

The screwtape letters: a story of love, war, and betrayal



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In 1942, C. S. Lewis—the well-known author of the Narnia series—wrote a fascinating book called *The Screwtape Letters*. The novel takes place in Hell, during the mortal time of World War II, and follows a series of letters written by Screwtape; a senior demon in a position of high power, to his nephew Wormwood; a junior tempter demon in the process of leading his first mortal “Patient” to the devil, referred to as “Our Father Below.” Screwtape teaches Wormwood multiple techniques to ensure the human’s soul does not go to Heaven, though these ultimately prove futile. An article in *Touchstone*, a collection of Christian journals and reviews, contains a review of *The Screwtape Letters* which states that, “The tactics he (Screwtape) recommends for Wormwood’s human ‘patient,’ are as complex and varied as their principle is simple: ‘Aggravate that most useful human characteristic, the horror, and neglect of the obvious.’ The successful tempter is one who promotes that neglect through continual distraction and misdirection” (McDonald). Some of the easiest forms of distraction come in little bundles of hatred often referred to as “pet peeves,” which are small behaviors or habits that other people perform that innately annoy one. One of Screwtape’s most prominent strategies for tempting the patient is having Wormwood plant “seeds of hatred” for those around him into the man’s head; another strong tactic of his is ensuring that Wormwood distracts the Patient from proper prayer. Unfortunately for Wormwood, both temptations inevitably fail. Correspondent to the Patient, each mortal being can be tempted by creatures such as Wormwood and Screwtape. Human beings have an inherent tendency to put their thoughts and desires before others’, and to try to correct this by praying for others. Regrettably, this is what the demons want from individuals, as shown throughout *The Screwtape Letters*. <https://assignbuster.com/the-screwtape-letters-a-story-of-love-war-and-betrayal/>

To begin, “Seeds of hatred,” also often called “pet peeves,” are small quirks or habits in another person’s behavior that one finds to be obnoxious. Many people dislike those who chew with their mouth open, bite their nails, tap surfaces in a quiet setting, talk too loudly, etc. Some of Screwtape’s earliest advice to Wormwood consisted of orders to make the Patient alert to every little thing that annoyed him about others, keeping in mind that he should never realize that he might be upsetting people with behaviors of his own, as he said, “Bring fully into the consciousness of your patient that particular lift of his mother’s eyebrows which he learned to dislike in the nursery, and let him think how much he dislikes it. Let him assume that she knows how annoying it is and does it to annoy—if you know your job he will not notice the immense improbability of the assumption. And, of course, never let him suspect that he has tones and looks which similarly annoy her” (Lewis). By instructing Wormwood to do these things, Screwtape aims to create a feeling of animosity towards his mother and other people, while simultaneously creating an egotistical feeling of righteousness. His pet peeves towards other people will bring to light how much he dislikes those around him, while his negligence to see his flaws will produce a feeling of superiority. If one can only see others’ faults, then one may assume himself to be perfect.

Furthermore, Screwtape advises Wormwood to take similar advantages over the Patient’s fellow churchgoers, to make sure that the church does not live up to the Patient’s expectations and that this feeling of superiority extends to people at his church, telling him that, “Provided that any of those neighbours [in the pew next to him at church] sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must, therefore, be somehow ridiculous. At his <https://assignbuster.com/the-screwtape-letters-a-story-of-love-war-and-betrayal/>

present stage, you see, he has an idea of 'Christians' in his mind which he supposes to be spiritual but which, in fact, is largely pictorial" (Lewis). To wayne the Patient away from the church, once again, strengthening his awareness of flaws or characteristics about others that irritate him is a primary tactic. If he sees himself as better than the churchgoers, than he may think himself to be better than the religion that they follow.

A second strategy that Screwtape promotes is the procedure of making the Patient's prayers become inefficient. One way to achieve this is by having the Patient pray to a sort of idol, unbeknownst to him, of course, that this is not the correct way to practice prayer. In letter IV, when discussing the dangers and advantages of worship, Screwtape explicitly explains, "... whatever the nature of the composite object, you must keep him praying to it—to the thing that he has made, not to the Person who has made him. You may even encourage him to attach great importance to the correction and improvement of his composite object, and to keeping it steadily before his imagination during the whole prayer" (Lewis). If the Patient remains praying to a false version of God, the prayers may be incomplete or otherwise not received. In this way, prayer can be a fantastic advantage for the devil if a human thinks that he knows what God is. Another method of using prayer to the demons' benefit is that of making patients abandon their childhood prayers and go for something unprompted and self-centered. Raymond Potgieter covers this idea in a summary of The Screwtape Letters clarifying that "Prayer must never be directed at the Enemy, but center on the person himself or on some confusion or blend of ideas about the incarnation and deity with attempts to appropriate experiential feelings validating the

experience of God" (Potgieter). It is easier for one to focus more on himself when praying if he is making the prayer up as he goes, so by having the Patient desert the old, recited prayers from childhood, his prayer slowly becomes more selfish. The Patient may be trying to replicate the way that others pray, thinking that if he says things similar to what they say during prayer, all will be good; however, this attitude takes away the spirituality of worship altogether. It reduces prayer to nothing, but a jumble of words said to make one feel as though he is participating in the religion.

Continuing, each of Screwtape and Wormwood's attempt at the patient's soul proved unsuccessful for various reasons. In the end, one of the most significant factors contributing to the loss of the Patient's soul on the demons' part, is that he fell in love with a seemingly perfect, virtuous, young Christian girl. Screwtape expressed his disgust from the moment he first heard about her and even wrote a warning that "...the very house she lives in is one that he ought never to have entered?" (Lewis). Screwtape warns multitudinous times that this girl—and everything having to do with her—is exactly that type of thing from which the Patient should have stayed away. She is a threat to the demons' cause because they know that she can help him through his mistakes and guide him on his journey to Heaven. The real turning point of the Patient's soul, however, was in death. When he died, the Patient was no longer vulnerable to Wormwood's attempts and was instead admitted into Heaven. Screwtape detailed this phenomenon by writing, "There was a sudden clearing of his eyes...as he saw you for the first time, and recognised the part you had had in him and knew that you had it no longer" (Lewis). As the Patient finally saw and recognized Wormwood as the

evil that had been plaguing him for years, he no longer had a reason to be afraid. He had been liberated from that part of himself in death, ultimately freeing himself from any demonic temptations.

Moving on to the author himself, C. S. Lewis has always had a way of creating characters simple, yet complicated enough that most readers can relate to them. The Patient in *The Screwtape Letters* is no exception. Just as Wormwood's patient, any man can be tempted by the Devil's trickery if he is not careful. Throughout the story, with many different forms of temptations displayed, there are some of Screwtape's letters that make a person think that he might have fallen for that strategy in the past. Lewis' characters have a psychological basis for being so relevant, as stated in an article about *The Screwtape Letters* in *USA Today*, "Lewis' training was not in psychology, but it may as well have been, as his insights into the nature of human weakness illustrate an incredibly wise merger of the emotional, theological, and philosophical aspects of being human" (Puterbaugh). It is no surprise, then, that the Patient can be seen as the Everyman; Lewis has a talent for interpreting specific aspects of humanity into his writing.

Finally, by examining much evidence from C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, it is apparent that Wormwood's patient is an Everyman, for Lewis wrote in a captivating way which relates each reader to the character whose soul hangs in the balance. It makes the book more interesting to read because it feels personal as Screwtape and Wormwood try many different strategies, eventually failing at the time of the Patient's death because he had been lead closer to God by the woman with which he was in love. In the last letter Screwtape writes to Wormwood, the younger demon is warned <https://assignbuster.com/the-screwtape-letters-a-story-of-love-war-and-betrayal/>

that due to his failure to seize the Patient's soul to feed the higher demons, Wormwood, himself, is now to become food for his own uncle. Although it seems tragic and shocking from a mortal's standpoint, it is understandable because of how Hell, as one can imagine, is run. Screwtape, being the stronger demon, gets to devour his " dear" nephew, Wormwood, in a genuinely dog-eats-dog domain.

Works Cited

Lewis, C. S. *The Screwtape Letters*. Geoffrey Bles, 1942.

McDonald, Brian. " Merely Saved or Merely Damned?." *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*, vol. 21, no. 2, Mar. 2008, pp. 24-29. EBSCOhost, proxygsutoc1.galileo.usg.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rh&AN=31390928&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 24 November 2017.

Potgieter, Raymond. " Revisiting C. S. Lewis' Screwtape Letters of 1941 and exploring their relation to ' Screwtape proposes a toast'." *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* [Online], 50. 1 (2016): 8 pages. Web. 25 Nov. 2017

Puterbaugh, Dolores T. " The Screwtape Letters: SOPHISTICATION and SELF-ABSORPTION." *USA Today Magazine*, vol. 139, no. 2788, Jan. 2011, pp. 68-71. EBSCOhost, proxygsu-toc1.galileo.usg.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=fh&AN=57639474&site=eds-live&scope=site.