utterly different,” “completely his”? Edwards

states this position most plainly when he says that the “difference between the successful and the unsuccessful borrowers, is the difference between the artist and the plagiarist. The plagiarist is simply a bad borrower” (115).

I suspect that these writers would not say that Lewis plagiarized from Thisted, but that he instead borrowed artfully. After all (and I would have to agree) The Great Divorce differs in more ways than it mirrors Letters from Hell. Lewis has woven a new fabric with some threads from an earlier writer and, arguably, the Lewis tapestry is of higher quality than the Thisted. And yet I remain uneasy. Lewis’s use of Thisted (and in particular his failure to credit the Danish author) still strikes me as unfair, and I am still inclined to use the word plagiarism.

Maybe I hold Lewis to a higher standard because he holds himself to one, or at least seems to. Throughout The Great Divorce he makes plain his debt to other writers, often by naming them, such as Blake, Keats, Macdonald, Cowper, Taylor, Milton, Swedenborg, and Hans Christian Andersen. He both names and makes recognizable allusions to Dante. When he can’t remember the name of an American science fiction writer, Lewis nevertheless mentions in his preface that a certain debt is due (11). Yet he never refers to Letters from Hell or its author. Why he didn’t is a matter of even looser speculation than I’ve made elsewhere in this paper. Did he mean to, but forgot? Did he honestly believe that Thisted’s novel hadn’t influenced him? Did he consider the book to be so obscure that it didn’t warrant a mention?

Of course, I can’t answer these questions, but I can say, as I believe this paper makes clear, that I wish Lewis would have credited Letters from Hell. I wish this because unlike the other writers he refers to in the pages of The Great Divorce, Valdemar Thisted has grown less well-known with time. Considerably so. A few days ago I did something that the nineteenth-century Danish writer could not have expected. I googled him. On that whole expanse known as the world wide web only fifteen entries appeared, several of them as repeats. I’m not so naïve as to believe that a single mention in Lewis’s preface would have rescued Thisted from obscurity, but maybe a few more readers would look up his novel and enjoy reading it, as I did. They might admire his originality, even if it is put to better use in Lewis. In the end there’s always something to be gained from going back to the original source, and I wish that Lewis had made doing so a little bit easier.

Notes

¹I want to thank Linda Lambert, Reference Librarian at the Zondervan Library of Taylor University, for suggesting an early version of my title.

²During the period just before Lewis's novel appeared, writers about plagiarism noted a general increase in frustration toward "source-hunters"—scholars and critics who attempted to establish cases of plagiarism against established authors. Interesting accounts can be found in H.M. Paull's Literary Ethics: A Study in the Growth of the Literary Conscience, especially pages 128 and 340, and in William Allan Edwards' Plagiarism: An Essay on Good and Bad Borrowing, especially pages 82-88.

³Edgar Allan Poe once remarked that "One out of ten authors of established reputation, plunder recondite, neglected, or forgotten works" (qtd. in Goodale 202). My own least generous thought is that Lewis himself might be numbered among the one-in-ten authors.

Works Cited

- The Hans Christian Andersen Center. www.andersen.sdu.dk. Dec. 8, 2003.
- Edwards, William Allan. Plagiarism: An Essay on Good and Bad Borrowing. Cambridge: The Minority Press, 1933.
- Goodale, David. "Some of Walt Whitman's Borrowings." American Literature 10:2 (1938): 202-213.
- Hill, Richard. "The Gently Sloping, Chosen Path: C.S. Lewis's View of Hell in Screwtape and The Great Divorce." Inklings Forever. Upland, IN: Taylor University, 2001. 19-24.
- Hordern House Web Catalogue. www.hordern.com. Dec. 8, 2003.
- Lewis, C.S. The Great Divorce. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996.
- Macdonald, George. "Preface." Letters from Hell. London: Macmillan, 1911. v-ix.
- Mallon, Thomas. Stolen Words: Forays into the Origins and Ravages of Plagiarism. New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989.
- Paull, H.M. Literary Ethics: A Study in the Growth of the Literary Conscience. London: Thornton Butterworth, 1928.
- Thisted, Valdemar. Letters from Hell. Transl. Julie Sutter. London: Macmillan, 1911.