

The Screwtape Letters Study Guide

The Screwtape Letters by C. S. Lewis

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Plot Summary

Written in the form of letters, *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis is an amusing and insightful correspondence between a senior devil, Screwtape, and his obstreperous and incompetent nephew, Wormwood, a "young fiend." All of the letters are from Screwtape to Wormwood, and the subject of the correspondence is a human being, newly converted to Christianity, whom Screwtape refers to as "the patient." Throughout the correspondence, Screwtape tries to help Wormwood tempt the patient away from Heaven and into Hell. He encourages his nephew's successes, suggests various and devious ways to enter the man's thoughts and influence him, and berates Wormwood for his failures as the man begins attending church, goes through various ups and downs of faith, falls in love with a Christian girl, and is called to service in the War. All in all, the letters and "Screwtape Proposes a Toast," the last chapter of the book, are a witty and cautionary commentary on the state of the modern human soul.

At first, Uncle Screwtape is paternal with his nephew Wormwood and quite indulgent. He gives him lots of excellent advice about how to subtly tempt a human being away from thoughts of God and one's neighbors toward thoughts of self, materialism, doubt, cowardice, and denial of the existence of God. All this is done so the soul of the human being will end up with "Our Father Below." Screwtape is a demon par excellence—very experienced, very subtle, and very wise (wise as a serpent, as a matter of fact). The believing reader will recognize just how insightful into human weaknesses Screwtape is. Indeed, C. S. Lewis mentioned he had only to look so far as his own soul and the goings on within it to be able to write the doings and thoughts of Screwtape.

Wormwood, Screwtape's nephew, is less than a stellar student when it comes to influencing a human being in a hellish direction. He makes many blunders. Screwtape's letters to his nephew grow increasingly impatient, angry, and unforgiving as the patient's faith and sincerity grow. The man becomes engaged to a Christian girl, entering her charitable and loving circle of family and friends, and grows in his faith. He also participates bravely in a war. He is triumphant in both the physical and spiritual wars in which he engages. Screwtape lambastes Wormwood with sarcasm and malice for his bumbling. Since Hell is a predatory place, Wormwood's failure will result in Screwtape consuming him.

The reader gets a further glimpse into Screwtape's (twisted) mind when he makes some highly astute commentary on the general situation of society and devilry in modern life. This commentary takes place in "Screwtape Proposes a Toast," the last section of the book. Screwtape is the guest of honor at the annual dinner of the Tempters' Training College for young devils. Both witty and cautionary, Screwtape rises to summarize modern humankind's situation and Hell's promising prospects for winning the war against God by capturing most of God's children. He claims Hell will be populated not so much with grandiose sinners as with ordinary people who, through conformity, materialism, worldliness, muddy thinking, and petty corruption, lose all sight of Heaven in their lives.



Two interesting notes appear in the beginning section. The first is that *The Screwtape Letters* is dedicated to the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, the great J. R. R. Tolkien. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis were close personal friends as well as fellow faculty members at Oxford. A second interesting note is that in the front matter C. S. Lewis quotes two famous Christians, one Protestant and one Catholic: Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, and Thomas More, a Catholic saint. Both are quoted as saying that the best way to deal with the devil is to laugh at him. Lewis took this advice to heart in writing his rollicking and rueful *The Screwtape Letters*.



Letter 1

Letter 1 Summary

Written in the form of letters, *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis is an amusing and insightful correspondence between a senior devil, Screwtape, and his obstreperous and incompetent nephew, Wormwood, a "young fiend." All of the letters are from Screwtape to Wormwood, and the subject of the correspondence is a human being, newly converted to Christianity, whom Screwtape refers to as "the patient." Throughout the correspondence, Screwtape tries to help Wormwood tempt the patient away from Heaven and into Hell. He encourages his nephew's successes, suggests various and devious ways to enter the man's thoughts and influence him, and berates Wormwood for his failures as the man begins attending church, goes through various ups and downs of faith, falls in love with a Christian girl, and is called to service in the War. All in all, the letters and "Screwtape Proposes a Toast," the last chapter of the book, are a witty and cautionary commentary on the state of the modern human soul.

Letter 1, like most of the letters from Screwtape to Wormwood, begins and ends cordially, as if Screwtape has genuine, indulgent affection for his young nephew. The difference in age, experience, sophistication, and malice between Screwtape and Wormwood is apparent, however, when Screwtape asks Wormwood if he is not being a little naive by trying to keep the patient or young man away from Christianity by using reason and argument. Screwtape scolds young fiends at the end of the letter in a superior way, yet signs the letter with affection.

Screwtape acknowledges it is good to influence the patient's reading and thoughts, as Wormwood has written to him, but reminds him it is the devil's duty neither to argue nor to teach the human beings, nor to stimulate their interest in thought. For the most part, the devil's part is to befuddle the patient's reason and to keep him from thinking deeply about anything. Screwtape cites one of his own successes in bringing a human soul to "Our Father Below" by distracting him from thoughts of God to thoughts of lunch, a passing bus, and the noonday newspaper headlines. It is best, Screwtape admonishes, to use ordinary everyday distractions so that human beings do not begin to use their reason to ponder eternity, thereby inviting the "Enemy" (God) to enter their consciousness.

Letter 1 Analysis

This letter introduces the idea that Christians are intelligent people with sound reasoning abilities and the best way to keep people from God is to keep their thoughts preoccupied with mundane things and confused by meaningless jargon. Reason, argument, and original thinking are more on God's side than the devil's. Thus, C. S. Lewis refutes the age-old accusation that reason and faith are incompatible.



Lewis also refutes, through Screwtape's words, the idea that religion and science are incompatible. Screwtape mentions that the pursuit of scientific truth has led certain modern physicists to the existence of God. This is a reference to Albert Einstein, possibly the most brilliant scientist who ever lived, to whom God was the ultimate reality. Christianity, in Lewis's view, is a thinking person's religion.



Letter 2

Letter 2 Summary

Wormwood is in trouble. The patient has had a conversion experience. He is no longer contemplating Christianity; he has become a Christian. Screwtape warns Wormwood sternly that he should not think he will escape the consequences of allowing this to happen. There is hope, however. Screwtape assures Wormwood that many people have been recovered for Hell after becoming Christians.

Screwtape warns Wormwood that the way to approach this problem is to keep the patient's attention on the faults and foibles of his fellow Christians. These faults may be real or imaginary, as long as they are perceived as faults by the patient. The patient may decide Christianity itself is as faulty as its practitioners and give it up—as long as he doesn't become humble. "All you have to do," Screwtape instructs Wormwood, "is to keep out of his mind the question 'If I, being what I am, can consider that I am in some sense a Christian, why should the different vices of those people in the next pew prove that their religion is mere hypocrisy and convention?'" (p. 8).

Related to disappointment in his fellow believers is a period of general spiritual disappointment, common once the first flush of conversion is over. Screwtape says the Enemy allows this to happen so the convert may come to God of his own free will rather than being carried along by grace. Screwtape advises Wormwood to play up this spiritual disappointment as much as possible.

Letter 2 Analysis

St. Augustine wrote there is a "visible" and an "invisible" church in Christianity. The invisible church is what Screwtape refers to when he speaks of "the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy," (p. 5). The invisible church is where the real power of Christianity lies.

Without using Augustine's terms, Lewis puts forward the idea that the visible church is comprised of a poorly conceived piece of architecture on a piece of real estate and a group of very ordinary, unremarkable, even annoying, people. To look at the visible church and not the invisible church is to get caught up in particulars which will erode faith. Rather, the Christian is to look to the invisible church, the church behind the church, where even the most ordinary person wearing out-of-fashion clothes nevertheless may be a great spiritual warrior. Appearances are deceiving when it comes to spiritual reality, Lewis is saying, and therefore it is important to be humble.



Letter 3

Letter 3 Summary

Screwtape advises Wormwood to sow seeds of domestic discord between the patient and his mother, with whom he lives, by encouraging small annoyances and frictions between the two. Further, Screwtape wants Wormwood to direct the patient's attention inward toward bogus spiritual meditation rather than outward toward service to others, e.g., his mother. Screwtape suggests Wormwood introduce some personal removal into the patient's prayers for his mother, encouraging the patient to pray for an unrealistic mental portrait of her while continuing to disregard the wants and needs of the real person next to him. Lastly, Screwtape asks for information about the mother's attitude toward her son's conversion. Can any jealousy or resentment be stirred up on that score?

Letter 3 Analysis

Philosopher Martin Buber talked about people usually relating to one another in an "I—It" relationship, where the other person is not quite real and his or her needs and wants are not considered as important as one's own. In fact, the other is an "it" or an object because he or she is only a means to achieve the self's ends or an obstacle in the way. This goes against the ideal human relationship, which is an "I-Thou" relationship in which the other person is perceived as a fully fledged fellow human being under God, with rights, privileges, desires, and aspirations all his or her own. In this letter, Screwtape is telling Wormwood to get and keep the patient in an "I-It" relationship with his mother, in which she is not a real person to him but an annoyance, a bother and someone he can hardly stand, even as he prides himself on praying for what he believes to be her soul.



Letter 4

Letter 4 Summary

Screwtape is offended in this letter. Wormwood has dared to criticize his methods, particularly in regards to prayer. Screwtape asserts his superior position over Wormwood—he is the under-secretary of a department of Hell, whereas Wormwood is just a novice tempter. Screwtape's tone is cold and angry, but as Wormwood's mentor, he realizes it is time to deal with the unhappy subject of prayer more fully.

It is best, he counsels, to keep the patient from praying at all. Best to remind the patient of praying by rote as a child, repeating the same empty phrases again and again. This will encourage the patient to pray more free form and with little discipline. Further, if the patient also fails to discipline his body by not assuming a prayerful position, the battle is won. After all, whatever a human being does with his or her body affects his or her soul.

It is good to turn the patient's attention away from the Enemy and in toward himself, so he busies himself trying to manufacture good feelings out of his own will power. Attention must be taken away from God and others at all costs. Another method is to have the patient concentrate on his own mental images of religious icons or objects. That way he will not be encountering God in any real way. However, all prayer carries the danger of a human being encountering the presence of God. Then, Screwtape says, in essence, all bets are off. Wormwood is not to worry, however. Human beings do not really want to pray all that much anyway!

Letter 4 Analysis

This letter, if interpreted in reverse, shows the successful way to pray. Genuine prayer means to cast aside all images, concepts, and impressions of God. If the person prays to God, not as he or she visualizes and conceives of Him, but as He really is, and lays himself or herself open to the presence of the living God without restraints and in sincere humility, God will make Himself real and present in that person's soul in a potentially revolutionary way. Genuine prayer is also disciplined, Lewis reminds the reader. Although people who are highly advanced in spiritual matters may be able to pray in an unstructured way, communing deeply with God, the beginner and intermediate spiritual seeker needs more discipline than that. Lewis emphasizes that the physical position assumed does make a difference, and he refers later in the letter to how thoroughly God responds to a human being on his or her knees. This is an attitude of humility—one of the Christian virtues Lewis most emphasizes.

Further, Lewis asserts prayer does not have to do with how a person feels. A person might spend more time in prayer trying to feel brave rather than humbly beseeching God for the quality of courage, effectively centering on himself or herself rather than on God. Regardless of feelings, the sincere human soul seeking God in prayer is exposed

to God's light and grace in a way which transforms and redeems the human soul to the point where the devils are, at least temporarily, vanquished.



Letter 5

Letter 5 Summary

Wormwood is ecstatic a European war has started. He is thrilled at the prospect of so much human suffering. He is also drinking headily of the wine of his patient's anguish over the war. Indulgent about the pleasures of all this, Screwtape nevertheless calls Wormwood back to the business at hand—undermining faith and keeping the man from becoming strong in virtue. Screwtape doesn't care a rap if the man is a pacifist or a patriot—war is only something to be used for devilish purposes, that is all. Instead of enjoying the suffering caused by the war, the devils do better to think how to use it for their ends. War is not necessarily good for Hell. It may make human beings turn to God; it makes them sacrifice themselves for higher causes and beliefs, and for one another. Also, since death is an ever present danger to humans in war, they are often prepared for it and standing in the good graces of their Maker. In war, Screwtape's weapon of choice—worldly complacency—is weakened. God is also ever present to those who beseech him—an ever-present help in trouble.

Letter 5 Analysis

This letter speaks of one of Lewis's most prominent themes in the book: that the state of the individual human soul is what matters, not the external circumstances. War is neither good nor bad in and of itself, but individual human responses to it are important. While war brings on great suffering, it also brings on great acts of self-sacrifice, courage, and tends to enhance faith. Certainly it brings about an understanding of one's own mortality. What is more, God has made it clear to believing humans that suffering is part of redemption. Therefore, what appears to be bad—illness, misfortune, financial reverses, war—may not be bad at all for the human soul. It all depends upon human beings' responses to the trying circumstances. What matters, war or peace, is faith and virtue. In any and all human circumstances, those are the things which really count. What is more, Lewis says, any time a human being turns to God in prayer, even and especially under desperate circumstances, God is there to rescue and redeem.



Letter 6

Letter 6 Summary

As possible military service looms for the patient, Screwtape encourages Wormwood to make sure the patient lives in a state of unreal fears about what will happen in the future, rather than merely dealing with the anxious uncertainty of the present moment. The anxious uncertainty of the present is the patient's real spiritual task. He must be distracted from it.

The hatred war brings is enjoyable, Screwtape admits, but it is also problematic. In the abstract, the English may hate their enemies, the Germans, but the English are kind at heart. They will call for the destruction of their enemies, but if a wounded German pilot lands in their backyards, they will rush to serve him. They are, in other words, hateful in the abstract, but kindly in the concrete. Screwtape recommends directing the man to be the opposite—charitable in the abstract and nasty to the immediately present people in his life. Virtues imagined and honored only in the mind and not practiced will not prevent a person from going to Hell, Screwtape counsels. In fact, they will make the person a lot more fun for the devils to torment.

Letter 6 Analysis

Lewis likes to remind people of "mere" Christianity—he wrote a book by the same name. "Mere" Christianity means, among other things, dealing with the present moment, the present people, the present trials. It is part of praying for one's daily bread and the strength to bear this day's particular crosses. Jesus advised people there were enough cares in one day's time and not to worry about tomorrow, for no one could, through anxiety, change a single thing about the future. The present is what is important, so following God today and entrusting the future to Him is best.

Related to living in the present moment is dealing with one's immediate surroundings well. To hate people "out there" is not enough to take a person into Hell if he or she is behaving lovingly toward the real people he or she knows and encounters in daily life. Conversely, to be charitable to people "out there" is also not much use if one is nasty to one's family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers.



Letter 7

Letter 7 Summary

Wormwood, perhaps due to his youth, has asked Screwtape if he should reveal himself to the patient. In the modern age, Screwtape says, the High Command has ordered devils not to reveal themselves to humans. This means they miss out on the fun of directly frightening people, but the devils have found that making people disbelieve in spiritual matters—devils as well as angels—is more useful for luring people into the materialistic, worldly lives which will end in Hell.

Screwtape considers whether Wormwood should try to influence the man to become either a fervent patriot or an extreme pacifist. He decides it does not really matter. Either will do, as long as it induces the man away from thoughts of God and others. If he can be encouraged to join a faction—it does not matter what kind—and be nasty to those who do not belong to his faction or agree with him, that is all to the good (or bad, as it were). If he can make the man mistake his factionalism for part of his religion, Wormwood will be successful in winning his soul.

Letter 7 Analysis

This chapter again asserts the theme that faith is undermined in the modern age by complacency, materialism, and a pseudo-sophistication which woos people away from God by simply denying any spiritual reality exists, good or bad. If there is no absolute representation of goodness—God—then there must be no absolute representation of evil either. People are lulled into spiritual compromise of their souls by disbelief in any absolutes.

The chapter also reinforces the idea that the devil likes to remove people one mental step away from "mere Christianity" into a sort of mental construction which is spiritually misleading. This mental construction may take the guise of political movements, patriotism or pacifism, or some worthy cause. It really does not matter what the mental construction is. If the person's patriotism, pacifism, movement or cause becomes more important to him or her than prayer and kindness, the person's soul is lost.



Letter 8

Letter 8 Summary

Screwtape derides the Training College and its head, Slubgob, for its inability to properly educate young fiends like Wormwood, who has asserted the patient's religious phase seems to be dying away. Wormwood has shown himself to be ignorant of certain basic principles about human beings. They are amphibious, Screwtape asserts, half spirit and half animal. They occupy both the spiritual realms and the earthly realms, at the same time. This means they go back and forth, have ups and downs, high and low tides in their spiritual lives.

This man is going through a low point in his faith, but this is not necessarily good. In fact, Screwtape says, these low tides are the times the Enemy tries and hones a person's faith and causes the person to grow ever more close to Him. It is because of free will. The Enemy wants people to come to him because they want to, because they will to. They become true sons and daughters by walking to God on their own power and of their own free will. Without mentioning his name, Screwtape cites Jesus on the cross as the greatest example of someone who overcame a low period in spiritual life with magnificent faith, endangering the devils' positions immeasurably.

Letter 8 Analysis

Adherence to duty, even without feeling, even when one does not want to, even when it is arduous, is one of Lewis's teachings in this book. It is when spiritual dry spells prevail that obedience to God really counts. Christianity, and indeed life, can be full of grace, happiness, and love at times. Then obedience, kindness, and charity are easy. It is when the going gets rough, so to speak, that the sons and daughters of God really emerge.

The reference to Jesus, all the more resounding because he is not named, shows Jesus stands as the highest example of how a son of God acts and is the example Christians are expected to follow. Biblically, in the moments before he died on the cross, Jesus cried out to God, asking why God had forsaken him. This is the epitome of a spiritual low point. Jesus had accepted beating, reviling, imprisonment, and torture without complaint. Then, in the last moments of his life, he could not perceive the presence and love of God. Yet he still died without a murmur against God, praying for God to forgive his killers out of mercy for their ignorance. His victory of heart over circumstance, duty over relief, faith in the face of all evidence to the contrary, was the eternally exemplary Christian rout of the forces of evil.



Letter 9

Letter 9 Summary

It is possible to exploit this down period, Screwtape continues in this letter. Sexual temptation is good here, when the person is low, miserable, and in want of energy. In fact, this is a wonderful time to try to tempt him into the lower forms of sexual expression, ones which are bereft of love. The man will take sexual pleasure as an antidote to his pain rather than as a meaningful exchange of love with a fellow, valued human being. It will, therefore, bring him little real pleasure, and it will have a measure of brutality in it which will shame him as well.

Screwtape expounds a bit on the subject of pleasure. Since the Devil cannot create, he can only pervert or destroy what God creates. Pleasure is a creation of God. Any pleasure taken in the way it was intended is God's territory. Even though many a soul has been won through pleasure, it was done by perverting God-invented pleasures through misuse. Sin is pleasure taken in the wrong way, at the wrong time, in the wrong quantity, or with the wrong person. Pleasure itself belongs to God.

One last way to exploit the dry spell the patient is going through, Screwtape counsels, is to keep it out of his mind that it may just be a passing phase. Let him believe rather that his Christianity was merely a passing phase, preferably an adolescent one. As he does many times throughout the book, Screwtape applauds the way devils have used the media to pervert the meanings of certain words like "phases" and "adolescent," rendering them very useful for leading people away from God.

Letter 9 Analysis

A further exploration of spiritual dry spells as being part of the growth process toward mature faith, this letter makes an important point about pleasure. Pleasure belongs to God, Lewis asserts. He made it, and it is His province. Sexual pleasure, for instance, is God's invention. Like all the pleasures, it only becomes evil when people misuse or corrupt it—doing it at the wrong time, with the wrong person, in the wrong way, or in the wrong quantities. Lewis accepted the Church's teaching that sexual expression belonged only within holy matrimony. There will still be pleasure in sex taken outside of marriage, as sexuality was created to be pleasurable, but there will not be deep satisfaction. This is a good answer to the philosophy "If it feels so right, how can it be wrong?" The inherent portion of pleasure will always feel right momentarily or partially—but it will not be right and will not lead to lasting soul-satisfaction.

Letter 10

Letter 10 Summary

The patient has made some new friends—just the kind Screwtape likes. They are bright, funny, skeptical, wealthy, and worldly. Encouraging these sorts of friendships is just the thing Wormwood should be doing. Screwtape warmly approves.

Although the patient will soon realize his faith is at odds with the way these people think and live, he may not defend it or assert it with them, and he may become so influenced by them that he will abandon his beliefs. He may not realize, in the modern age, that the choice of friends, the use of one's time, and worldly vanities are things the Christian really must be careful about. These old-fashioned virtues have fallen by the wayside. The patient may even be encouraged to pass such concerns off as "Puritanism", one of those useful words Screwtape feels the language department of Hell has done so much with in the media.

Letter 10 Analysis

One of the themes of the book is the corruption of language and, therefore, ideas. The word "Puritanism" is taken as a case in point. According to Screwtape, the devils have loaded the word "Puritanism" (a mere reference to a religious group of great accomplishments) with all sorts of negative connotations. Through self-congratulatory conceit about not being "Puritanical", a man can be convinced to do many things he would not otherwise do in order to fit into the modern world. He can be made to dismiss such wisdom as using one's time well, being prudent about with whom one associates, and being cautious about paying more attention to this world than to the next. He will drink to excess, be sexually promiscuous, and lead a riotous life rather than allow himself to be called or thought of as "Puritanical".



Letter 11

Letter 11 Summary

Things are going well with the secular, sophisticated friends. Screwtape is glad of it, but he is concerned Wormwood has mentioned they like to laugh. Laughter is not always in the devils' favor. The subject of humor is explored.

The innocent laughter of joy and fun among friends and family is no good to the devils. In fact, it is related to Heaven. Jokes provide more fertile ground for corruption. Innocent jokes which are funny because they point out incongruities are not helpful either. "Dirty" jokes most certainly are, but the best jokes are ones that excuse acts of cruelty or cowardice by making jokes of them. It is what a human does which counts, after all. Flippancy is best. To see something ridiculous in virtue, to take nothing seriously, to pass everything off as subject matter for jest—these are all excellent ways to insulate the human heart from God and to make sure that He does not penetrate human consciousness.

Letter 11 Analysis

Joy and fun are innocent pleasures. They are actually heavenly and reflect the love of friends and family for one another. They are in direct opposition to Hell, for Hell is a joyless place. Jokes, however, can have a dark as well as a light side. Used to justify bad behavior by making it into a joke, they are destructive. Lewis emphasizes actions or deeds over thoughts or even words in this case: it is one's behavior which counts, what one does. If one passes off one's cowardice or avarice or lack of chastity as fodder for humor in order to excuse it, then humor is serving a destructive purpose. A general mocking and/or dismissive attitude toward all which is good and true is the most secure armor against becoming godly. This kind of flippancy, seemingly harmless, is actually quite destructive.



Letter 12

Letter 12 Summary

This letter deals with the subtlety involved in tempting a human being away from Heaven. Wormwood is doing well. Screwtape fears he may be going too quickly though. It is good the patient is still going to church, because if he were not, he would notice his Christianity is slipping away from him. As it is, he is probably only experiencing a vague unease that he is not doing as well at his faith as he should. Soon, this may make him reluctant to pray or to think about the Enemy. A major sin or sudden awakening to just how lax he has become would be disastrous for the patient's progress to Hell.

This is Screwtape's preferred method of temptation. Subtly, by degrees, without the patient really knowing what is happening to him, the world will creep into him. Soon his existence will be joyless, and he will be easily distracted not by pleasures, but by anything at all. He is progressing toward the Nothingness which is hell. Major sins are not important; an accumulation of many small ones will cause a person to retreat slowly from the light of God into the darkness of Nothingness.

Letter 12 Analysis

Lewis works on a theme which will come to full fruition in "Screwtape Proposes a Toast", an addition to The Screwtape Letters. The big, major, life-unsettling sins are not usually what bring a person to hell. It is the small, vague, unthinking habits of a lifetime, slowly increasing secularization and worldliness. It is the small sins, the small betrayals of the true self, which lead most inexorably to Hell.

Lewis was a master of the punch line. The last line of many of his chapters and writings is often the best line in the whole piece. This is true at the end of this letter, which sums up Screwtape's entire tempting philosophy on this chilling note: "Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts," (p. 61).



Letter 13

Letter 13 Summary

Screwtape is not pleased. The man has awoken, become aware of his slippage, repented and re-entered a state of grace. This repentance and renewal, Screwtape posits, has taken place on a more profound psychological level than his initial conversion.

Simple pleasures were the stimuli. The man read a book he really enjoyed and took a favorite walk in the country to an old mill. In so doing, he stilled his soul and saw the calamity which was taking place there. He realized how shallow his new friends and his new occupations were and how far removed they were from who he was really was and wanted to be. A man or woman's sincere likings are tools of the Enemy, related to intrinsic personality. A person's sincere likings make the person not care what others think and make the person true to him- or herself.

The day is not lost, however. Screwtape is not much of a one for mere feelings. Even a second conversion need not be too serious, Screwtape says, as long as they can keep the man from acting on his newfound feelings.

Letter 13 Analysis

Lewis has posited that returning to one's true self through honest, innocent personal preferences and enjoyments helps one return to God. The true self is the godly one; in reality, human beings belong to God. To find one's true nature is to find Him. A simple contemplative walk in the countryside, the reading of a good book because he likes it, not because it will impress his friends, bring the person to a realization of who he is and that he is rightly God's. Falseness falls away.

In another great last line, Lewis has Screwtape try to salvage things by positing that if the man just feels converted again, it will be fine. Just as long as he does not really change anything about his life, just as long as he does not act, his re-conversion is meaningless. Even his feelings about it will fade. As always, it is what a man or woman does which solidifies faith. The last line is, "The more often he feels without acting, the less he will be able ever to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel," (p. 67).



Letter 14

Letter 14 Summary

Frightening for Screwtape, the patient has found some real humility. Humility is dangerous. He asks Wormwood if he can draw the patient's attention to just how humble he is being, so the patient can begin to pride himself on his very humility and thus move closer to Hell again. He also encourages Wormwood to deceive the patient into thinking humility means self-denigration and denial of his own talents. Since this is not true, the patient will know it, but not be able to escape from his misconceptions. Also, he will continue to think about himself, which is what Hell wants.

Letter 14 Analysis

The goal of humility, as with all the virtues, is to turn the person's attention to God and others—God and one's neighbors. This was, as Jesus said, the greatest and most all-encompassing commandment: to love God and to love one's neighbor. Turning the attention to the self, then, is the satanic aim. In fact, Lewis says through Screwtape, God does not even want human beings to dwell on their sins, as it turns them too much toward themselves. He wants them to turn outward—to God and to others. False humility is just another form of preoccupation with the self.



Letter 15

Letter 15 Summary

Eternity and the present are what God wants people to concentrate on, so it would be good if Wormwood could bind the patient's mind up with thoughts of the future, especially in regard to the war. Some people can be preoccupied with the past. That is all right too, but living in the future, which they cannot know, is best. It removes them nicely from reality and from doing anything useful or charitable in the present. Screwtape wants people obsessed with the future, constantly pursuing the elusive end of the rainbow, unhappy and dissatisfied in the here and now.

Not thinking about the future can be good, too, if it is done because the patient thinks, mistakenly, the future will assuredly be good for him. If in thinking about the future the patient concludes bad things may come to him and he needs to arm himself with virtues to prepare for future trials, even as he busies himself productively in the present, then, says Screwtape, this is no good. Attack at once, he advises Wormwood. If the man is living in the present simply because things are going well now, Wormwood should break up that happiness. What right, Screwtape wants to know, has this creature to be happy?

Letter 15 Analysis

This letter returns to the theme that what counts is what one does in the here and now, the present. It does not matter what one thinks in the abstract or in the imagination, of which the unknowable future is a part. Therefore, it is the devil's job to keep the mind on the unknowable future and stir up all sorts of controversy, anxiety, and pain in regard to it, blotting out the all-important here and now and any wise actions which might be applied to the present situation. It is important not to be obsessed with the future or to take for granted that the future will be smooth sailing. It is good for people to prepare for the future by doing today's duties well, offering each day to God, and praying for the fortitude or virtues which will be needed to face future trials. This preparation for the future should not, however, take away from responsibly and meaningfully dealing with the business of the present.

In dealing with the present well, a person is also dealing with eternity. As Lewis reminded the reader, what human beings do with their bodies affects their souls. Keeping one's sight on the eternal and therefore dealing with the present in a moral and responsible way is exactly the way God wants human beings to be occupied. It also brings human beings the satisfaction of daily happiness.



Letter 16

Letter 16 Summary

Screwtape wants to know why the man keeps attending the church he has always attended. If it is not because he could care less, it is an important issue to address. If a man has to go to church at all, he should be constantly kept church shopping, displeased with all he finds. Church shopping means a man is looking with criticism and dissatisfaction at the various churches he attends instead of humbly learning what he may from each. It encourages arrogance rather than humility.

A church is a place where people are united by something higher than just liking one another. It brings too many different elements together in harmony to be trusted by Screwtape. That is, unless factionalism can be made rife. Screwtape has checked, and both the local churches are full of factions, so that is all to the good as far as Screwtape is concerned. It is fun to work up hatred between religious bodies based on mere differences in ritual, Screwtape says. If people had really heeded St. Paul on these issues, Hell would be in real trouble!

Letter 16 Analysis

Here Screwtape refers to St. Paul and his writings on how a Christian should be basically uncritical of other Christians' practices or the lack of them, as long as it does not involve actual sin. The issue in the New Testament was Jewish eating restrictions and whether or not they applied to the new Christians. In other times, controversies have surrounded the use of pictures or icons, decorations or no decorations, fancy candlesticks or plain ones or none at all. Lewis summarizes St. Paul's position as being that those who have strong feelings about such things should be submitted to so as not to offend. This is part of Christian charity.

There is another great last line in this letter, the punchline being one of Lewis's most effective literary devices for leaving the reader with food for thought. Screwtape says the differences in practices in Christianity have been such good material for devilry that without them and all the arguing about them "the Church of England might have become a positive hotbed of charity and humility," (p. 85).



Letter 17

Letter 17 Summary

Old-fashioned sins like gluttony should not be overlooked, Screwtape admonishes Wormwood. They must simply be updated. The modern version of gluttony, among sophisticated people, is to have them pay close attention to diet and to make them demand to have their dietary demands met, even at the inconvenience of others. Gluttony is no longer just uncontrolled overeating. If a person can want his or her way with food or beverage so badly that he or she becomes cranky if thwarted, the sin of gluttony has effectively taken root. Gluttony can also take the form of snobbery about the quality of food and the way it is prepared. Any of these modern forms of gluttony can cause a person to be selfish and inconsiderate of others—important elements of hellishness.

Letter 17 Analysis

We can imagine someone going to a party where the hostess has labored to provide a wonderful feast and having someone cry, "Is that low-carb? If not, I can't eat it!" Lewis is writing to a Western audience in the developed world, so gluttony, while a problem (many American children and adults overeat and are obese), has taken on new forms. The modern person must be aware of this. Gluttony is not merely overindulging in too much food. It means being overly controlled by what one eats, even when one is arduously dieting. For all her delicate appetites, Lewis portrays the patient's mother as a glutton who continually offends waitresses, servants, and hostesses with her demands for lighter, stricter dietary fare than what they have served her. A more virtuous person, on the other hand, would eat what was given with humility and gratitude out of consideration for the host, hostess, or the people serving.

For males, Lewis says, dieting is not the underside of the sin of gluttony. Rather, the underside of gluttony in males is vanity about being very knowing about food quality and preparation. Yet any strong attachment to what goes into the mouth—whether it is alcohol, tea, coffee, or cigarettes—to the point where the person finds it extremely hard to do without the favored substance without becoming unkind to others—means the person is a slave to his or her appetites and easily controlled, through that substance, by evil.

This letter underscores what Lewis says is devil's preferred methods of modern temptation. He is very subtle and subversive; he likes to remove the essential meaning of clear old-fashioned concepts like "gluttony" (being overly concerned with what a person ingests) so people hardly recognize the modern form of the sin, just as deadly as the classic understanding of it.



Letter 18

Letter 18 Summary

Screwtape takes on the subject of sexual temptation. He takes another dig at Slubgob, the head of the Training College, for not training the young fiends very well on this subject. Screwtape's snobbery toward Slubgob has the potential to be an issue later on, as the reader will see, but apparently it is not an issue by the time "Screwtape Proposes a Toast" at the end of the book.

In this letter, Screwtape states that as far as sexual matters go, the Enemy's standard is either complete abstinence or complete monogamy. This is because sexual intercourse makes a man and a woman into "one flesh", as the Bible states, and this oneness is an eternal bond. Screwtape then comments on how God likes things to be diverse yet one. Some examples in addition to two people becoming one flesh are that even He Himself exists in Three Persons of the Holy Trinity. Humanity is to be separate, individual entities, yet all united. Organisms, even the family, are based on this idea of unity in diversity. Of course, to Screwtape it is all nonsense and just a device God uses for bringing in love. Life is not cooperation and oneness between separate entities. It is predatory competition.

Hell has found especially useful the idea of "falling in love". People have come to believe, through devilish influence, that "falling in love" is the only good reason to marry and have sex. Falling in love is illusory, though, and therefore not suitable grounds for marrying or staying faithful. People have been taught by devilry to believe that marrying for the sake of sexual satisfaction within the will of God, marrying in order to have and raise children, and marrying for mutual support are actually distasteful ideas. They have learned to regard a dizzying, fleeting passion as the only sound basis for marriage, which, of course, it is not. The concept of "falling in love" as the basis for marriage has led many people into irresponsible, impossible, and ultimately miserable marriages. This is all to the good, as far as Screwtape is concerned.

Letter 18 Analysis

Lewis refutes the idea that "falling in love" is a sound basis for marriage (and, by implication, that falling out of love is a sound basis for divorce). He lets it be known it is the devil's construction which has made the idea of marrying in order to help one another, in order to be sexually in line with God's will, and in order to give life to children, inferior to the idea of being swept up in an uncontrollable passion. People use "falling in love" to excuse all sorts of irresponsible behavior and to make irresponsible marriages.

Marriage and sex are inextricably interlinked in Lewis's theology. Sexual intercourse makes a man and a woman into "one flesh", which is an indissoluble union. One cannot be "one flesh" with more than one other person in a lifetime, hence reinforcing the



Christian standard of sexual abstinence before marriage and sexual fidelity within it. Being "one flesh" is a transcendental, eternal state of being with another. It is a bond of great force and, by implication, cannot be easily or painlessly broken. Lewis says, "The truth is that wherever a man lies with a woman, there, whether they like it or not, a transcendental relation is set up between them which must be eternally enjoyed or eternally endured," (p. 96). The purpose of this transcendental relationship is to engender love and the family. It has little to do with "falling in love" in a tempest of passion, but a lot to do with loyalty, chastity, mutual support, and parenting children responsibly together. Then true romantic love comes. In Lewis's view, true love in marriage depends heavily upon virtue.



Letter 19

Letter 19 Summary

Screwtape becomes a bit cautious in this letter. He has asserted that God likes to bring love into the human equation and does indeed love the human creatures. In the devils' world, this is heresy, which he is anxious to explain away. He is also concerned Wormwood has perhaps shown Slubgob his unflattering references to him in his letters. I was just joking, Screwtape, says, in effect. He wants Wormwood to know he really holds Slubgob in the highest respect, but he also wants Wormwood to lock up his letters in a safe place.

Screwtape refutes the idea that God's motivation (and even His Being) is love, an idea he himself has spoken of several times. Of course, from Hell's viewpoint, love is an incomprehensible impossibility. God must be up to something so devious and selfish the devils simply have not found it out yet, that is all. More research is needed.

Wormwood also has asked whether it is desirable for the patient to be in love. It is neither undesirable nor desirable, says Screwtape. Like so many parts of human life, being in love is a matter of indifference unless they can use the man's being in love to corrupt him. It would be ideal if they could divert his sexuality from the idea of marriage. If they could make him feel some distaste for normal sexuality so that he snubs it and removes himself from it, and then fool him into some perverse form of sexuality as a reaction, that would be good. Barring that, marrying him off to someone so unsuitable as to produce maximum misery and erosion of faith is the best course to pursue.

Letter 19 Analysis

Once again, Lewis asserts that the circumstances of life—war, peace, being in love, not being in love—do not matter. What matters is how a person responds to them. Everything is an occasion to come closer to Heaven or to Hell, depending on how the human being reacts and what he or she chooses to do.

Screwtape, in his profound understanding of human nature and the universe, has blundered into heresy by affirming the existence of love in prior letters. He has asserted several times that God really loves his human creations. A more proper position for a devil is total incomprehension of the force of love. Lewis has Screwtape now revert to the jealous, dumbfounded incomprehension of God's love for human beings which was instrumental in Satan's original fall from Heaven, according to biblical accounts. Unable to comprehend God's love for the human creatures, jealous, the devils regard God mistrustfully and suspiciously rather than accepting the wonders of His love. The devil's position, Lewis seems to be saying, is anti-love; endless, warring opposition to the very idea of God's love.



Letter 20

Letter 20 Summary

The patient has resisted temptation and is now going through a time of tranquility. He has learned a dangerous lesson—that sexual temptation does not last and that it goes away faster when resisted. Screwtape suggests Wormwood try again by filling the man's thoughts with the idea that chastity is unhealthy. That is a very helpful satanic idea.

Screwtape wants to know what kind of unsuitable young women are in the man's neighborhood which he might be encouraged to marry. He also says a particular culture's taste in female desirability is manipulated by devils working through the media. The idea is to remove men's taste from the reality of women through media manipulation so that men hunger after abstract, unrealistic images and are unable to love the particular women right next to them.

Wormwood may also benefit from playing inside the patient's mind on the man's already existent images of womanhood. Each man loves a terrestrial and an infernal Venus, Screwtape says. The first he wants to adore in marriage and the second he desires with his lowest appetites, to an almost obsessive degree. If luck holds out, a man may be made to marry an infernal Venus type so he can feel morally upright while gratifying his sexual desire for her. Then she will proceed to make of his life a living hell.

Letter 20 Analysis

Marrying the wrong woman for the wrong reasons is a very good way to ensure both earthly and eternal unhappiness, Lewis asserts once again. It is a serious spiritual mistake. His position grows out of the biblical teachings against divorce and in favor of "one flesh". The classic Judaeo-Christian position is that marriage and sexual intercourse are irrevocable acts, not to be entered into lightly at all.

Lewis comments upon the power of the media to shape men's (and women's) ideas of sexual desirability in a mate. He mentions that men have two types of mental love goddesses in their minds—an earthly and an infernal Venus. The infernal Venus is like the Playmate of the Month—an airbrushed, surgically enhanced impossibility. Lewis points out that such media manipulation adds to general sexual dissatisfaction, for no woman in reality lives up to that physical ideal, not even the models themselves.

Satanic maneuvering of the human mind away from the present reality to an abstract idea is a theme throughout the book. The devils like to keep the human mind on the future, on contrived mental images of God and others, rather than what and who they really are. An unrealistic ideal of sexual attractiveness is just another abstraction. Focusing on and striving for these impossible ideals rather than attending faithfully to the present reality subtracts from both heavenly and earthly happiness.



Letter 21

Letter 21 Summary

The notion of ownership is explored in this letter. Human beings' strange notions that their time and their bodies are their own are explored and exploited. Thinking their time is their own is good material for attacking the patient's mood and making him exasperated and impatient, Screwtape says, especially when someone impinges upon "his" time. It is good to raise his expectations of what life owes him so his snappishness at not getting his way may be properly aggravated.

Human beings' conceit in thinking that any thing on earth is theirs is treated with suitable Screwtapian contempt. It is, he says, absurd. He makes the point that people did not invent time; they cannot add to it or restrain it. It comes to them as a gift. Theoretically, for Christians, they owe every particle of time to the service of God.

Their bodies likewise they did not create and are not to use just as they will. Pride and confusion help to keep modern human beings in a state of foolish claims to ownership. This pride and confusion is to be encouraged, for in actuality, Screwtape says, nothing belongs to human beings. Possession is solely the province of God or of Satan. In the end, human beings will find out to whom their time, their bodies, and their souls belong. Everything will be claimed by God or Satan.

Letter 21 Analysis

Human beings foolishly forget that their time, sexuality, and "belongings" are not really theirs but God's. All things were created and given by God. Satan is in furious and constant battle to possess them and steal them away.

In a chilling last paragraph, ending with one of Lewis's arresting lines, Screwtape prophesies threateningly that every human being will find out, indeed, to whom his or her time and body belonged, and it will not be to him or her. It will belong to God or Satan. In the last line, the Hitlerian nature of "Our Father Below" is revealed: "At present the Enemy says 'Mine' of everything on the pedantic, legalistic ground that He made it: Our Father hopes in the end to say 'Mine' of all things on the more realistic and dynamic ground of conquest," (p. 115). This letter serves as a dire warning that, in the end, God or Satan will claim a person's time, actions, and soul.



Letter 22

Letter 22 Summary

Screwtape is acidly annoyed in this letter. The man has fallen in love with someone Wormwood has not even mentioned in his communications with Screwtape. Also, Wormwood has betrayed some of Screwtape's heretical words about love to the Secret Police, but Screwtape is powerful enough to have smoothed this over. He will not forget about it, however.

This girl, Screwtape has learned, is the very worst sort of girl for their patient to marry. She is a sincere Christian, the type Screwtape would have liked to have seen fed to the lions in the early days. However, he thinks she might have died with a faithful smile on her face. Screwtape cannot heap enough contempt on her.

Her family is full of love for one another. The whole house and garden are permeated with grace. Screwtape is beside himself. He is angry the man and woman feel sexual attraction toward one another and that God is happy about it, looking forward to their marriage. It can only be because, at heart, God is really such a pleasure-seeker. Screwtape is aggrieved once more that all of life's pleasures have to be twisted by devils—they cannot invent any themselves.

At the end of the letter, Screwtape is so upset he turns into a centipede. A secretary must finish his letter. He is now openly vindictive toward Wormwood. He longs, he says, to embrace him with his many arms.

Letter 22 Analysis

Once again, C. S. Lewis speaks of pleasure as being from God. He refutes the commonly held notion that Christianity is a solemn "Puritanical" faith with so many "Thou shalt nots" that all the joy is taken out of life. No, Lewis says, "Out at sea, out in His sea, there is pleasure and more pleasure. He makes no secret of it; at His right hand are 'pleasures forevermore,'" (p. 118). The joys of love and sexuality are of God, as are the joys of loving family life. In contrast to heavenly, abundant life and joy, hell is a miserable, blank, austere place.

Hell is also depicted by Lewis as a place where there is no creativity. Screwtape admits in this letter that Hell cannot create any pleasures at all; the devils can only twist and distort the pleasures God has made. C. S. Lewis shared this idea with J.R.R. Tolkien, his friend, who wrote in one part of *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy that evil cannot create; it can only destroy or distort that which has been created.



Letter 23

Letter 23 Summary

In this letter Screwtape sums up that the man has met the girl's family and all their friends. Now they will not be able to remove spirituality from the man's life. Therefore, they must corrupt it. Screwtape sees hope in perhaps dividing the man from these friends through political disagreements as to how to apply faith to social realities.

There is a rather lengthy discussion on theories of the historical Jesus. Such theories remove people from encountering the facts of the Resurrection and the Redemption and propel them into theoretical realms. This is related to the discussion of removing the man's focus from the spiritual to the political. Making Christianity a means to an end—for example, a means to social justice—is a way to remove people from encountering truth and reality and force them to strive to live up to impossible mental notions. This is one of Screwtape's favorite tricks. Making Jesus into an interesting historical figure, that is to say, a theoretical Jesus, also removes people from a close encounter with him.

Letter 23 Analysis

Even a religious person can be corrupted as long as religion becomes a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Lewis thinks it is a good thing Christians are aware of their social responsibilities. They may allow their social responsibilities to take precedence over their spiritual ones, or become confused that their social and spiritual responsibilities are one and the same.

As in other chapters, Satan's lures are deceit and a subtle shifting away from the truth into some intellectual construction of it. This has been done with the historical Jesus, so that rather than encountering the living Christ, a person encounters a scholar's dry approval of someone who only exists in the scholar's imagination.



Letter 24

Letter 24 Summary

Here another devil is mentioned: Slumtrimpet, who is in charge of the young woman. Screwtape's access to information through his office is a subtle way of showing Wormwood Screwtape's superiority. He does this under the guise of being helpful. However, the effect is to show Wormwood what Wormwood might have done if he had been more conscientious.

Screwtape hopes to introduce the serious sin of spiritual pride into the young man's life. The girl he loves is innocently naive about other faiths or other versions of her faith. She thinks hers is the right one and others are rather ridiculous. At the same time, she is mostly just innocently ignorant in this, not truly vicious or prideful. Yet, with this characteristic, she may be used to influence the young man into real spiritual pride. He is a fresh convert and quite susceptible to being proud of himself, his faith, and his new set of friends.

Screwtape says the new circle of Christian friends really is better educated, more intelligent, and more agreeable than any the patient has known in his life. Therefore, it may be easy to make him proud of this circle and proud of himself for being in it. He is not humble enough to realize how much the people in this group forgive and excuse him for his blunders and how immature in the faith they know him to be.

Letter 24 Analysis

Humility is once again set forth as a major Christian virtue. Lewis also takes this opportunity to remind the reader that Christians are intelligent, interesting, well-educated people. He refutes the notion that they are ignorant, uninformed, dull, and limited people.

There is another mention of the war. Once again, Wormwood and the reader are reminded war is not important in and of itself. It is how humans behave during a war that counts. This reminder may be seen as a foreshadowing of the young man's increased role in the war and his eventual death in it. The real concern in war, as in peace, is the state of the individual human soul.



Letter 25

Letter 25 Summary

Screwtape objects to this new set of friends because they are "merely" Christian. He would prefer them to be interested in Christianity and something else, because he likes to distract the human mind from spiritual and temporal realities and fixate it on intellectual abstractions. He likes fashionable Christianity, Christianity concerned with passing trends and fads.

Because human beings are changeable themselves, they do not like the same old thing, even in their religion, which is supposed to be unchanging. The human restlessness for change has been useful to the devils. Screwtape says it has helped in promoting heresies, breaking up friendships, and causing marital infidelity. Once again, the devils have had success through corrupting the language. Something "unchanged" is no longer spoken of with admiration for its steadfastness. It is considered "stagnant".

Letter 25 Analysis

Lewis, of course, wrote a book called *Mere Christianity*, meaning Christianity not attached to anything but its own unchanging precepts. He clearly approves of these people who are "merely" Christian. Lewis decries the restless modern need for endless change which makes people attach themselves to fashion and trends, even fashions and trends in faith. The thirst for novelty has made the arts, for example, reach for ever new lows in order to be simply different and new. The arts, Lewis implies, could elevate people to thoughts of eternity, beauty, truth, goodness, and love, but they are rendered inefficient by the constant demand for novelty.



Letter 26

Letter 26 Summary

Screwtape approves of Wormwood sowing the seeds for future marital discord between the courting lovers at this point. Being enchanted with each other and in a haze of sexual attraction, the young couple are readily and easily sacrificing for one another. Screwtape predicts that when the first enchantment fades, they will not have built up the necessary kindness to sustain them, for they will expect one another to be as "unselfish" as they were during courtship, and neither will be able to.

In a previous letter, Screwtape said that "unselfishness" was great fodder for quarrels as each person in question hypocritically tries to be less "selfish" than the other (and letting the other darn well know about it too). Here he adds that the difference between the way women interpret unselfishness and the way men do is fertile ground for marital misunderstandings. A man thinks unselfishness is not giving any trouble to others; a woman thinks it is actively serving others. It is therefore easy for each to think the other is being selfish, even when he or she is being unselfish in his or her own way. Hell forbid the couple should ever drop their demands for mutual "unselfishness" and really start practicing charity toward one another. All Heaven might break loose then.

Letter 26 Analysis

Lewis instructs in previous letters that the formation of faith and of virtue takes effort by one's own free will. He notes the dry and disappointing periods when God leaves a man or woman to take steps without grace and with little help, to enable them to grow stronger. Marriage is no exception to this need to "get up and walk" on one's own. The enchantments of the early days of mutual attraction are not enough to sustain marriage; nor are ironclad rules of "unselfishness." Real charity has to be practiced day in and day out. Marriage, like all things good, is a discipline. The joy comes after the virtues have been attained. The early enchantment is a promise of what comes after virtues like charity have been formed through practice.



Letter 27

Letter 27 Summary

Wormwood is failing, Screwtape feels, because even though the young man's love is distracting him from God, the young man knows it and is beseeching God in prayer to help him deal with the distraction. This is not good. Screwtape suggests Wormwood try to lure the man away from simple, God-directed prayers by making the man doubt whether asking God for things is appropriate at all. Perhaps he can be made to stop praying.

However, the man is now obedient, so he will probably continue to pray, but Wormwood can make him feel it is really rather useless. If his prayers are answered, he can rationalize what happened away. If they are not answered right away, then he will be confirmed in his suspicion that asking God for things is absurd, and prayer has no impact upon the universe whatsoever.

Fortunately, the devils have managed to divorce humankind from the past and from learning from the thinkers of the past on such things as prayer, time, predestination, etcetera. This has been done, Screwtape says, by always contextualizing the authors within a historical framework rather than dealing with what lasting truths they might have spoken. The Historical Point of View, the devils call it, and it is one of their manipulations of media to their own ends. The Historical Point of view befuddles even great scholars and effectively keeps wisdom from being passed from generation to generation.

Letter 27 Analysis

The answering of prayers, whether prayer actually changes things, or whether things are predestined to unfold as they will anyway, whether it is important to pray for one's daily bread or better to enter into some sort of spiritual communion with God, are all issues raised in this chapter. Lewis refers again to the present rather than the past or the future, saying that God operates in the Unbounded Now. Therefore, human free will, demonstrated in prayer, does affect things.

The twisting of the media to devilish ends is spoken of again. In this case, the subject is divorcing one generation from the wisdom of the other through the confusion caused by scholars. Scholars take the great thinkers of the past and categorize and contextualize them until the profound truths the thinkers may have spoken or written are lost. When Lewis says scholars are now as ignorantly bad off as a foolish mechanic who thinks history is nonsense, he is referring to Henry Ford, who famously said history was "bunk."



Letter 28

Letter 28 Summary

Screwtape once again wants Wormwood to stop being so thrilled about the war and start thinking about what it really means. If their man died now, he would die in a state of grace and go to Heaven. That is not what they want!

In fact, the young man is working hard at defense work, he is in love with a worthy girl, he is working harder and interacting more with his neighbors than ever before, and he is turning more and more to God in the midst of all this. In short, he would be lost to Hell should he die now. Far better to let him live a long life, age, and grow cold in his devotions, warm in his disappointments, and tired of fighting the same old temptations over and over again. Far better to let time wear a soul out than to hope it dies young! This is a theme Screwtape returns to again and again.

Letter 28 Analysis

Once again, war is not as important as the state of the souls of individual people within the war. Lewis returns to a theme which has been spoken of before—that the surest road to hell is the slow, dim, long, slippery slope one—not some dramatic sin or, in the case of war, sudden dramatic death. A lifetime of struggling to resist temptation, a lifetime of prosperity and creeping worldliness, tiredness, habit—these are the pernicious things which ultimately claim a person's soul from God.



Letter 29

Letter 29 Summary

This letter is about the rapid approach of the war toward the man's own town and the probable bombing of it. Screwtape recommends making the man a coward about it all. Since courage is, Screwtape asserts, the very forging point of all the other virtues, undermining a man's courage makes good sense. What is more, every human being feels shame and guilt about cowardice.

Screwtape advises Wormwood to fill the man's mind with little escape hatches so that when push comes to shove, he will act in a cowardly fashion. After all, Screwtape says, feeling fear is no sin. It is the act of cowardice, not the feeling of fear, that counts.

Letter 29 Analysis

Lewis points out that courage is the formation point of all of the virtues. A virtue that is not upheld in the face of threat is no real virtue. Once again, Lewis emphasizes how one acts rather than how one feels. It is all right to feel fear; it is natural. Fearful feelings are not serious unless they result in acts of cowardice. Mark Twain once said that courage is a person acting rightly in spite of the feeling of fear. Lewis seems to agree with this. Courage is as courage does, not how a person feels. This discussion of courage foreshadows how the man will behave in the next chapters.



Letter 30

Letter 30 Summary

Screwtape is sarcastic toward Wormwood at the beginning of this letter. He has learned from the Infernal Police (Wormwood's own report being sketchy) that the man behaved well during an air raid upon his town. He was extremely scared, so takes no pride in his actions, but he did his duty and a little bit more than his duty. There are no excuses for Wormwood's failure in this. Hell is a place where a superior being consumes a weaker one. Human souls are to be brought for consumption, or the devils who fail will be consumed themselves.

Screwtape thinks the man's exhaustion following the air raid will not be good fodder for temptation. It might be useful if Wormwood can create escape hatches here, although he failed to do the same with the man's courage. If Wormwood can make the man resolved to bear his exhaustion so far and no farther, when it goes farther, even a little bit, the man will fall apart.

The scenes of horror that happen in war—intestines spattered upon a wall, for instance—may be used to make a man lose faith, Screwtape says. Let the man think that spattered human blood and guts is the only reality. Let him deny that children playing in the sunlight or beautiful weather are equally "real." With devilish word antics, Screwtape suggests Wormwood not let the man wonder too much about what he means when he uses the word "real." The devils have been befogging this word for a long time.

Letter 30 Analysis

As long as a person is uncommitted to sticking to something important, there is a strong possibility he or she will fail. Mental escape hatches undermine people in every endeavor which requires courage and perseverance (most worthwhile endeavors in life). Being committed to doing one's duty, no matter what, is the key to success, both in the physical and spiritual senses. Spectacular bravery is not always called for, but doing one's duty, no matter what, is the quiet courage which supports human dignity.



Letter 31

Letter 31 Summary

This is the very last letter. Screwtape begins it cooingly. Wormwood has apparently been begging him for tokens of affection, wanting to know (now that all is lost) whether his uncle ever really loved him. Smoothly, nastily, in a snakelike way, Screwtape assures him that their mutual desire for one another has always been the same. He gloats he is the stronger of the two in the world of Hell, where the strong prey upon the weak.

The man was killed in an air raid. Screwtape describes "the scream of bombs, the fall of houses, the stink and taste of high explosives on the lips and in the lungs, the feet burning with weariness, the heart cold with horror, the brain reeling..." (p. 172). Yet the next moment, the man was taken from this world into the next. The man recognized Wormwood's dealings with him for what they were and dropped him like a set of dirty old clothes. What is more, he was received by "Them." "They", it seems, were benign spirits, angels perhaps, who had been helping him all his life and whom he recognized, beyond recognition of the eye, when at last they were revealed to him as he entered the spiritual realms.

The patient not only saw "Them," Screwtape asserts, he saw Him, meaning God. God emanated wondrous light, which was painful and blinding to Wormwood but cooling, clear, and soothing to the man. The man prostrated himself before God, gave over all his sins, which Screwtape says the man himself knew better even than Wormwood did, and utterly submitted himself to be taken by his God.

Screwtape signs off, saying he is hungrily affectionate toward Wormwood now. The rule of Hell is to bring souls for the devils to feast on or be feasted upon oneself. Screwtape will consume the failed Wormwood now, or a part of him. He will feast on Wormwood's failure.

Letter 31 Analysis

The essential hatred and venom of Hell, even in the relations between an uncle and his nephew, are revealed in full in this final letter. Wormwood is nothing to Screwtape except something to devour. It is eat or be eaten in the hellish world, and expert devil that he is, Screwtape is not going to be eaten. To say there was no love lost between these two is a vast understatement.

The man's death was something like a birth. There was great pain and then it was over and there was great rejoicing. He was met by good spiritual beings, friends, relatives, angels, perhaps. He was allowed to look upon God, even as God's purity, beauty and light caused him to throw himself down, in full knowledge of his sins, upon the Mercy and the Love.



God is represented both as wearing the form of a man, which is the biblical statement about Him, and also as a being of light. Being in the presence of God is blinding and painful to demons. To a redeemed human soul, it is refreshment and life itself. Seeing and being with God is the man's reward for staying the course, for being faithful, for doing his duty in both the spiritual and physical wars in which he was engaged. This rather ordinary fellow has fought the good fight and stayed the course. He is representative of all of humankind and represents the victory that may belong to each person.



Screwtape Proposes a Toast

Screwtape Proposes a Toast Summary

Some time later, Screwtape remains an erudite bureaucrat, quite high up in the Lowerarchy. He has been asked to give a toast at the annual dinner of the Tempters' Training College for young devils. Slubgob is still the principal, and Screwtape is the guest of honor.

This dinner, Screwtape says, although there was plenty of it, lacked the savor of eating great sinners. He laments losing the flavors of a Henry VIII or a Hitler. It was gratifying to crunch down on their fabulous egos and boundless cruelties. This evening's feast had more to do with people who went to hell for corruption, for graft, for petty crimes. Even the adulterers were rather hapless fools who had gotten into the wrong beds for silly, misguided reasons—they were not like Casanova, who was lustfully tasty.

At the same time, there is plenty to eat, and these are the tides of the times, Screwtape says. There will be quantity, though not quality, in the sinners captured for Hell, and this is an improvement. They may not taste as good, but at least there are plenty of them.

Screwtape then gives an historical overview of Hell's situation. Human and heavenly progress since the mid-nineteenth century had been substantial. Liberty, equality, the abolishment of slavery, and religious toleration were rampant. Reforms were everywhere, particularly in England, where Screwtape saw his service. Things were looking rather bleak for Hell.

However, socialism, communism, and Nazism all helped Hell a great deal. Democracy also helped by not only encouraging equality but sameness. No one should stand out, so no one should excel. Self-esteem was encouraged in students no matter how well or badly they performed in school. Conformity began to replace the idea of freedom. No one should be different. Human excellence is cut down to size so that everyone can feel comfortable and equal.

Since saints are examples of human excellence, there are fewer of them in a "democratic" world. But, since sinners are simply the flip side of saints, there are no more great sinners either. Everyone, then, is subject to the kind of slow temptations to spiritual numbness and complacent worldliness which are Screwtape's method of choice for ensnaring sinners.

Although the taste of sin is less spectacular than in the past, there are more souls to eat, and for that they must be grateful. When he tastes the wine, however, Screwtape changes his tune. The wine is positively sizzling with hellish flavor. Why? It is full of Christians who hated one another because of denominationalism and differences due to ritual. They are entwined in their hatred, shocked that they are conjoined with others whom they despised so while on earth. All in all, they are giving off a flavor absolutely



ambrosial to devils. "All said and done, my friends," Screwtape concludes, "It will be an ill day for us if what most humans mean by 'religion' ever vanishes from the Earth. It can still send us the truly delicious sins," (p. 209).

Screwtape Proposes a Toast Analysis

Factionalism, which Lewis has mentioned several times as being the bane of the Church, is the crowning subject of "Screwtape Proposes a Toast." Lewis, as usual, saves the best for last. It is a surprise that after all of Screwtape's reluctant praise for mediocrity and mediocre sinners in their plenitude, a wine appears which burns like "dark fire" that he is able to savor fully. Herein, then, lies the most serious sin of the age—the divisions and destructive hatred which grows up between different factions of Christianity.

Before this, in Screwtape's praise of the slippery slope theory of getting people into hell through contented secularism, we find Lewis's characterization of the modern age. The lack of fervor in either saints or sinners is due to cultural numbing in matters of truth and excellence. No one is outstanding. If someone is, he or she is dragged back down into mediocrity by sheer pressure to conform. The road to Hell is no longer the road of spectacular sinning. The road to hell is the road of mediocrity.



Characters

Screwtape

Screwtape is a senior devil who is the head of a department in Hell. He is a highly experienced, very subtle, very smart tempter who understands human weakness very well. While he can be affable and indulgent, understanding and even generous, his mind is never off the business at hand. He feels superior to Wormwood, his young nephew. When things are not going well and Wormwood tries to betray him, Screwtape shows his real nature: hateful, vindictive, without affection or mercy.

Screwtape is a bureaucrat. He knows how to check histories, forms, and has connections in many of the devilish offices and departments. He knows the rules and regulations and plays by them. He has influence. When Wormwood reports him for the heresy of saying God truly loves human beings, Screwtape is able to patch it up with those who might use it against him. Even though Screwtape has derided Slubgob, the head of the Tempters' College, many times in his letters, his influence and power are such that, even though Wormwood probably revealed the letters to Slubgob, Screwtape is still the guest of honor at the annual dinner of the College and is expected to provide a toast and a speech.

Screwtape displays many character qualities we associate with a devil. He is arrogant, superior-acting, wily, wise, diabolically clever, vicious, hate-filled, and vindictive. He has no love or regard for human beings, considering them inferior to those who are purely spirit (like devils) because they are part flesh. Nor has he any particular regard for his fellow devils. He is quick to show his contempt for Wormwood and for the way young tempters are taught these days. He considers God a frustrating, puzzling, incomprehensible Enemy who must be defeated at all costs. He is, in devilish terms, quite the patriot. He pays worshipful regard to "Our Father Below." He takes the long and broad view of the overall battle and is fully devoted to the cause.

Wormwood

Wormwood is Screwtape's hapless young nephew, the person to whom all the letters are addressed. Although the reader does not encounter Wormwood directly, a lot about his character is shown through Screwtape's responses to him. He is a young devil, full of fun, laziness, and selfishness. He is irresponsible. One can just imagine him going off to have fun with the other young devils and leaving his important work undone, yet still having youthful optimism that everything will turn out his way.

Wormwood's immaturity is revealed when he asks things like whether he may be allowed to reveal himself to the patient. The reader can imagine what fun this would be for Wormwood. He also shows his immaturity when he is optimistic while his patient goes through through a spiritual dry spell, thinking this may be the end of the man's



faith. Wormwood needs to be rebuked several times not to merely enjoy the human suffering brought about by the war, but to concentrate on his task of winning just one soul for Hell.

Wormwood's laziness and irresponsibility are evident too. It is Screwtape, not Wormwood, who searches out and contacts the devil in charge of the patient's fiancée and the patient's mother. It is Screwtape who finds and provides important information Wormwood should be getting for himself. Wormwood's reports, which should address really significant topics, such as the character of the girl the patient decides to marry, are scanty and leave Screwtape frustrated with the sloppiness they expose. When Wormwood finally fails in his task, he squirms to get off the hook by appealing to his uncle's love for him. Since this is non-existent, we know the careless, irresponsible young devil is doomed.

The Patient

The patient is a young man contemplating God and Christianity and who soon becomes a convert. He is sincere and thoughtful. When he begins to wander from his newfound faith, he catches himself by reading a book he enjoys and going for a country walk. This brings him to a sense of who he really is and to repentance and a renewal of faith. He is honest enough to realize the friends he has been spending time with are leading him away from God, and he needs to refresh and rededicate himself, which he does. He seems like a thoughtful and intellectually honest young man.

The man also has moral strength. We learn through the letters that he has been going through a series of sexual temptations, which he has resisted. He has learned, to his great relief, that the temptations do not last forever and resisting them lessens them. He also learns the dry spells he goes through in faith do not last forever either. He has the moral strength of being honest with himself without being brutally so. Although sorry for his sins, he is still able to accept grace and avoid the false humility of thinking little of himself. While not flamboyantly courageous in the war, he does his duty responsibly and is doing his duty when he dies. When he meets God, he is at once deeply repentant for his sins (which he has a thorough knowledge of) and yet ready and able to receive the grace extended to him.

The Patient's fiancée

This girl is particular offensive to Screwtape. Screwtape positively hates her. While Screwtape's attitude toward the male "patient" is the rather detached attitude of someone studying a specimen, Screwtape's passions are truly provoked by his fiancée. From this, we can understand she is an extraordinarily good person. Indeed, she is full of virtues.

She is a virgin, we learn, for Screwtape mentions it angrily several times. She seems like a plain and simple person, yet has a sublime sense of humor and a great sense of the ridiculous. Belonging to an intelligent circle of friends, she is intelligent too. She is



attractive enough to have enchanted the young man and is in touch with her sexuality enough to have fallen passionately in love with him in return. She is charitable and kind, and this makes her appear weak. Yet, Screwtape assures the reader, she is just the type which, in the early days of Christianity, would have been martyred for her faith with a smile on her face. If she is perhaps a bit of a sectarian, it is mostly due to ignorance and innocence with no real spiritual pride behind it.

God (The Enemy)

God is shown to be a benign, loving presence, ever ready to respond to His children's needs, thoughts, and concerns. Although He is fighting a cosmic battle with the Devil for every human soul, He waits upon human will to take action and always fights fairly and like a gentleman. The foundation of His throne and being is love; He is regretful the devils cannot understand that. He is shown as loving these "amphibious" human creatures—half spirit and half flesh—with a deep and abiding love.

Our Father Below (the Devil)

A self-worshipper, the Devil is not clearly delineated as a character. Unable to understand love, unable to understand the Creator's love for the human creatures, assertive of his own position and pre-eminence, we can only imagine the Devil to be Screwtape taken to the furthest possible extreme. His character is perhaps best depicted when it is said he wishes to own everything in the universe on the basis of conquest and that he is a worshipper of himself.

Slubgob, the head of the Training College

Slubgob is one of Screwtape's favorite targets for contempt, although Screwtape is very gracious at the annual dinner hosted by Slubgob. Slubgob appears as a rather incompetent bureaucrat. He is the principal of the Training College for Young Tempters and does not seem to be doing a very thorough job, even as he churns out graduates.

Glucose

Glucose is the devil in charge of the patient's mother. Glucose is only mentioned once or twice. Appropriately named to sound like a combination of "Gluttony" and "Obese", Glucose is working hard to make the mother's constant dietary concerns a division between her and her family and friends.

The patient's mother

The patient lives with his mother. His mother is a Christian of long standing who taught him Christianity as a boy. It is possible they may experience discord over his fervent



adult conversion, or they may find joy together. The devils are trying to plant discord between them, but the reader does not see how successful this is or is not. One thing we know is that the mother indulges in a form of gluttony—she is far too concerned about what she eats, even though she is on a very strict diet.

Slumtrimpet, the devil in charge of the patient's fiance

Slumtrimpet is a female young devil. The lilted "trimpet" suggests someone light of step, while the "Slum" suggests where this person abides spiritually. She is in charge of the young woman the patient falls in love with. She does not seem to be having much success in tempting the young woman into any kind of serious sin.



Objects/Places

The War

The European War is the backdrop for the spiritual war being fought over each individual soul. The war affects the patient quite a bit, as he is anxious about it, is eventually called to serve in it, and indeed dies in it. It is repeatedly said by Screwtape, however, that war is only interesting in how it affects a human soul for good or evil.

The Wine

The wine Screwtape proposes a toast with is composed of Christians who hated each other in life for their differences in ritual and practice. It is used perhaps as a counter-symbol to communion wine, which stresses unity and being one with Christ and with one another as fellow believers. This devilish wine is the essence of disunity between Christians.

Hell

Hell is depicted as a "Lowerarchy" and a bureaucracy. It is also depicted as Nothingness and a place of incessant noise, where thought, music, joy, silence, and pleasure are banished.

Heaven

Heaven is depicted as a place of light, calm, love, and peace, rather like the sweet and peaceful home and garden of a happy and loving family.

The old mill

The old mill is a quiet place, along a country way, where the patient takes a walk and finds, in the stillness of solitude, that he is not being faithful to who he really is.

The house and garden of the fiancée's family

An abomination to Screwtape, this is a place similar to Heaven, where there is beauty, peace, kindness, good fellowship, and where grace abounds. Here, every guest leaves with some grace clinging to him or her. Even the dog and cat are covered in grace. It is a wonderful place to be, where people are cherished and loved.



The office

Screwtape is a bureaucrat and works out of an office in a department of Hell, where he has access to other offices and departments, as well as to records of human souls.

The Training College

A place where young devils are trained as tempters.

The media

Screwtape informs Wormwood that devils have been working successfully in modern media to influence the souls of human beings. He mentions the arts, newspapers, scholarly writings, fashion magazines, and media images of desirable sexual types. Devils have invaded and manipulated modern media in order to produce maximum dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and susceptibility to temptation.

Words

Words are very important to C.S. Lewis, who as a great writer and thinker, knows their power. He notes the devils "load" or twist the meanings of words so they have negative connotations which instantly change people's opinions of good things. Examples are "Puritanism", which has become an insult and something most modern people want to avoid being accused of. "Puritanism" is associated with being too strait-laced, too self-righteous, and too narrow, rather than merely being the name of a religious group. Another word the devils find useful is "stagnant". Rather than something being eternal and unchanging, which is good by Heaven's standards, the devils have taught people to think of things which are not constantly changing as "stagnant".



Themes

Reason and Faith

One of Lewis's main themes is that Christians are thinking people who ponder truth deeply. They are not blind, nor are they fools, nor are they unintelligent and unreasonable. They are quite the opposite, as a matter of fact. They see through the devils' machinations and manipulation and penetrate to simple questions and simple truths. Indeed, befuddlement, messy but important-sounding thinking, an inability to distinguish between the true and the false, characterize the modern age and are aided by the devils' leading language. Christians have the clarity of thought to cut through all this devilish obscurity to refreshing, simple, straightforward truth.

War

External war is not as important as the spiritual warfare which goes on in each individual human soul. War itself is not necessarily the stuff of either Heaven or Hell. It is what people make of war, how people respond to it, what people do or do not do, that makes war important. Like all of life's various circumstances, war can be an inducement to good or bad behavior. It is merely grist for the heavenly or hellish mills.

War brings human suffering, which the devils certainly enjoy watching. However, Christians have been forewarned by God that redemption involves suffering. Suffering is a tool God uses to help human beings stretch and grow in faith and responsibility. War provides ample opportunity for redemptive suffering. It also provides human beings with consciousness of their own mortality, consciousness of belonging to and being responsible to wholes larger than themselves, and often turns them to God. Even so great a cataclysm as war need not defeat the human spirit and can serve in a redemptive capacity.

Duty

Duty in the present moment, with the present people, in the present circumstances is what is called for. Doing one's duty is the very definition of courage and the way virtues are formed. The devil's tries to focus people's attention on the abstract, as opposed to the particular, in order to prevent them from acting nobly or charitably in the here and now—to get them to neglect their present duties. The young man has duties toward his mother, with whom he lives. Neglecting the simple obligations of this relationship will affect this young man's soul in a negative way.

When the young man is involved in his first air raid, the devils count his behavior as a loss to their side simply because he does his duty. The young man does not perform any spectacular act of heroism. Indeed, he is terribly afraid the whole time. However, he



sticks to his post and fulfills his duties even in the face of great danger and fear. This is all that is needed to deal the devils a defeat.

Factionalism

Factionalism, as opposed to unity, is destructive. Lewis deals with factionalism through several different examples. For instance, he does not endorse being either a patriot or a pacifist when it comes to war. What matters is whether one's patriotism or pacifism causes one to look down on those who disagree, who are not part of one's group. He also deals with religious factionalism, especially in Christianity. He mentions that many Christians differ with one another in matters of ritual, and that these differences have become a dividing point between denominations. Christians have not, he asserts, taken the advice of St. Paul, which is to defer to one another in such matters in order to preserve unity.

"Screwtape Proposes a Toast" is the strongest statement Lewis makes against factionalism. The wine served in Hell on this occasion reminds Screwtape of the taste of the greatest sinners. The wine is comprised of Christians who hated one another on earth due to denominational factionalism. Therefore, Lewis is saying, factionalism in Christianity is not just undesirable and inconvenient. It is extremely pleasing to Hell and even transforms Christians into food and drink for devils.

The Slippery Slope to Hell

This theme appears again and again in *The Screwtape Letters* and is reinforced in "Screwtape Proposes a Toast." Grand sins and terrible evil are not really the stuff which stocks Hell with human souls. Most souls walk the slow, steady path of creeping secularism, worldliness, comfort and complacency. This process is aided by a lot of subtle deception and confusion. There are no great falls, which might lead to great realizations and deep repentances. There are simply many small compromises which eventually lead a soul into deeper and deeper darkness. Human beings are best lulled into Hell through devilish deception and reassurances. This way they hardly know what is happening to them as their faith cools, their perceptions dull, and their will to act nobly and charitably erodes.

On His Sea is Pleasure

God is the Creator of pleasure. Although pleasure is often associated with sin, in fact, devils really offer no pleasures to human beings. They have not created any pleasures themselves. All they can do is encourage human beings to take the pleasures God has made in the wrong ways, in the wrong quantities, under the wrong circumstances, or with the wrong people, thus turning the pleasures into sins. Indeed, the devils take what pleasure they can out of sinning because they hate to see human beings enjoy themselves at all. The attendant pleasure of sins is the pleasure naturally built into



certain activities by God. The devils begrudge human beings the pleasurable aspect of sinning, because Hell is a place of misery.

Life on earth and a life of faith are meant to be joyful. God has provided abundant pleasures for human beings to enjoy. Lewis gives the examples of all there is to do, all there is to eat, all there is to appreciate. God wants to give people pleasure, and He delights in human pleasure as long as it is taken in the right ways, with the right people, and under the right circumstances. Those are His only restrictions. Within the boundaries He has set, there is abundant pleasure.



Style

Point of View

The point of view is the first person and Screwtape, a devil, is the narrator. Screwtape speaks in the form of letters to his young nephew (and at the end in the form of a speech accompanying a toast). Everything in the book is told from his perspective on things. Everything is interpreted through his rather twisted point of view. Screwtape is a limited and unreliable narrator. Often, the reader has to infer the opposite of what Screwtape has said in order to understand what is being described.

An example of this is the girl the patient falls in love with. Screwtape spews out venom and hatred for her. From this, we can infer she is a wonderful and lovely person, a sincere Christian of gossamer but steel-like strength. According to Screwtape, she is "a vile, sneaking, simpering, demure, monosyllabic, mouse-like, watery, insignificant, virginal, bread-and-butter miss. The little brute. She makes me vomit. She stinks and scalds through the very pages of the dossier. We'd have had her to the arena in the old days," (p. 117-118).

C.S. Lewis warns in the preface "Not everything that Screwtape says should be assumed to be true even from his own angle." Crafty as Screwtape is, some of the things he says are to manipulate Wormwood and to aggrandize himself. Screwtape definitely sees through a glass darkly. He sees the world from an upside-down, evil and twisted angle. For example, at the time of the young man's death, the light and love of God are described as bringing blinding pain to the devils. By contrast, we know the young man is basking in it, drawn to it, fulfilled and made whole in it.

It is this incongruous and inaccurate but consistent point of view which gives the book its great humor and makes some of its most telling points, by making them from upside down or the opposite point of view. God's benevolence, for instance, is seen in contrast to the malevolence of Hell.

Setting

The setting is England during a World War. The setting is a small city or town with some outlying country districts. The city or town is significant enough to be bombed during air raids, yet it has country roads which lead out toward an old mill. There are sophisticated city types around, however, which the young man makes friends with, and which indicate a city of some size and significance. There is a country-like feel to the girl's family's home and garden.

At the same time, the setting is, in many ways, the young man's consciousness and soul. This is where the real action takes place. The fact he is English, that there is a war on, are externals of only partial significance. The real ground of the story is what is



going on inside the man and in his relationship with God. It is there that the battles are fought and won.

Screwtape appears to inhabit a sort of spiritual-realm office. He has access to documents like the girl's dossier, and we know he is the head of a department. We can imagine him writing his letters from some dark desk, seated on a dark cloud, sending reports further down into the Lowerarchy where important decisions are made. "Screwtape Proposes a Toast" takes place at a large dinner or banquet at a college for young devils.

Language and Meaning

No one uses the English language quite like C.S. Lewis does. His style is clear, humorous, and yet telling. He is a master of the final line—his closing lines are often the most powerful and thought-provoking in the piece. Lewis is never sloppy in his use of language. He is always fastidious, and his words are always consummately well chosen. He writes, however, with a certain freshness and simplicity which make him a delight. One need not be a theologian or a scholar to enjoy this book or to understand it.

The style of the language is sometimes slightly elliptical, highly ironic, and full of the kind of humor which makes people laugh because it is true. Irony is well suited to the incongruity of the situation. When the main voice, Screwtape, is deriding God for his "bourgeois" addiction to pleasure, he heats himself up with hellish dignity and speaks of the Miserific Vision of Hell. It is comical, because we know Screwtape is actually lauding misery. Sometimes Screwtape becomes ridiculous in his dedication to the viewpoint of Hell, but most of the time Screwtape is thorough, crisp, intelligent, and devilishly witty. He comes across as an excellent, insightful, mid-level and rising bureaucrat who is very good at his job. The humor stems mostly from the incongruity of the situation and the deadly accuracy of the descriptions of how the devil works on human beings.

Structure

The book consists of thirty-one letters and the addition of "Screwtape Proposes a Toast", which is in the form of a speech. The letters are from Screwtape to Wormwood. They are undated, although they seem to cover a length of time running to a couple of months, and are almost always signed "Your affectionate Uncle Screwtape". The letters run about four pages each, with a few slightly shorter and a few slightly longer.

The plot is of a young man contemplating Christianity who converts to it and goes through various ups and downs, tests and the like, as he goes through his life working, meeting people, falling in love, and finally, being called up to service in a major war. Throughout these activities, Screwtape plots with Wormwood how to exploit every possible chink in the man's mental, emotional, and spiritual armor, so as to lead him into sin and away from God. Since Screwtape is such an expert tempter and so quick to see opportunity, even in things like a man's conversion to Christianity, the reader is never quite sure what is going to happen. The man seems to be making slow yet steady



progress toward becoming a solid Christian and repelling many, indeed most, of the satanic attacks launched against him. The conflict is between good and evil.

The climax is at the very end of the book, when the man dies in a state of grace. This climax takes place off the page, however. In Screwtape's last letter to Wormwood, he speaks of the man's death and ascension into Heaven as having happened in the very recent past, and he describes it to Wormwood as it must have happened. This is the apex of their battle for his soul, and they have lost. Screwtape comforts himself that, while they may have lost this battle, they will not lose the entire war.



Quotes

"If he ever consciously directs his prayer 'Not to what I think thou art but to what thou knowest thyself to be', our situation is, for the moment, desperate," (Letter 4, p. 18) .

"Of all humans the English are in this respect the most deplorable milksops. They are creatures of that miserable sort who loudly proclaim that torture is too good for their enemies and then give tea and cigarettes to the first wounded German pilot who turns up at the back door," (Letter 6, p. 17).

"One must face the fact that all the talk about His love for men, and His service being perfect freedom, is not (as one would gladly believe) mere propaganda, but an appalling truth. He really does want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of Himself," (Letter 8, pp. 38-39).

"Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys," (Letter 8, p. 40).

"Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts," (Letter 12, p. 61).

"The more often he feels without acting, the less he will be able ever to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel," (Letter 13, p. 67).

"Much of the modern resistance to chastity comes from men's beliefs that they 'own' their bodies—those vast and perilous estates, pulsating with the energy that made the worlds, in which they find themselves without their consent and from which they are ejected at the pleasure of Another!" (Letter 21, p. 113).

"In the long run either Our Father or the Enemy will say 'Mine' of each thing that exists, and specially of each man. They will find out in the end, never fear, to whom their time, their souls, and their bodies really belong—certainly not to them, whatever happens," (Letter 21, pp. 114-115).



"He's a hedonist at heart. All those fasts and vigils and stakes and crosses are only a facade. Or only like foam on the seashore. Out at sea, out in His sea, there is pleasure and more pleasure. He makes no secret of it; at His right hand are 'pleasures forevermore.' Ugh! I don't think He has the least inkling of that high and austere mystery to which we rise in the Miserific Vision. He's vulgar, Wormwood. He has a bourgeois mind," (Letter 22, p. 118).

"We want cattle who can finally become food; He wants servants who can finally become sons. We want to suck in, He wants to give out. We are empty and would be filled; He is full and flows over," (Letter 8, p. 39).

"Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden," (Letter 9 p. 44).

"I see few of the old warnings about Worldly Vanities, the Choice of Friends, and the Value of Time. All that, your patient would probably classify as 'Puritanism'—and may I remark in passing that the value we have given to that word is one of the really solid triumphs of the last hundred years? By it we rescue annually thousands of humans from temperance, chastity, and sobriety of life," (Letter 10, p. 51).



Topics for Discussion

Think of ways in which science and religion or reason and religion have been at odds in history. What are some famous examples of this? Now think of examples of how religion and science or religion and reason have been shown to be compatible.

Compare and contrast the brightly skeptical group of sophisticated and worldly people the patient meets in the early days of his conversion, and the group of intelligent and agreeable people he meets through the young woman he loves.

To whom is Screwtape referring in this passage: "Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys," (Letter 8, p. 40). If you know who it is, how do you know? Find the biblical passage that shows who this is.

J. R. R. Tolkien said in *The Lord of the Rings* that evil cannot create; it can only destroy. What is Lewis's stance on pleasure and creation? Do you suppose the two friends discussed such issues?

In your own words, describe what the young man is like. How do you imagine him physically? What kind of work do you think he does?

In your own words, describe what the young woman is like. Do you think you would enjoy her as a friend? How do you imagine the young man and young woman met?

Courage, C. S. Lewis says, is acting nobly and responsibly even when one does not want to, and even in the face of serious fear. Have you ever shown courage by doing what you were supposed to do even in the face of fear?

Write your own Toast from the point of Screwtape, summing up society's prospects for Heaven and Hell.