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C.S. Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters*

In Christian writing there is often an emphasis of demons and the Devil in them. C.S. Lewis’s novel *The Screwtape Letters* features two demons as the main characters. Wormwood is a low level demon who works as a “tempter”—his ultimate is to have the Patient go to Hell when he dies so that the Patient’s soul can be devoured by demons. Wormwood is inexperienced and, frankly, incompetent. He writes to his uncle, Screwtape, who is an upper level demon who works in Hell’s bureaucracy (i.e., the Lowerarchy). Screwtape attempts to help Wormwood tempt the Patient (an unnamed British man) and through a series of letters, directs Wormwood. In the end, Wormwood is unsuccessful and the Patient dies and goes to Heaven. As punishment, Wormwood is devoured by his uncle and other demons. If read straight, the book could seem disturbing especially towards Christian readers: the entire premise of *The Screwtape Letters* is a demon attempting to lure a man away from “the Enemy" (Christ) and bring him to “Our Father Below” (the Devil). However, *The Letters* are a work of satire that are used to concentrate and educate on Christian theology, especially in regard to temptation and resisting temptation and the lack of awareness of the presence of the Devil and demons in daily Christian life.

One of Lewis’s key strengths in *The Screwtape Letters* is his use of irony. The emphasized use of the term “Patient” implies a sense of concern for that person’s well-being, usually in a positive light. However, “The word ‘patient’ turns deeply ironic once one realizes that it refers to the victim being subjected to Wormwood’s temptations” (Schakel 138) and is no longer the term to be used by a genuine caregiver. By not giving a name to the Patient, Lewis is creating a more universal character and the readers are supposed to recognize themselves in him. In the first letter, Lewis makes his satirical and ironic take known and it carries throughout the thirty-one letters. While Lewis writes from a demonic perspective, he points out how easily a Christian can be corrupted and pulled away from God. His concern for an ambivalent attitude towards demons is obvious and Lewis seeks to remedy this lack of understanding and ignorance through *The Letters.*  He prefaces the book with this:

“There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight” (Lewis *Letters*).

Lewis believes that humans are doomed either way—too much acknowledgement and man becomes consumed or obsessed with devils and the focus is taken away from God. But having no knowledge of the devils leaves a man ignorant and possibly defenseless against their manipulations. A healthy balance then needs to be struck up between the two.

Another way that Lewis plays into the narrations irony is when he points out another persons oddity can create disdain for one another and Screwtape urges Wormwood to take advantage of that. It is “light, humorous ridicule of the folly of our tendency to allow trivialities and externals to dominate over crucial internal issues” (Schakel 139). By focusing on subjective and small annoyances, Lewis warns humanity that it is a path to success for Wormwood and other devils. Lewis constantly plays with, even to the point of perversion, common human behavior. Throughout *The Letters*, Wormwood is encouraged to subtly use the Patient’s disdain and annoyance for this around him as a means of guiding him to Hell.

Throughout *The Letters*, Screwtape often divulges many of God’s true intentions and Lewis clearly and articulately explains Christian doctrine through Screwtape’s disgust. It is a deliberate, although at times subtle, commentary—if a demon finds the theology useful (even as means of undermining God) then a Christian should be even more aware and knowledgeable of the theology.

[The enemy] wants each man, in the long run, to be able to recognise all creatures (even himself) as glorious and excellent things. He wants to kill their animal self-love as soon as possible; but it is His long-term policy, I fear, to restore to them a new kind of self-love — a charity and gratitude for all selves, including their own… For we must never forget what is the most repellent and inexplicable trait in our Enemy; He really loves the hairless bipeds He has created…” (Lewis *Letters*).

Despite these being words of a demon, there is a fundamental Christian truth to them that Lewis strongly believes and emphasizes throughout his works. There are many times throughout *The Letters* where Lewis blatantly lays out what his, and many Christian, beliefs are. Lewis seeks to educate through his satirical work and reemphasize the common beliefs that many Christians hold dear.

C.S. Lewis also uses *The Screwtape Letters* as a means to correct the erroneous portrayal of Satan by Milton and other Romantics. Lewis believes there is nothing special or heroic of Satan—there are some who view Milton’s Satan as the hero of *Paradise Lost*  for standing up to God. Lewis believes that is a mistake to read Satan as a sympathetic character—his entire purpose is to defy God and pull humanity away from God. Lewis has “an essential feature of the demonic character—pure malice—as well as a core affective component of traditional encounters with the Devil—the experience of terror” (Stutz 210) that was lacking from Milton’s Satan. The Devil and his demons have returned to a more grotesque and medieval incarnation in *The Screwtape Letters*—Lewis’s intention of returning the Devil to a more horrifying figure will bring the truth of his (the Devil’s) true nature back into the forefront of Christian and secular conversation. These grotesque representations of the Devil and demons are founded in the Bible’s Book of Revelation. In Revelation “Satan is described as ‘a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads’ that ‘stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child’ (Rev 12. 3, 4 NRSV)” (Stutz 212). This biblical depiction of Satan further helps Lewis to form his own version of Satan that is similarly monstrous to the one found in the Bible. He dehumanizes the demons in *The Screwtape Letters* and there is a scene where Screwtape is so overcome with rage that he turns into a cockroach—a vivid and disgusting image of a being so repulsive to humans.

In Hell, love is misinterpreted as hunger—the demons want the souls in Hell so that they can satisfy their hunger; when a soul goes to heaven, being with God and Jesus forever is the ultimate form of love. Lewis has created a Hell where demons are always hungry for more—whether it be souls or power. The demons are just as focused on gaining a soul as tearing one another down, when it suits them. Lewis called their society “dog eat dog” and in the end that literally happens, proving “to be the principle of the whole organization” (Stutz 224). Screwtape and other demons will be able to feed off of Wormwood’s essence as punishment for letting the Patient end up with the enemy.

Lewis also uses sarcasm as a way to highlight the differences between the attitudes of Satan and God towards humanity. Throughout *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape mocks Christian values and simple Christian truths. Lewis, through Screwtape, points out that people’s lack of belief in the Devil—Lewis wants and hopes for readers to understand the reality of Hell and the manipulation of Satan and his devils that they face. Screwtape encourages Wormwood to not reveal himself to the Patient because by doing so, he invites the Patient to be open to the belief of the Enemy. Satan would prefer to have his existence remain unknown and the torment that humans face not be a slap in the face of “demons exist”. Satan’s “true nature is to conceal himself, while God’s is to reveal Himself” (Hardwood 70). Satan and God’s true natures seemingly parallel with society’s disbelief in Satan and Christians’s firm belief in God.

Screwtape also laments over the advantages that the Enemy has over the devils. Since it is a Christian narrative, there is a constant reassurance throughout that God will always have the upper hand over the demonic beings. One of the advantages that Screwtape bemoans is God’s advantage of having lived a human life—Jesus Christ, God’s Son of Man. Because Jesus had been a human, the Enemy has a better understanding of humans and can relate to them whereas demons are not like them at all. Screwtape also makes it clear that when battling with the Enemy over a Patient, “one can never *quite* overhear what He says to them” (Lewis *Letters*), once again acknowledging that they do not possess the advantage to fully combat God because they cannot be sure of what is said to the Patient.

Lewis also uses inverted ideology to teach about Christianity. He takes familiar titles such as “Our Father [Above]," which refers to God, and inverts it to “Our Father Below”. Screwtape continually refers to Satan as “Our Father Below,” a reverent way of referring to Satan. By taking something that is so familiar, “Lewis manipulates people and makes them slightly uncomfortable with the familiarity of the titles and attributes to God that traditionally belong to Satan” (Stutz 142). Screwtape also inverts the common conceptions of God and Satan. He refers to God as a “hedonist at heart…[and] he has bourgeois mind” (Lewis *Letters*), which is a simple role reversal of God and Satan. Lewis uses these inverted ideas as a way to show the differences between God and Satan.

*The Screwtape Letters* is a strong satirical narrative that is used by Lewis to reveal important and relevant Christian truths about God and His love for humanity versus Satan and his complete disdain for them. These truths are revealed through irony, satire, and inverted ideology by Lewis. Every Christian can firmly attest to their belief in God and Jesus, but as Lewis points out, people are not as sure about the Devil and their ignorance to Christian values beyond a simple belief will condemn them. Ultimately, Lewis strongly supports and defends the Christian belief, and his own strong belief, that God is being of unfailing love and will do anything to have His “children” with him and Satan’s efforts to fight it.

Works Cited

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