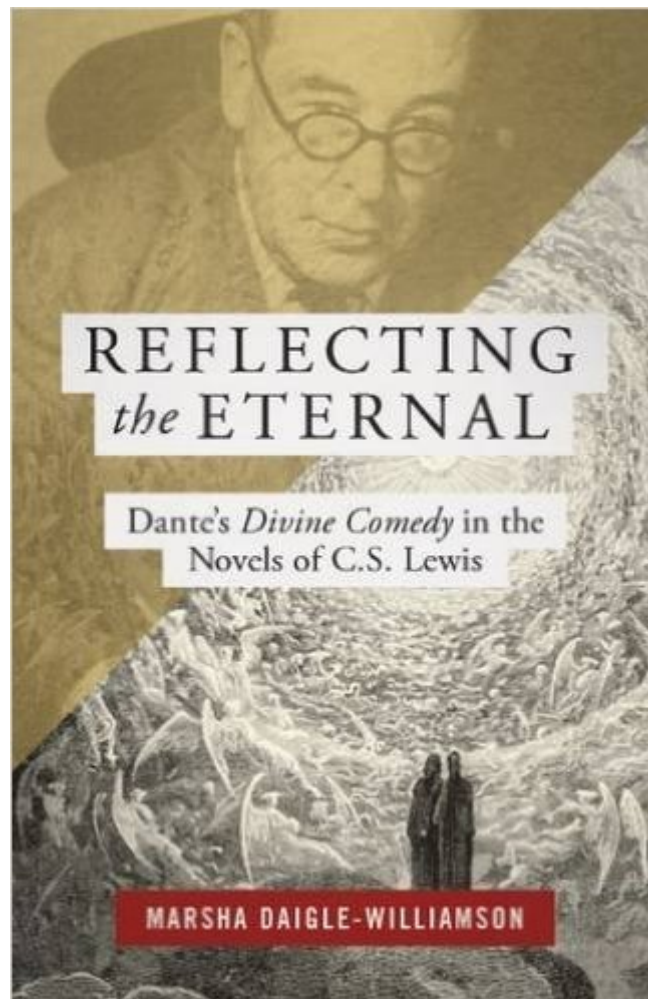


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Reflecting The Eternal: Dante's Divine Comedy In The Novels Of C.S. Lewis



Synopsis

The characters, plots, and potent language of C. S. Lewis's novels reveal everywhere the modern writer's admiration for Dante's Divine Comedy. Throughout his career Lewis drew on the structure, themes, and narrative details of Dante's medieval epic to present his characters as spiritual pilgrims growing toward God. Dante's portrayal of sin and sanctification, of human frailty and divine revelation, are evident in all of Lewis's best work. Readers will see how a modern author can make astonishingly creative use of a predecessor's material-in this case, the way Lewis imitated and adapted medieval ideas about spiritual life for the benefit of his modern audience. Nine chapters cover all of Lewis's novels, from Pilgrim's Regress and his science-fiction to The Chronicles of Narnia and Till We Have Faces. Readers will gain new insight into the sources of Lewis's literary imagination that represented theological and spiritual principles in his clever, compelling, humorous, and thoroughly human stories.

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Customer Reviews

Having read a great deal of C. S. Lewis and having read Dante's Comedia at least four times (in two different translations) this work by Daigle-Williamson deepens my understanding of Lewis's works tremendously. Not only does the author deepen and enhance what Lewis has to say but also brings new insights into Dante's intention in the Comedia, calling the reader to give serious thought to one's final end. Good companions should be in hand while reading Daigle-Williamson's work: Lewis's works and a good translation of Dante.

I still clearly remember a speaker who came to visit my college campus approximately ten years ago, when I was just a freshman. It was Dr. Michael Ward, and I only knew that he was speaking about one of my favorite authors--C.S. Lewis. He spoke at length about what later became the content of his book, *Planet Narnia*, opening up Lewis in completely new ways by showing how Lewis's study of medieval cosmology influenced the *Chronicles of Narnia*. In the years since that lecture, I've grown to love such literary scholarship and the ways in which it helps the reader to see an added depth and richness to an already beloved text--or perhaps, making a connection between a familiar text and an unfamiliar one, inspiring the reader to explore both more deeply. In that same vein, Dr. Marsha Daigle-Williamson's *Reflecting the Eternal*, which explores the connections between Dante and Lewis's fictional works, has certainly whet my appetite to re-read these works again with a new appreciation for how they illumine each other. Daigle-Williamson begins her book with a helpful introduction to Lewis and some of his own thoughts about writing and 'imitating' other authors, before moving to an overview of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, helpful for readers who may be entirely unfamiliar with the work (or who, like me, haven't read it in quite some time). In subsequent chapters, she neatly expounds the connections between Dante and each of Lewis's fictional works: *The Pilgrim's Regress*, *Out of the Silent Planet*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *Perelandra*, *That Hideous Strength*, *The Great Divorce*, the *Chronicles of Narnia*, and *Till We Have Faces*. Helpfully, each chapter contains a brief summary of the book being discussed, making Daigle-Williamson's book incredibly accessible to readers. Even though I haven't [yet] read *The Pilgrim's Regress*, the brief overview and her clearly organized argument allowed me to grasp the points she was making just as well as I did in the chapter on *The Great Divorce* (which I've read at least a half-dozen times). Readers don't need to worry about coming to this book having already read Dante or even every single work of Lewis's that is discussed. Daigle-Williamson provides more than enough context for her evidence without boring the reader or detracting from her own thesis--a difficult balance to achieve! Daigle-Williamson primarily focuses on a few motifs of Dante that are present throughout Lewis's fiction: the creation of worlds (more prevalent in the first few works), a pilgrim's journey, a Virgil-like guide, and a Beatrician figure. What's utterly fascinating is the way that Lewis uses these motifs in varying ways, depending on the work; sometimes he combines the Virgil/Beatrice role or has multiple characters fulfill them, sometimes he shows the entirety of the pilgrim's three-part journey through the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, while other times only part of the journey is shown. Daigle-Williamson highlights these differences for the reader, adeptly revealing Lewis's skill and creativity and the increasing complex use of these motifs in his novels. My

personal favorite of the works discussed was *The Great Divorce*, not only because it had some of the strongest parallels, but also because it's my favorite novel of Lewis's, and certainly the one I am the most familiar with. Yet despite my familiarity, I have to admit I had never thought of the allusions to Dante prior to reading this work! As Daigle-Williamson mentions early on, Lewis's subtle use of "...the ever-present *Divine Comedy* most often lies below the surface...and may not be visible at first glance" (15), and this was certainly the case for me, though it seems obvious to me now. Beginning with the fictive world, Daigle-Williamson notes how, similar to Dante, Lewis does include both hell, purgatory, and heaven, though not in quite the traditional way that Dante does. The "Grey Town" (which is later revealed to be hell) is explicitly mentioned as being a Purgatory for those souls which eventually travel from the Plain to the Mountains. Additionally, Daigle-Williamson points out that the Plain is the "moral equivalent of Dante's purgatory because it is the place of preparation for heaven" (130). This is just one brief example of the way in which Lewis takes key concepts from Dante, but varies them subtly and creatively to add unique nuances to his own story. When considering characters, it seems clear that George MacDonald most certainly fulfills the roles of Virgil and Beatrice as he guides the narrator through his journey, and Daigle-Williamson explains this connection thoroughly while adding that MacDonald's character also echoes three other minor characters from Dante as well, adding that MacDonald is "one of the most vivid examples of the technique Lewis uses throughout this novel to create continuous, multilayered echoes of Dante's poem" (137). But perhaps most interesting to me was in the discussion of Sarah Smith as Beatrice's parallel. As Daigle-Williamson discussed Beatrice types in other works, I had begun anticipating that Sarah Smith would serve this function in *The Great Divorce*. However, I was not expecting the explanation of the particular line discussed here: "After such a specific kind of prelude, Lewis's narrator naturally has to ask his guide, 'Is it?...is it?' (GD 107), meaning, of course, 'Is it...is it Dante's Beatrice?' The question need not have been repeated twice, but perhaps Lewis had in mind Beatrice's repetition in her initial greeting when she first appears in the garden: 'Ben son, ben son Beatrice' (Purg 30.73), meaning, 'I really am, I really am Beatrice'" (151). I instantly remembered this moment, because it was always a curious note for me in my previous readings of *The Great Divorce*, my only thought was that possibly the narrator was thinking the figure was the Theotokos (the Virgin Mary). However, that idea never seemed to satisfy me completely and it seemed to be a slightly random interjection; interpreting the figure as Beatrice instead makes more sense of the double-repetition of the question. All in all, this is a very beautiful and subtle reference surrounding a figure who clearly functions in a Beatrice-like role for her husband, the Tragedian, as Daigle-Williamson aptly demonstrates in the rest of her discussion. It would be impossible to discuss

every chapter in the same level of detail in a brief review, but I hope to have given the reader the briefest of tastes into some of the parallels that they can expect to read in this book. All of Lewis's works do have these sorts of parallels, though *The Great Divorce* does seem to be the most clearly connected to Dante. If there was one weaker chapter it was the last on *Till We Have Faces*, mostly because the connections to Dante seemed to have much broader strokes--less unique to Dante in particular and perhaps more strongly echoing the Christian theology that they share, though even here the themes of a pilgrim's journey and Virgil/Beatrice figures seem evident. There were certainly a few pieces of evidence in each chapter that occasionally seemed to be a bit of a 'stretch' or seemed to draw more broadly on the larger Christian Tradition that Dante and Lewis would have shared as opposed to being a specific connection to Dante. Yet there certainly was plenty of evidence in each work that was very unique, the most persuasive being unique Dantean phrases that were used in particularly parallel moments or even quotes from Lewis's letters and other writings explaining his references to or appreciation of Dante. When all the pieces are taken as a whole, the Dantean influence in Lewis's fiction certainly seems clear. Ultimately, the subtlety of connection on Lewis's part serves his stories well, as Daigle-Williamson notes, "[The works of Dante and other authors] tend 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" (13). In many ways, this is the true genius of Lewis's craft: his works stand on their own two feet, they can be understood apart from their connection to other classic works. And yet, the moment when the reader steps back and notices the proverbial "giants" underneath allows for even more astounding insights--into Lewis as a person, his own works, and the other works which have become the "furniture" of his mind. That is the mark which every author should aspire to reach: to create books that can be read again and again, each time drawing the reader "further up and further in" to their richness, and to their connections to numerous other examples of literature and human history. And it is always helpful to have a book such as *Reflecting the Eternal* to help illuminate these connections and excite the reader to go and mine the source texts more fully. Disclaimer: I received a review copy of this book in exchange for this review, but that did not affect the content of my review in any way.

When I received a copy of *Reflecting the Eternal*, I was intrigued by the subject matter (Dante's influence on C.S. Lewis) but equally intrigued by the author, Dr. Marsha Daigle-Williamson. The

name stood out to me and it bugged me until I figured out who she is. She is the translator for the Preacher to the Papal Household. As soon as I had that ah-ha moment, this book moved up from a must read to an instant read. The book begins with an introduction that talks about the themes and characters in Lewis' novels and how they were influenced by classics in Western literature. She then points out that no one has analyzed Dante's impact on Lewis' works, which she finds surprising because she believes that Dante's Divine Comedy is essential for understanding all of Lewis' works. She then provides us an opening chapter which details Lewis' admiration for Dante and a brief summary of the Dante Comedy. Dr. Daigle-Williamson then takes us through a chronological examination of the works of C.S. Lewis and explains the influence of Dante in each. The chapters are as follows: 2. The Pilgrim's Regress 3. Out of the Silent Planet 4. The Screwtape Letters 5. Perelandra 6. That Hideous Strength 7. The Great Divorce 8. The Chronicles of Narnia 9. Till We Have Faces

Reading through this book, I realized just how little of C.S. Lewis' works that I have actually read. For that reason, the chapters I connected with more are logically the ones which I have read. For example. In the chapter on The Pilgrim's Regress, we see the use of a pilgrim and a guide like Beatrice. In the chapter on The Screwtape Letters, we see similarities between Lewis and Dante in the description of Hell and the three stages of spiritual development. My favorite chapter, without a doubt, was the one that addressed The Chronicles of Narnia. Dr. Daigle-Williamson shows how The Silver Chair is similar to the Inferno, and she also compares The Voyage of the Dawn Treader to Dante's Purgatory and Paradise. As many times as I have read those books, the clear influence of Dante never struck me, but it made me want to immediately go re-read them all. That will have to wait until I read Lewis' Ransom Trilogy (Out of the Silent Planet, Perelandra, and That Hideous Strength). It is a series I have always wanted to read, but I have extra motivation to do so now. The level of research, notes, and academic depth in this book is astounding. You would normally pay \$50 for a book of this nature from an academic publisher, but the \$15 price point makes this book a bargain! I have long considered myself a student/fan of C.S. Lewis, but after reading this, I realize I still have so much to read and learn. If you are a fan of Lewis, Dante, and/or great literature then you will want to read this book. Like me, you'll probably need to read or re-read some of these works either before or after reading this book, but you will read them at a deeper level and appreciate them all the more.

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