



REFLECTING
the ETERNAL

Dante's *Divine Comedy* in the
Novels of C.S. Lewis

MARSHA DAIGLE-WILLIAMSON

“This book is an impressive feat of C. S. Lewis scholarship, both for its theme (the presence of the greatest Christian poetic storyteller in one of the greatest Christian prose storytellers) and for its comprehensive and complete treatment of that theme, which admirably combines clarity with profundity, accuracy in detail with ‘big picture’ wisdom, and theological theory with moral practice.”

Peter Kreeft, Professor of Philosophy, Boston College
Author of *C. S. Lewis for the Third Millennium,*
Between Heaven and Hell, and Back to Virtue

“This is an immensely impressive work. It is what scholarship ought to be—perspicacious, *readable*, measured, and exhaustive (in the good scholarly sense of that word). I found myself continually delighted on page after page. Lovers of Dante and Lewis will find themselves ‘surprised by joy.’”

Thomas Howard, former Professor of English, best-selling author of
Narnia and Beyond: A Guide to the Fiction of C. S. Lewis

“This carefully researched, lucidly written study fills a much-needed gap in Lewis scholarship. It not only traces the profound impact that Dante had on Lewis’s fiction; it identifies the Beatrice character in each novel that imparts grace and revelation to the protagonist.”

Louis Markos, Professor of English and Scholar in Residence
Houston Baptist University

“I am impressed with the care Dr. Daigle-Williamson has taken in reading primary and secondary sources and bringing them into conversation with each other. It is an extraordinary accomplishment requiring mastery of Dante and of Lewis and of the most important scholarly work on both authors. I have argued for years that in order to understand Lewis, you must understand Dante. Now—at last!—this thoughtful study demonstrates why this is true. *Reflecting the Eternal* is a very important book. I highly recommend it.”

Diana Pavlac Glyer, Professor of English, Azusa Pacific University
Author of *The Company They Keep: C. S. Lewis and*
J. R. R. Tolkien as Writers in Community

“Marsha Daigle-Williamson’s book has helped me better know and appreciate my countryman Dante Alighieri. (Contemporary hermeneutics are correct in claiming that a work cannot be fully understood except retrospectively by the fruit it produces and the influence it exercises.) In this comparison of Dante and Lewis, flashes of truth burst forth that illuminate the journey on earth for people today as it did for people in the Middle Ages and in all times. Both authors point to the same goal—the eternal—and offer the same map, Christian revelation.”

Raniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M. Cap., Preacher to the Papal Household

“Virgil guided Dante through Hell and accompanied him through Purgatory; George MacDonald guided Lewis through *The Great Divorce*. In an intellectually exciting way, Marsha Daigle-Williamson has guided her readers through a double journey: Lewis’s novels as they were influenced by Dante. The great spiritual journey is illuminated!”

**Joe R. Christopher, Professor Emeritus of English
Tarleton State University, author of *C. S. Lewis: A Checklist of Writings
about Him and his Works* (in collaboration) and *C. S. Lewis***

“In this brilliant and comprehensive study, Marsha Daigle-Williamson shows how C. S. Lewis not only quotes Dante but also—and more importantly—transfuses the soul, as it were, of the *Divine Comedy* into his own major writings. One aspect of the importance of Lewis is his honesty. This is amply demonstrated in the careful analysis of nine works of Lewis, from *The Pilgrim’s Regress* to *Till We Have Faces*; our understanding of them will never be the same. Monumental.”

**John Bremer, Director, Institute of Philosophy
Author of *C. S. Lewis, Poetry, and the Great War***

“Marsha Daigle-Williamson’s *Reflecting the Eternal: Dante’s Divine Comedy in the Novels of C. S. Lewis* is a thoughtful, thorough, and astute study of Dante’s influence upon Lewis’s fiction. While some readers may have noted general Dantean echoes in books such as *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, and *Perelandra*, fewer will have seen Dante’s influence on the *Chronicles of Narnia* and *Till We Have Faces*. Daigle-Williamson expertly draws out these connections in a compelling and fascinating manner. This is a must book for both general readers and Lewis experts.”

**Don W. King, author of *C. S. Lewis, Poet: The Legacy of His Poetic Impulse,
Plain to the Inward Eye: Selected Essays on C. S. Lewis,
and The Collected Poems of C. S. Lewis: A Critical Edition***

“In this well-researched and thoroughly documented study, Daigle-Williamson provides overwhelming evidence that Dante’s *Divine Comedy* served as both source and influence for Lewis’s fiction. Her work fills a significant gap in C. S. Lewis scholarship, supporting the bold claim that Dante’s masterpiece is, in fact, the model for Lewis’s fiction. To her credit, the author has created a book that will satisfy, not only literary critics, but general readers and fans of Lewis’s fiction looking for a deeper appreciation of Lewis’s artistry, theology, and imaginative vision.”

**Gary L. Tandy, Professor of English, George Fox University
Author of *The Rhetoric of Certitude: C. S. Lewis’s Nonfiction Prose***

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MARSHA DAIGLE-WILLIAMSON

 HENDRICKSON
PUBLISHERS

**Reflecting the Eternal: Dante's *Divine Comedy*
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© 2015 by Marsha Daigle-Williamson

Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC
P. O. Box 3473
Peabody, Massachusetts 01961-3473

ISBN 978-1-61970-665-1

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing—October 2015

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC ISBN 978-1-61970-665-1

To J. C., who first gave me the idea

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Acknowledgments

I have been writing this book on and off for almost thirty years now. Producing a book can be likened to raising a child: it takes a village. I would like to thank the “village” that supported me during this project.

First, this book would not be in print if it were not for Carl Z. Nellis who, after a chance encounter at a conference, single-handedly acted as a liaison between me and his fellow editors at Hendrickson to promote my book. Subsequently, as my editor, his suggestions were always thoughtful and judicious, and his manner in handling my expressed preferences for this or that detail during the book’s production was always gracious and kind.

Thanks also go to Joe R. Christopher and Don King (both of whom have written excellent books on Lewis) for their encouragement over the years to move forward with this project. I need to thank my four main readers who gave me valuable feedback about the readability of the book: my husband Peter S. Williamson, my university colleagues Dr. Charles Morrisey and Dr. Robert H. Woods Jr., and my friend Christine Helrigel. Behind this project and holding it up in prayer are several people who are relieved to be able finally to cross this off their lists (in alphabetical order): Jeannette Barbacane, Jan Belanger, Linda Duffy, Mariel La Fleur, Sharon Foster, Julia Glas, Yolanda Gonzalez, Paula Holtz, Dr. Pamela Jackson, Christine Jones, Jeane Larson, Dorothy Morsfield, Jim and Juliet Pressel, Lidija Balciunas Thomas, and countless others.

Had I waited until I found *all* the links between Lewis and Dante, this book would never have gone to print. I am certain, therefore, that readers will find omissions as well as errors (hopefully not too many), and for the omissions and errors I have no one to thank but myself.

Abbreviations

Works by C. S. Lewis

- GD *The Great Divorce: A Dream*. London: Geoffrey Ellen, 1945. Reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1946.
- OSP *Out of the Silent Planet*. London: John Lane, 1938. Reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1965.
- Per. *Perelandra*. London: John Lane, 1943. Reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1965.
- PR *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1933; 2nd ed. rev. with a new preface. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1944.
- SC *The Silver Chair*. New York: Macmillan, 1953.
- SL *The Screwtape Letters*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1942. Reprint, with a new preface. New York: Macmillan, 1961.
- THS *That Hideous Strength*. London: John Lane, 1945. Reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1965.
- TWHF *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1956.
- VDT *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader."* New York: Macmillan, 1952.

Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*

- Inf. *Inferno*
- Purg. *Purgatorio*
- Par. *Paradiso*

La Divina Commedia, Scartazziniano edition. Ed. Giuseppe Vandelli. Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1965.

Introduction

Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963) was a professor and scholar of medieval and Renaissance literature at Oxford University and later at Cambridge. He was also a literary critic, lay theologian, poet, essayist, novelist, cultural critic, philosopher, Christian polemicist, and literary historian. He is known and admired for his intelligence, his wit, his storytelling, and his skill at communicating complex concepts in simple and accessible ways. He has become one of the most widely read and translated Christian authors of the twentieth century with books on topics ranging from Christian apologetics to literary criticism. His fiction and popular theological works continue to be best-sellers, and the recent filming of books from The Chronicles of Narnia series has helped bring his stories to a new generation.

Books about Lewis abound, treating various aspects of his career, his personal life, and his writings. So why another book on Lewis? In studying Lewis's novels, readers and scholars who have analyzed his characters, themes, imagery, and sources have discovered that Lewis's novels are replete with echoes of the great classics of Western literature. However, no book so far has examined in depth the significant role that Dante's *Divine Comedy* plays in the composition of Lewis's novels and the parallels to that poem that abound in his novels. This is a significant gap since, as I argue throughout the book, there is perhaps no classic that is as important to understanding Lewis's art as Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In fact, Lewis employs Dante's masterpiece as the major literary model for his fiction, and the themes he treats in his novels are fundamentally the same as Dante's. In one of his essays, Lewis writes, "A Source gives us things to write about; an Influence prompts us to write in a certain way." An examination of Lewis's novels demonstrates that Dante, according to Lewis's own definition, was both a source and an influence for him.

This book is for Lewis fans, teachers of Lewis and their students, Lewis critics and scholars, Dante lovers, and general readers. Readers will learn more about the ideas, structural patterns, and narrative details in Lewis's novels that have links to Dante's poem. They will see how a modern author can make use of a predecessor's material—and in this case, how he can successfully incorporate medieval elements into modern stories. Writers of religious fiction can learn how Lewis and Dante express theological and spiritual principles in literary depictions of spiritual life. The book will be of use in any high school or college class that includes Lewis's work as it describes a vital feature that runs throughout his novels.



For the sake of readers who may not be very familiar with Dante and *The Divine Comedy*, a brief introduction is in order. Dante Alighieri (c. 1265–1321) was a poet, a linguist, and a philosopher from Florence, who is known in Italy as *il Sommo Poeta* (“the Supreme Poet”). Dante's works include a linguistic treatise, a political treatise and a philosophical treatise. His *New Life* (*La Vita Nuova*), a collection of love poems set within a prose narrative, recounts the history of his love for a young woman in Florence named Beatrice Portinari, whom he saw only twice before her untimely death at the age of 24 (and who subsequently figures prominently in his poetic masterpiece).

Dante is best known, however, for his lengthy poem *The Divine Comedy* (*La Divina Commedia* or just the *Commedia*). Narrated in the first person, this poem tells the story of a man who has lost his way and is spiritually transformed by a journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven. As he travels through the afterlife and sees historical and mythological characters in each realm, he learns about the essence of sin (hell), the importance of overcoming vice and growing in virtue (purgatory), and the joyful bliss of souls united to God (heaven). During this journey Dante's pilgrim is guided first by the Roman poet Virgil and then by Beatrice. Dante's storytelling abilities, his descriptions, his well-drawn and unforgettable characters, his imagery, and his literary presentation of Christian truths have earned him a permanent place in the canon not only

of Western literature but of world literature as well. It is this masterpiece that Lewis draws on to tell his stories.

Understanding the relationship between Lewis's fiction and Dante's poem is important because, although it is no secret that Lewis's imagination was shaped by the medieval and Renaissance literature he loved so much, his appreciation and understanding of Dante provide a major key to the shape of that literary imagination. The links between his fiction and Dante's poem demonstrate Lewis's lifelong belief that the modern age has much to learn from the past—in this case, from an author in the distant past whose story, characters, literary techniques, and Christian worldview are still relevant today. They demonstrate Lewis's consummate artistry in the variety of ways he adapts features from that poem. They shed light on Lewis's meaning in all his novels, since the spiritual truths he teaches are the same as Dante's, illustrating that certain basic Christian themes transcend time, culture, and denominations. The specific adaptations Lewis makes of *The Divine Comedy* also provide his indirect commentary on that medieval masterpiece. Dante, by his own admission in the poem, acknowledged that he learned his literary craft from Virgil's *Aeneid* and that he was following in that poet's footsteps. So too Lewis, in the composition of his novels, followed in the footsteps of the author who was perhaps his main guide, Dante.

The Organization of This Book

Each of the chapters discusses one of Lewis's novels in the chronological order of its publication. This chronological order enables readers to track and evaluate the development of Lewis's varied uses of Dante's poem in his novels. Each chapter begins with a brief introduction and plot summary of one of Lewis's novels, followed by a discussion of that novel's fictional world and its inhabitants and the way they reflect Dante's imaginary universe. It next describes the similarities between the main character and Dante's pilgrim and traces the patterns in his or her journey that parallel journey patterns in *The Divine Comedy*. Finally, each chapter concludes with a discussion of the character who fulfills a function analogous to that of Beatrice in *The Divine Comedy*, i.e., a character who serves as a channel of grace and revelation and

as an instrument of transformation for the main character. (Lewis always depicts the protagonist's meeting with this character using narrative details imported from the meeting between Dante's pilgrim and Beatrice at the top of Mount Purgatory in the Garden of Eden.)

Chapter 1 provides a framework or context for the book's discussions by addressing Lewis's general approach to literary predecessors and helps explain why Lewis thought it was not only permissible but appropriate for an author to draw on past authors. It also details his admiration for Dante, which remained constant throughout his life, and concludes with a brief plot summary of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Chapter 2 deals with *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933). Lewis constructs the geography of this imaginary world with literary techniques from Dante. In addition, the journey of Lewis's pilgrim John echoes events from the journey of Dante's pilgrim in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. In this novel Lewis presents his interpretation of Dante's Beatrice most fully, which can help readers to recognize the Beatrice figures in his subsequent novels. This is the only novel in which an inanimate object (rather than a personal being) fulfills a Beatrician role.

Chapter 3 describes *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938). In this book Lewis constructs a modern Christian cosmos that incorporates features from Dante's medieval cosmos. His hero Elwin Ransom, who resembles Dante's pilgrim in a variety of ways, undergoes a journey whose significance parallels that of the journey in the *Inferno* and echoes events from the *Paradiso*. The ruling spirit of the planet Malacandra (Mars) is Beatrice's parallel here.

Chapter 4 considers *The Screwtape Letters* (1942). Lewis's depiction of hell incorporates several parallels to concepts that shape Dante's hell. In addition, the "patient" (the young Christian man being tempted) goes through three stages of spiritual development that correspond to the three-phase journey of Dante's pilgrim, and the young woman he loves is patterned after Beatrice.

Chapter 5 looks at *Perelandra* (1943), the second novel of the Ransom trilogy. Lewis's story is again set in the imaginative Christian cosmos he presented in *Out of the Silent Planet*, but this time on the planet Venus. The mini-journey of the narrator at the beginning of the book reflects the journey in the *Inferno* while

Ransom's adventures parallel the journey in the *Purgatorio*. His vision of the Great Dance at the end of the novel condenses visions and images of light from the *Paradiso*. Here it is a couple, the Perelandrian Adam and Eve, who act and speak like Beatrice.

Chapter 6 completes the discussion of Lewis's trilogy. Ransom reappears in *That Hideous Strength* (1945) and resembles Dante's pilgrim in a unique way. The journeys are ended for Ransom and the pilgrim, so now they assist others on their spiritual journeys. The spiritual journeys in this novel occur for a young couple, Mark and Jane Studdock: Mark's progressive involvement with a scientific institute, the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments (N.I.C.E.), parallels the descent of Dante's pilgrim into hell, while Jane's involvement with a small group of Christians echoes the ascent of Dante's Mount Purgatory. In this novel that features two characters on spiritual journeys, Lewis presents the reader with two Beatrice figures.

Chapter 7 deals with *The Great Divorce* (1946), which is often called Lewis's *Divine Comedy* because it deals with the state of souls in the afterlife. However, the links are much deeper than this shared theme. Lewis's techniques for constructing the afterlife mirror Dante's mode of designing a physical realm that represents spiritual realities. For many of his narrative details, Lewis reassembles and condenses material from Dante's poem. He blends two or more settings, characters, events, and dialogues into new wholes producing a highly compressed version of significant sections of Dante's narrative. The narrator in *The Great Divorce* resembles Dante's pilgrim in ways not seen in any other Lewis novels. In this novel multiple characters that come down from Mountains in the east, and in particular the guide George MacDonald and Sarah Smith, fulfill Beatrician functions.

Chapter 8 treats *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–1956) together. In this series, Lewis employs typology to shape and narrate events that are similar to biblical events, a narrative approach used by Dante. Two Narnian novels explicitly echo *The Divine Comedy*. The first part of the journey in *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* (1952) reflects Dante's design of Mount Purgatory, while the second part condenses events and images from the *Paradiso*. *The Silver Chair* (1953) presents a journey under the earth that echoes some features of Dante's *Inferno*.

Chapter 9 analyzes Lewis's last novel, *Till We Have Faces* (1956). Written as a first-person narrative, this book recounts the spiritual journey of a woman in pre-Christian times who comes to recognize herself as a sinner and repents. Lewis adapts a classical myth for his story in a way that parallels Dante's procedure for adapting myths. Lewis also uses Dante's moral criteria for assessing the spirituality of a pagan. Before her conversion, the protagonist Orual is reminiscent of some of the souls in Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, while the narration of her spiritual awakening at the end of the story echoes details from the *Inferno* and from Dante's garden scene at the end of the *Purgatorio*. Orual's half-sister Psyche functions as Beatrice on two separate occasions. The first involves a failed attempt to lead her sister to faith in the deity while the second occasion is successful.

In concluding, chapter 10 summarizes the different kinds of links between Lewis and Dante. It also includes an overview of Lewis's ongoing patterns in three areas: his construction of fictional worlds, his journey narratives, and his Beatrice figures.

How conscious and deliberate are these parallels to Dante on Lewis's part? On several occasions in response to specific queries from readers, Lewis confirms that particular parallels with Dante in his novels are intentional. Otherwise, Lewis is silent. We can only wish that readers had asked him more questions. However, the sheer number of specific allusions and parallels are evidence, at the very least, that Dante's poem was an integral part of Lewis's thinking.

Whether or not *all* my examples of Lewis's parallels to Dante were directly intended by Lewis, there can be no doubt that he approached *The Divine Comedy* as an archetypal account of the Christian journey that bears repeating to a new generation. Dante's powerful poem presents in literary form what the Bible has to say about redemption and damnation, about human freedom, and about how human beings should live. In fashioning his stories to teach those same truths, Lewis follows in the footsteps of a master who had accomplished that task for his own generation. It is a tribute to Lewis's art and his understanding of Dante's poem that he could succeed at recasting so much of Dante's story into language and imagery accessible to the modern reader without requiring the reader's prior acquaintance with Dante's medieval masterpiece.

Lewis and Dante are ultimately connected because Lewis's novels not only retell the important truths of *The Divine Comedy* but also make direct use of material from that work to accomplish his task. Although *The Great Divorce* has sometimes been referred to as Lewis's *Divine Comedy*, I would argue that the entire corpus of Lewis's novels comprises his *Divine Comedy*.

Lewis scholar Alister E. McGrath comments, "Lewis was deeply conscious of standing within a tradition of literary, philosophical, and theological reflection, which he extended and deepened in his own distinctive manner. There is more that remains to be discovered about Lewis's rich intellectual vision. . . . Half a century after his death, the process of receiving and interpreting Lewis has still only begun." This book is an attempt to discover more of "Lewis's rich intellectual vision."



Two brief notes are in order as to what readers can and cannot expect from this book. First, this book is not about Lewis's life, all his fictional themes, all the other authors he draws on, all the layers of echoes that pertain to some events or characters, or the connections between his novels and his personal life. It focuses only on *The Divine Comedy* as a major strand that is woven throughout Lewis's fiction, so some things that readers might expect or consider as "essential to be said" may be left unsaid here.

Second, the notes at the end of this book are for readers who are interested in more details about Dante's poem, in my agreements, disagreements, and debts to other Lewis and Dante scholars, or in the original quotations in Italian. These notes may be disregarded by readers whose primary interest is simply to learn how C. S. Lewis creatively adapts and employs Dante's *Divine Comedy* in his novels.

CHAPTER ONE

Lewis, Dante, and Literary Predecessors

In his 1919 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T. S. Eliot, a contemporary of C. S. Lewis and a major figure in English letters, claimed that every new writer will find a place in literature only if he is solidly in line with tradition, if his work fits with the “*whole* existing order” of literature that is created by the “monuments” of previous writers. The writer must have a historical sense that “involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.” In fact, for Eliot, the significance of any author lies in “his relation to the dead poets and artists” that came before him, and “not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their universality most vigorously.” Eliot’s remarks here refer to poetry. What they say applies to literature in a much broader sense. C. S. Lewis himself used the term “poetry” in a similar way. “By poetry,” Lewis wrote, “I mean, as the renaissance critics meant, imaginative literature whether in prose or verse.”

While writing *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the Ransom trilogy, or *The Screwtape Letters*—the “imaginative literature” for which so many of us know him—C. S. Lewis was certainly conscious of the achievements of previous writers. He expressed his approach to literary predecessors throughout his writing career in works of literary criticism as well as in his essays on a variety of topics, public lectures, letters, and religious writings. Over the course of his writing career, Lewis remained remarkably consistent in his views on literature. His overall approach to literature derives from classical and medieval traditions and is steeped in Christian thinking about creativity. Lewis’s ideas about the purpose of literature, the role of the author, the proper subject matter of storytelling, and the

role of literary predecessors in an author's creative process can best be understood in the light of these traditions.

For Lewis, the purpose of art, including literature, and therefore the role of the artist, including the writer, is "to teach and to delight." In *The Personal Heresy* (1939), Lewis writes that "the old critics were perfectly right when they demanded of literature the *utile* and the *dulce, solas* and *doctrine*, pleasure and profit." A year later, Lewis restates this position in a letter by saying that the arts "are only healthy when they are either a) Definitely the handmaids of religious, or at least moral, truth—or b) Admittedly aiming at nothing but innocent recreation or entertainment." With these statements, Lewis reaffirms an approach to literature that was accepted by ancient, medieval, Renaissance, and neo-classical authors and that has only recently been challenged in modern times. Despite whatever formula was used in any given age to express the concept, it has generally been held that the purpose of literature is either instruction or entertainment or both.

In upholding that tradition, however, Lewis is aware that he is consciously opposing a modern trend that redefines the role of the artist:

Until quite recently—until the latter part of the last century—it was taken for granted that the business of the artist was to delight and instruct his public. . . . All this has changed. In the highest aesthetic circles one now hears nothing about the artist's duty to us. It is all about our duty to him. . . . We [now] owe him "recognition." . . . The bard does not exist in order to delight the tribe; the tribe exists in order to appreciate the bard.

In rejecting this trend, Lewis condemns the notion that poets are "a separate race of great souls or mahatmas" and that "the end which we are supposed to pursue in reading . . . is a certain contact with the poet's soul." In other words, Lewis believes an author is not to be the focus of attention but is to be the channel for communicating truths to others; he or she is not meant to be "a spectacle but a pair of spectacles." Lewis likewise opposes the notion that T. S. Eliot championed in his defense of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, i.e., that "a man of genius is responsible to his peers, not to a studio full of uneducated and undisciplined coxcombs." Lewis insists, instead, that the bard does indeed exist for the sake of the tribe and that

he is indeed responsible to more than just his peers. According to Lewis, an artist's indifference to the audience "is not genius nor integrity; it is laziness and incompetence"—particularly if the role of the artist, and the purpose of literature, is to teach and delight the public that is now being held in disdain.

As for what constitutes the proper subject matter for the art of literature, Lewis's view is based partly on the tradition of "pleasure and profit" for the reader, and partly on an application of New Testament Scriptures to the literary texts. In *The Discarded Image*, Lewis describes the concept of literature held by medievalists and sums up his own position equally well: "Literature exists to teach what is useful, to honour what deserves honour, to appreciate what is delightful," and if that be the case, then the content of literature should be "useful, honourable, and delightful things." Lewis reaffirms this concept in his essay on "Christianity and Literature." According to Lewis,

Our whole destiny seems to lie in . . . acquiring a fragrance that is not our own but borrowed, in becoming clean mirrors filled with the image of a face that is not ours. . . . Applying this principle to literature, . . . we should get as the basis of all critical theory the maxim that an author should never conceive himself as bringing into existence beauty or wisdom which did not exist before, but simply and solely as trying to embody in terms of his own art some reflection of eternal Beauty and Wisdom.

For Lewis, then, the proper subject matter of literature consists in values or truths that are superior to literature and for whose sake literature exists.

In terms of literary predecessors, this meant that Lewis's approach to writing was intentional "imitation," receiving inspiration and ideas from writers of the past and at times purposely echoing them as part of adding layers of meaning to his own work. As Lewis noted in *The Personal Heresy*, this way of seeing creative work is a centuries-old tradition. When Virgil, for instance, has Aeneas unsuccessfully attempt to embrace the shade of his dead wife Cruesa three times, he is echoing the passage from Homer in which Odysseus tries to greet his dead mother in Hades. Dante's pilgrim replicates that action with the very same result when he sees his dead friend Casella on the shores of purgatory (see *Purg.* 2.76–81).

This echoing of his predecessors enriches the scene by drawing the stories of Homer and Virgil into *The Divine Comedy*. In the same way, Lewis's novels are enriched by the many stories he draws on.

Lewis's approach to "imitation," in addition to being a centuries-old tradition in Western literature, is also explicitly based on his reading of the New Testament. In "Christianity and Literature," Lewis points out that "in the New Testament the art of life itself is an art of imitation: can we, believing this, believe that literature is to aim at being 'creative,' 'original,' and 'spontaneous'[?]" Although Lewis derives his rationale here for "imitation" from Church teaching, this kind of approach to one's predecessors is the procedure that was generally recommended and adopted by Western writers until the modern period. Despite the variations that occurred in the interpretation and application of the concept of "imitation" during successive literary ages, there was at least a consensus that predecessors were to be respected, studied, and followed. Literary achievements were models for new authors, deep wells for inspiration, sign-posts to assist and guide them along the well-trod path that lay before them.

As Lewis points out, the emphasis that was placed on "originality" and "creativity" as literary ideals since the Romantic period led to a negative appraisal of "imitation" during Lewis's lifetime: "We certainly [now] have a general picture of bad work flowing from conformity and discipleship, and of good work bursting out from certain centres of explosive force . . . which we call men of genius." For Lewis, however, "imitation" and "originality" are not mutually exclusive terms. There is room for originality in Lewis's literary theory, but it is not to be achieved by consciously setting oneself off from one's predecessors as some recent theories purport. In fact, according to Lewis, when originality is raised to the status of an ideal in and of itself, it becomes self-defeating. In *Mere Christianity*, he contends that "in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply *try* to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it." Originality, then, is a by-product that can occur when an author has his or her sights set on higher goals.

Given his views on originality, Lewis maintains that the imitation of predecessors is a valid and necessary factor in the writing

of good literature, as any writer tries “to tell the truth.” This approach results, in Lewis’s case, in a profound affinity between his fiction and the vast body of writings that comprise European literature. His novels abound with echoes of Edmund Spenser, Homer, St. Augustine, John Milton, William Shakespeare, Virgil, Jonathan Swift—the list is as long as Lewis’s reading list. Lewis’s creative use of the work of past writers provides a rich experience for any reader familiar with the Western literary tradition.

However, the works echoed in Lewis’s fiction are seldom directly alluded to or quoted. Their presence tends to be woven into the fabric of Lewis’s novels in such a way that a reader’s lack of familiarity with those works constitutes no hindrance to the enjoyment of Lewis’s writing. Although erudition on the part of readers is not required to understand his stories and their messages, recognizing the ways in which he draws on his literary heritage enhances one’s appreciation for Lewis’s masterful artistry.

It is in this context that we can consider Lewis’s admiration for and “imitation” of Dante, beginning with a short history of his relationship to *The Divine Comedy*. Lewis began reading Dante’s *Inferno* in Italian in February 1917 with his tutor William Kirkpatrick, and by October 1918 he was reading through the *Purgatorio*. During Christmas of 1920 he acquired the Oxford edition of the entire *Divine Comedy*. In January 1930 he writes in a letter to his childhood friend Arthur Greeves that the *Paradiso* “has really opened a new world to me. . . . I should describe it as feeling more *important* than any poetry I have ever read,” and Lewis later tells him, “I think it [*Paradiso*] reaches heights of poetry which you get nowhere else.”

Lewis continued reading Dante’s poem thereafter. In a letter to Arthur Greeves written in January 1930, Lewis reports that he and Owen Barfield were reading *The Divine Comedy*, and the *Paradiso* in particular, during a four-day visit. Six months later, in a letter to Greeves on July 8, Lewis says he and Barfield finished the *Paradiso*. The next year, Lewis again writes to Greeves that he and Barfield had “splendid talks and reading of Dante.”

In 1937, Lewis joined the Dante Society at Oxford. According to Humphrey Carpenter, Lewis and Colin Hardie, the classical tutor at Magdalen College, read Dante aloud together in weekly evening sessions before World War II. At Dorothy L. Sayers’s request, Lewis

offered ongoing feedback to her about her translation of *The Divine Comedy* beginning in the the late 1940s.

Lewis's high regard for Dante and his poem remained undiminished throughout his life. In 1936, in his award-winning work of literary criticism *The Allegory of Love*, he states, "Dante remains a strong candidate for the supreme poetical honours of the world." In 1940 he writes, "I think Dante's poetry, on the whole, the greatest of all the poetry I have read." George Sayer, a former student and a biographer of Lewis, confirms that Dante was Lewis's favorite poet and that his "love for *The Divine Comedy* was lifelong."

Lewis's esteem for Dante can be demonstrated by the abundance of references to *The Divine Comedy* throughout his writings. Lewis is reputed to have remembered everything he read and had an "astonishing verbatim memory," so it is not surprising that continual references to what he considered as "the greatest of all the poetry I have read" would emerge in his works and letters. Lewis's three essays on Dante appear posthumously in *Studies on Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (1966) with seven mentions of him in that book's other essays. He mentions Dante thirty-nine times in *The Discarded Image* (1964), his book on the medieval worldview; twenty-three times in *The Allegory of Love* (1936), his book on courtly love and the development of allegory; and nineteen times in his commentary on *Arthurian Torso* (1948), Charles Williams's unfinished lyric cycle on the Arthurian legend. These references make it clear that Lewis looked to Dante as a model and a leading representative of what was best in the Middle Ages.

What is perhaps more telling is that books on topics that do not deal with medieval and Renaissance literature and worldviews also include multiple references to Dante. In the three volumes of *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, Lewis refers to Dante or his poem over seventy-five times and recommends the poem to some correspondents as necessary reading. The multiple references that appear for decades throughout all his various kinds of writings indicate that Dante was always close to the surface of Lewis's mind.

Given Lewis's admiration for Dante's art and his profound knowledge and understanding of *The Divine Comedy*, we can turn to the ways in which Lewis's literary imitation of Dante is evident in his novels. Crucially, Lewis followed Dante in presenting perennial Christian truths to his readers and used the form of the journey

narrative as a framework for conveying these teachings. In terms of form, Lewis's fiction is tied intimately to Dante's *Divine Comedy* in a variety of ways:

1. Lewis occasionally paraphrases or quotes Dante directly.
2. Lewis's choice of vocabulary, phrasing, and inclusion of odd details can at times only be explained as tipping his hat to Dante.
3. Throughout Lewis's fiction, settings, characters, events, and dialogues from *The Divine Comedy* reappear in new adaptations or in new combinations.
4. Some metaphors from Dante become literal events in Lewis's stories.
5. Lewis's protagonists resemble Dante's pilgrim through specific parallel details, and their journeys are shaped to mirror several journey patterns in Dante's poem.
6. Finally, Lewis's construction of imaginary worlds follows techniques that Dante uses to translate spiritual and theological concepts into concrete images.

Because of the subtle ways in which Lewis adapts Dante's material to modern situations, the ever-present *Divine Comedy* most often lies below the surface of Lewis's fiction and may not be visible at first glance. The following brief plot summary of Dante's poem may be helpful to some readers. The theological significance invested in these narrative details by Dante, and then in turn by Lewis, will be discussed as they reappear in Lewis's novels in their transformed shapes.

The Divine Comedy

Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (also called *La Divina Commedia* or just the *Commedia*) was written at the beginning of the fourteenth century and deals with the state of souls after death. He expresses the theme of his poem as showing how a human being

“by his merits or demerits in the exercise of his free will . . . is deserving of reward or punishment by justice.” Hoping to direct his readers to God, he says his purpose in writing is “to remove those living in this life from a state of misery and to bring them to a state of happiness.” Dante’s clear aim was to bring enlightenment to his readers that would lead to change. Although written from a medieval Catholic viewpoint, the poem for the most part presents basic doctrines that Christians from all denominations accept: hell is reserved for unrepentant sinners, heaven is the dwelling place of God and the redeemed, and people still living on earth must turn from their sin and live righteous lives.

Dante’s poem is divided into three major parts that represent the three realms of his afterlife—the *Inferno* (Hell), the *Purgatorio* (Purgatory), and the *Paradiso* (Heaven). It is further divided into sections called cantos that consist of 115 to 160 verses. After an introductory canto, thirty-three cantos are dedicated to each realm, adding up to 100 cantos (a number representing fullness and completeness for Dante). The poem tells the story of a man in midlife who has departed from the path of truth and finds himself lost in a dark wood. Virgil, the classical Roman poet and author of the *Aeneid*, is divinely appointed to offer him a journey through the afterlife as his only way back to the right path. Virgil leads him through hell and purgatory, and Beatrice, a woman in Florence whom Dante loved and who had died prematurely, leads him through the realms of heavens and then into the spiritual heaven beyond space and time, the true dwelling of God and the redeemed, which he calls the Empyrean.

Some features of Dante’s narrative described here appear only once in Lewis’s fiction; other features appear again and again, although always in new creative ways. Given Lewis’s position on the imitation of literary predecessors, his prodigious memory, and his proven admiration for Dante, it should come as no surprise that this is the case.

Inferno

Dante’s hell, located under the earth, is funnel-shaped and is divided into nine concentric circles where sinners are punished. Each circle has a guardian, a creature from classical mythology that

embodies that circle's sin, and a distinct punishment that Dante calls a *contrapasso*—a punishment that reflects the particular sin. (For example, murderers who shed the blood of others are immersed in a river of boiling blood, receiving for all eternity the essence of what they chose in life.)

Once past the entrance to hell, Virgil and the pilgrim see souls in hell's vestibule who refused to take a stand for good or evil when they were alive, so in line with their choices in life, they are rejected by both heaven and hell. After crossing the classical river Acheron into hell, Virgil and the pilgrim visit Limbo where, according to medieval theology, unbaptized righteous pagans live in unfulfilled desire for God. The next four circles of hell are for punishments of sins of the flesh, i.e., sins of incontinence that are linked to emotions and passions: lust, gluttony, avarice/prodigality, and wrath.

Virgil and Dante next arrive at the iron walls of the City of Dis (another name for Hades) that separate the five upper circles of hell from the four lower circles. Unlike sins that indulge the flesh and are linked to passions, the transgressions punished in these lower circles are premeditated sins of the heart and mind: heresy, violence, fraud, and treason. When Virgil and the pilgrim are refused entrance to this lower hell, an unnamed angel arrives to open the gate of Dis and enforce God's will for the pilgrim's journey to continue. After seeing the sixth circle of heretics, the pilgrim and his guide visit the last three circles, each of which has several subdivisions. The seventh circle is divided into separate rings that punish three kinds of violence: (1) against others (murder, destruction of others' property), (2) against self (suicide), and (3) against God (blasphemy, sodomy, usury). The eighth circle is subdivided into ten circular ditches called *Malebolge* (literally, "evil pouches"), each lower than the one above it. Ten kinds of fraud are punished here in different ways: seduction, flattery, simony, sorcery, civil graft, hypocrisy, theft, deception, sowing of discord, and the falsifying of various things. The last circle is divided into four zones corresponding to different kinds of treason: against family, against country, against guests, and against benefactors. At the bottom of this ninth circle, which is the center point inside the earth, a three-faced Satan (a parody of the Trinity) with six wings is encased in ice up to the middle of his chest. To leave hell, Virgil and the pilgrim climb down one of Satan's legs and

follow a subterranean tunnel that leads to the earth's unexplored southern hemisphere.

Purgatorio

Emerging from hell, Virgil and Dante arrive at the shore of the island where Mount Purgatory is located. Souls destined for heaven are transported here in a boat piloted by an angel to begin the process of purification. Ante-purgatory, the grassy area around the base of the mount, is populated by souls who delayed repentance and are now delayed from ascending the mount. Mount Purgatory has seven successive circular ledges where souls are being purged of each of the seven capital sins: pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust—in that sequence from bottom to top. As each of these sinful dispositions is purged, souls simultaneously grow in virtue through their meditation on sacred and secular examples of that virtue and its corresponding vice. (For example, the proud, carrying heavy stones on their backs, are bent over and thus have their eyes cast down as they meditate on biblical and classical examples of humility carved on the side of the cliff and examples of pride carved on the path they walk. The weight of the load that each one carries is proportionate to the amount of pride needing to be cleansed.)

Since Mount Purgatory is inaccessible because of the high wall around it, Dante's pilgrim is supernaturally transported to its gate by a heavenly lady (Lucia) who is intervening to assist the pilgrim. The angel guardian at the mountain's gate inscribes seven P's ("P" for *peccatum*, sin) on the pilgrim's forehead that indicate the seven vices that need to be purged on the mountain's ledges. As Dante's pilgrim climbs the stairs that connect one ledge to another, the angel guarding those particular stairs removes one "P," signifying the pilgrim's cleansing from that sinful attitude.

After going through the wall of fire on the last ledge (lust), the pilgrim finds himself in the original Garden of Eden. He and Virgil are welcomed by a woman named Matilda and then watch a procession of several allegorical figures: men representing the books of the Old and New Testaments, seven nymphs representing the theological and cardinal virtues, and a gryphon representing the human and divine natures of Christ. Beatrice arrives in the chariot being pulled by the gryphon, and the pilgrim is reunited with her at this point.

Beatrice first greets the pilgrim by rebuking him for having departed from the path of righteousness after her death and chronicles his misdeeds. The pilgrim, who had expected a joyous reunion with the woman who had been a channel of God's grace for him on earth, experiences a series of conflicting emotional reactions during this time, acknowledges his sin, and is cleansed in Eden's two streams, Lethe and Eunoë. The pilgrim next sees symbolic reenactments, interpreted by Beatrice, of the history of the Christian church and its future victory over evil.

Paradiso

As Beatrice gazes on God and the pilgrim gazes at her, they rise up through each of the nine spheres of heaven (the classical and medieval divisions of heaven in the Ptolemaic model of the universe at that time). Redeemed souls display the different degrees of blessedness they enjoy in the Empyrean, their true dwelling, by appearing to the pilgrim in each of the seven planetary spheres (Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, the Sun, Jupiter, and Saturn). In the eighth sphere of the Fixed Stars (the constellations), the pilgrim sees symbolic visions of the whole host of heaven. In the ninth sphere, which is referred to as the Prime Mover (or the *Primum Mobile*) and is responsible for the rotation of the other eight spheres below it, he sees the nine orders of angels who administer God's reign throughout the universe.

The pilgrim then moves beyond the physical universe and enters into the spiritual heaven of the Empyrean. Beatrice returns to her heavenly seat, and St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a twelfth-century mystic, helps orient the pilgrim as he sees successive symbolic visions of the court of heaven. In his last vision of the redeemed, he sees them in white robes seated in circular rows, which he compares to a white rose, gazing at a point of light (God). As he gazes at God and experiences a mystical vision and understanding of the incarnation, his will and desire "revolve" around God because having seen God, he too, like the rest of the universe, is now moved by God's love.