

Validity in
interpretation:
merging experience
and spirits in "the
screwtape lett...



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“ And anyway, why should the creature be happy? Your affectionate uncle, Screwtape” (Lewis 41).

In the preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, author and Christian apologist C. S. Lewis essentially clarifies the target audience of the work: “ 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, preface). In this epistolary novel, Screwtape, a senior devil, instructs his nephew, and “ junior tempter,” in how to effectively capture the soul of his assigned human, who is referred to only by “ the patient.”

Screwtape thoroughly describes tactics to win over and subconsciously steal the devotion of the patient, leveraging simple and seemingly natural human tendencies which he claims were created by demons. Within this interesting form of narration, all intuitive “ morality” becomes reversed, as evil becomes good, good becomes evil, and the patient’s development of virtues is considered fatal. Through such an ironic inversion of traditionally accepted and encouraged values, Lewis illustrates the psychology of human beings and their moral choices as dictated and manipulated by spiritual beings.

All readers of this piece by C. S. Lewis have different beliefs and experiences which shape their interpretation of the text. Perspectives and responses are based on time period, reader gender, whether the reader is Christian, atheist, or another religion, and a general accumulation of beliefs

determined by individual experience and upbringing. This idea of endless unique outlooks to every text is described by literary analyst and English

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professor Ross C. Murfin as the literary criticism of “ reader-response,” which raises “ theoretical questions about whether our responses to a work are the same as its meanings, whether a work can have as many meanings as we have responses to it, and whether some responses are more valid than others” (Murfin 337). According to reader response critic Wolfgang Iser, readers who are actively seeking to “ bring ‘ things’ into the text”(Cordell 292) are known as “ actual readers.” In accordance with Iser’s take on the reader response theory, there are two different types of readers, the “ implied reader, one the text creates for itself,”(Cordell 292) and the “ actual reader”(Cordell 292) who applies experience, personal beliefs, and previous knowledge to the text, completing the work’s meaning in doing so. Somewhere between the “ implied reader” and the “ actual reader” lies the true intended meaning, as one is inspired by the author, and the other by the reader. This research paper will attempt to address the many factors which could influence different interpretations of Lewis’ The Screwtape Letters, and how these perspectives reveal intended meaning. I will compare opposing views using secondary criticisms of the novel, two of the most essential predispositions being whether the reader is Christian or atheist. I will also discuss the validity of some views compared to others, and how that is determined. C. S. Lewis’ The Screwtape Letters allows for readers to insert their own individual experiences, knowledge, and beliefs into the context of the story in order to effectively convey faults that he often sees in Christian lifestyles.

The notion of spiritual warfare, or the continual struggle of demons to manipulate and conquer individual human devotion, seems utterly absurd to

many. From the lens of a reader influenced by a progressive, decreasingly religious society, this idea seems one that only the Christian interpretation of inerrancy, or the belief that everything within the Bible is fundamentally and historically accurate, would uphold. An atheist or nonbeliever could easily pin Lewis' narrative merely as an accurate description of the human sociological condition, and that the involvement of demons in the midst of common, natural error (or morally neutral action) is completely irrelevant and absurdly false. Because of this, it seems as though the effectiveness of this piece lies within the predisposition of the reader to either the Christian faith or atheism. Lewis does not attempt to convince the unbelieving reader of the legitimacy of his claims in the existence of these demons, but rather writes in a way which very convincingly reveals their existence and practices to the already Christian reader. In reading the series of letters without any background knowledge or experience as a Christian, there seems no support for the claim that these devils dictate the evil that is present in the world.

As someone who has grown up conditioned to believe in the existence of a God and spirits, a physical manifestation of the struggles common in Christianity can be logically justified to me. This is because of my heavy reliance on what I have personally felt and experienced in my life thus far, an interesting human tendency considering our plethora of proven historical and scientific data which would more logically fuel our decisions and beliefs. This divide—experience versus fact, ethereal versus concrete, real versus subjective—is addressed from senior devil to junior as a construct of the Devil himself: “ The general rule which we have now pretty well established among them is that in all experiences which can make them happier or

better only the physical facts are “ Real” while the spiritual elements are “ subjective”; in all experiences which can discourage or corrupt them the spiritual elements are the main reality and to ignore them is to be an escapist. Thus in birth the blood and pain are “ real”, the rejoicing a mere subjective point of view; in death, the terror and ugliness reveal what death “ really means”(Lewis 77). According to Screwtape, the speaker, I have herein just demonstrated that I am victim to his master’s creation of the belief in subjectivity within experience. A categorization of all that occurs, all that physically exists, and all that is thought into a spectrum of reality dependant on our incredibly limited human perspective is fundamentally absurd; this notion is warped by our predisposition to recognize tangibles as more “ real” than the thought of our own mental existence and capacity, which enables our rendering this question in this first place and should therefore seem the most concrete reality to exist. Lewis claims that this is one of many myopic human tendencies which Screwtape tells Wormwood the demons created in order to draw the patient further and further from God. Lewis uses the perspective of the tempters or demons to address common flaws he sees in a typical pursuit of faith: “ It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out” (Lewis 18). This passage is a perfect example of what I see the broad purpose of the piece as a whole to be. Through the ironic perspective of the direct advocates and “ creators” of all evil in the world (according to Lewis), he is drawing attention to the harmful Christian practices and habits which he personally believes need to be addressed. In the aforementioned passage, he is essentially saying, “ It is funny (or ignorant) how other people always . . .” fill in the blank. Using the Devil as

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the lens just makes the message that much more powerful, as it is not coming from a fellow judgemental human, but rather the source and creator of the evil itself. In using Screwtape as the narrator, Lewis is simply giving his voice as an author more weight and credibility.

While Lewis attacks certain habits which Christians often fall into, he is also making the point that it is not from our own natural wiring that this happens, but rather from the work of demons like Screwtape and Wormwood. This may seem, depending on upbringing, just an excuse Christians can use for falling short. To a non Christian, this likely does seem more a petty justification for wrongdoing than anything else. Nonetheless, as Lewis uses Screwtape as a creative literary device to further his argument, he also does truly believe in the existence of demons, New York based secondary critic of the novel Adam Lee saying, “ Though the book may be intended allegorically, on the whole it leaves little doubt that Lewis genuinely believed that evil spirits existed and were constantly assaulting human minds” (Lee). Regardless of the author’s intended message or personal beliefs, the work will always be seen as differently by all readers. As one New Yorker writer and secondary critic of *The Screwtape Letters* reminds us, “ The novel remains wildly popular because whether or not you agree with Lewis that the Devil is real, the evils promoted by Screwtape—greed, gluttony, pride, envy, and violence—most certainly are” (Cep).

Lewis employs a writing style which allows for the insertion of one’s own experience into the context of what is being discussed. Rather than delve deeply into “ the patient’s” life, Lewis merely uses him as a representative of the human race to reveal common Christian mistakes and the Devil’s

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dictation and manipulation of those mistakes: " When the patient is an adult recently re-converted to the Enemy's [God's] party, like your man, this is best done by encouraging him to remember, or to think he remembers, the parrot-like nature of his prayers in childhood. In reaction against that, he may be persuaded to aim at something entirely spontaneous, inward, informal, and unregularised; and what this will actually mean to a beginner will be an effort to produce in himself a vaguely devotional mood in which real concentration of will and intelligence have no part" (Lewis 18). Because the patient is not even given a name, and Lewis does not delve into his personal life but rather focuses on the devil's part in it, the reader can easily insert him or herself into the patient's position and recall times that the same or similar instance has occurred in his or her life. Lewis perfectly allows for deep individual and unique response, as the reader will naturally relate all discussions to his or her own life and experiences. As Louise Rosenblatt, a pioneer in reader-response criticism, suggests, " readers transact with the text by bringing in their past life experiences to help interpret the text" (Cordell 298). This response is also very much influenced by emotion in the reader along with experience, Wolfgang Iser recognizing " the simple fact that readers respond to literature on an emotional level and that such responses are important to the understanding of the work" (Cordell 292). When reading the novel, one's emotional capacity, or the level to which they are naturally emotionally impacted, will inevitably influence their interpretation of the text. Similarly, the level to which the reader relates to the temptation methods employed by the demons will impact emotional response, and therefore overall interpretation of meaning.

With a modern, progressive outlook, one would notice certain unequal portrayals when reading this work. Throughout the novel, sexist undertones can be recognized in Lewis' character selection, which can be seen simply in a lack in female characters, most noticeably in that all demons mentioned are male. Even in excluding females from such a negative role, there is inherent inequality. However, Lewis also demonstrates considerable awareness of sexual double standards: "It is the business of these great masters to produce in every age a general misdirection of what may be called sexual "taste". It is all a fake, of course; the figures in the popular art are falsely drawn; the real women in bathing suits or tights are actually pinched in and propped up to make them appear firmer and more slender and more boyish than nature allows a full-grown woman to be. Yet at the same time, the modern world is taught to believe that it is being "frank" and "healthy" and getting back to nature. As a result we are more and more directing the desires of men to something which does not exist" (Lewis 51). To attribute this unreasonable sexual standard to the work of demons in the early 1940s, whether metaphorically or otherwise, is socially progressive.

At the time during which the novel was written, the existence of God and demons was more widely accepted than in today's culture. A modern reader, who would have a deeper scientific awareness and a conditioned skepticism of religion, might not become as fully immersed in the work as someone from the 1940s. The novel does however speak to a number of ideas and life struggles which have remained fairly unchanged through the times because of our sociological wiring: "For all readers, regardless of belief, the letters frame human experience as a familiar sequence of trials, from how you take

your tea and what parties you attend to the sort of person you choose for a partner and the sort of politics you espouse" (Cep).

Because of the clearly intended audience, the meaning of this work is not as subjective or malleable to the reader's interpretations as many other novels. Rather, the level of the reader's understanding, and therefore interpretation, of the piece is determined largely by previous knowledge and experience with Christianity. While an endless amount of interpretations, regardless of background, are possible, the most revealing aspects of the novel can be understood only by a Christian reader. However, while there may be clear meaning intended by the author, the reader response literary criticism suggests that all interpretations are valid, as everyone experiences the text in different ways: " Even if all of our evidence for a certain interpretation comes from the work itself, and even if everyone who reads the text interprets it in the same (as improbable as that might be) it is still we, the readers, who do the interpreting, assigning meaning to the text. Reader response criticism not only allows for, but even interests itself in how these meanings to change from reader to reader and from time to time" (Millikan). The validity of an interpretation is completely and utterly subjective, as every single reader of the novel has a slightly different response and interpretation. The only sound method of judging the validity of one's interpretation is by comparing it to the original intent of the author. Even still, other interpretations may be valid insight. As Wolfgang Iser puts it, the reader "' completes" or ' activates' the text" and " In a sense . . . becomes the most important element in the reading process, supplanting even the author" (Cordell 292). If this is true, then the significance of author's original

intent is drastically diminished. Regardless, the author's intent is completely unknown to the reader and is essentially irrelevant, as the reader will interpret the novel however he or she pleases.

The central philosophy of *The Screwtape Letters* rests on the principle that spiritual forces and beings do exist. Past this, and regardless of belief in this notion, Lewis calls to attention many flaws in the church, Screwtape himself saying that "One of our great allies at present is the Church itself" (Lewis 14). While I see the meaning of the work to be fairly objective and clear, someone with a different take most likely has the same extent of conviction as I do. We naturally see our own respective beliefs or interpretations as objective truth rather than opinion. Because of this innate tendency of stubborn conviction paired with the inevitable wide variation of interpretations for every literary piece, all readers view their own response as the most valid. With this considered, we can conclude that validity of response is extremely subjective and difficult to determine. The the author's intended meaning is irrelevant to the reader, and the similarity between the author's intention and the reader's interpretation rests on the author's clarity. Ultimately, the reader is very arguably the most essential element in the literary work, engagement filling intentionally left "gaps" (Cordell 299) in the writing. In this case, Lewis' writing lends itself to easy immersion, the reader naturally assuming the role of Wormwood's "patient."

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