

# The Screwtape Letters



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF C. S. LEWIS

C.S. Lewis was born and raised in Ireland. His father was a Welsh solicitor and his mother was the daughter of an Anglican priest—Lewis’s early exposure to Christianity would influence his writing and thinking for the rest of his life. As a child and teenager, Lewis was fascinated by fantasy writing. He excelled at Latin and Greek in school, and won a prestigious scholarship to Oxford University. While still an undergraduate, Lewis fought in World War I, a traumatic experience that made him an atheist throughout his twenties. Lewis ultimately graduated Oxford with a “triple first” in English, Classics, and Philosophy, an extremely prestigious achievement both then and now. From the 1920s to the 1950s, Lewis worked as a professor at Oxford’s Magdalen College, teaching medieval and classical studies. In the late 1920s, when Lewis was in his early thirties, he converted to the Anglican Church, based on his studies of classical Christian texts and his friendship with such Christian thinkers as George Macdonald. For the remainder of his life, Lewis was a vocal proponent of Christian values, authoring such famous Christian texts as [Mere Christianity](#), a series of short lectures on Christian values and the existence of God. Lewis first delivered these lectures via radio broadcast during the Second World War. It was also at this time that he sheltered children from London in his house in the English countryside. The experience of moving from London to the countryside forms the premise of Lewis’s most famous book, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, (1949) the first novel he wrote about the fantastical world of Narnia. In the next five years, Lewis authored six other books about Narnia, collectively known as the *Chronicles of Narnia*. He also wrote the popular Space Trilogy (1938-1945). Although his fiction writing made Lewis wealthy in his later years, he continued to teach medieval and Renaissance literature at Oxford and later Cambridge University. *The Chronicles of Narnia*, along with Lewis’s writings on Christianity, remain enormously popular more than half a century after his death.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While *Screwtape* repeatedly tells Wormwood to avoid talking about specific historical events of any kind, it is clear that the patient is living in England during World War II. In this era of European history, Germany fell under the control of the Fascist dictator Adolph Hitler, who used his charisma and fiery rhetoric to persecute the Jewish race and rebuild the German military. From 1939 to 1945, Germany under Hitler conducted a brutal war with England, France, and, after 1940, Russia. In the

infamous “air raids,” German planes bombed hundreds of English cities, including London, causing enormous death and destruction. It is an air raid of this kind that ultimately kills the patient. While Lewis was too old to fight in World War II, he sheltered dozens of children from London in his home in the English countryside, and broadcast patriotic, Christian speeches to teach and entertain British soldiers. *The Screwtape Letters* also alludes to many of the ideological milestones of the early 20th century, including the rise of the doctrines of Darwinism and communism. The theories of Charles Darwin posited that all life on earth evolves by adapting to environmental changes. Karl Marx, who was inspired in part by Darwin’s thinking, proposed that all economic systems ultimately undermine themselves by empowering workers and weakening those who control the means of production. The end result of this process is communism, an economic system in which the workers themselves control the means of production. From Lewis’s perspective, the common trait of both of these ideologies is their emphasis on science and progress as inherent goods—Lewis takes issue with this assumption many times in his novel.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*The Screwtape Letters* is constructed as a collection of letters from one devil to another, concerning the corruption of a human soul. Simply by writing about Christian themes from the perspective of a devil, Lewis intentionally alludes to John Milton’s 1667 epic poem [Paradise Lost](#), often regarded as one of the greatest works in the English language. Lewis was highly familiar with Milton’s poetry, and indeed, authored one of the definitive critical studies of [Paradise Lost](#). While many critics continue to believe that Milton’s poem is a secret glorification of Satan, Lewis took the critical view that Milton was upholding Christian doctrine, despite seeming to sympathize with the Devil. *The Screwtape Letters*, then, can be read as a mirroring of Milton’s project, or rather, what Lewis takes Milton’s project to be: an explication of Christian morality from the perspective of the evil, not the good. It’s also important to note that Lewis constructs his book as a dialogue (albeit one in which we only ever hear half of what’s said!) between two characters about moral issues. In this sense, Lewis’s book falls into a long tradition of Christian theological works that use the methods of fiction—specific characters and events—as a pretext to talk about weighty philosophical issues, such as free will, good, and evil. Other examples of this approach can be found in John Bunyan’s 1678 novel *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (of which Lewis wrote a comic, updated version, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*) and the philosophical dialogues of Saint Anselm of Canterbury.

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Screwtape Letters*
- **Where Written:** Oxford, UK
- **When Published:** 1942
- **Literary Period:** The fantasy “boom” of World War II
- **Genre:** Moral dialogue, allegory, fantasy, epistolary novel
- **Setting:** Hell
- **Climax:** the patient’s death
- **Antagonist:** In one sense, the “antagonist” in the book is God, whom Screwtape calls “the Enemy.” From the perspective of the reader (who presumably sympathizes with good, not evil), the antagonists are Satan, Screwtape, and Wormwood, the devils who try to corrupt the patient’s soul.
- **Point of View:** **First person limited**—the novel is written as a series of 31 letters.

## EXTRA CREDIT

**The perfect friendship:** C.S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* is arguably the most famous series of fantasy novels written in the 20th century. Its only real rival for such a title would be J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. Amazingly, Lewis and Tolkien were good friends for many years. It’s not hard to see why: both were pious Christians, both taught literature at Oxford for decades, both fought in World War I, and both had their books made into highly successful movies... decades after they died.

**A sad day in history:** On the day C.S. Lewis died, his death attracted barely any international attention, despite the fact that his books were world-famous at the time. The reason? An even more famous and beloved figure died on that day: John F. Kennedy, who was assassinated during a visit to Dallas, Texas.



## PLOT SUMMARY

The novel consists of 31 letters written by a devil named Screwtape to his nephew, a young devil named Wormwood. The author, C.S. Lewis, notes that he has no intention of explaining how he came to acquire these letters.

In the early letters of the book, Screwtape responds to the news that Wormwood is busy trying to tempt a young man, the patient, to move away from God—the Enemy, as Screwtape calls him—and embrace sin. Screwtape gives Wormwood advice on how to influence the patient in various small ways, thereby encouraging the patient to move away from God and toward “Our Father,” Satan.

Screwtape advises Wormwood to prevent the patient from thinking whenever possible, since reason will only encourage the patient to accept Christianity with greater fervency.

Wormwood should try to prevent the patient from thinking about the history of Christianity, and instead influence the patient to focus excessively on the ugliness and imperfection of his peers and of family, especially his mother. In this way, Wormwood can encourage the patient to focus too exclusively on vice, imperfection, and the material realm, and reject piety, perfection, and the abstract moral realm.

Wormwood reports to Screwtape that a war (World War II) has broken out in Europe, prompting Screwtape to send Wormwood a series of letters on fear, violence, and bravery. Screwtape explains that war can be good or bad for the devils’ cause. It’s good in the sense that it fills people with fear and makes them turn to sin and sensual pleasure, but it’s also bad because it encourages people to think seriously about death, and therefore behave morally. Screwtape explains to Wormwood that whether the patient becomes a patriot or a pacifist, if he is extreme in his beliefs then his behavior will be sinful—extremism of any kind, except extremism for God, is a sin.

Wormwood writes to Screwtape, proud that the patient is “losing his religion.” Screwtape angrily reminds Wormwood that people are always moving between periods of depression and disappointment and periods of happiness—unfortunately, periods of depression are actually good for God, because if people can continue to worship God during this time, then it makes them nearly impossible to corrupt in the future. Screwtape adds, grudgingly, that God loves humanity and wants them to be rewarded for their virtue in Heaven. He also notes that modern European society has an irrational prejudice in favor of the new and of fashion—this encourages people to abandon Christianity simply because it’s old-fashioned, a great help to devils.

Screwtape learns that the patient has befriended a married couple that regularly mocks Christianity and celebrates the importance of progress. Screwtape tells Wormwood to use this development to his advantage: he should encourage the patient to spend more time with the couple, until the couple’s beliefs gradually become his own. Screwtape warns Wormwood that although he is successfully corrupting the patient, he must be careful not to corrupt him too quickly, for fear that the patient will realize that he is sinning and return to the church.

In his next letter, Screwtape reveals that Wormwood has failed to corrupt the patient—in fact, he has allowed the patient to return to the church. Wormwood allowed this to happen, Screwtape angrily explains, by letting the patient experience pleasure. Pleasure, Screwtape shows, is always dangerous for devils, since God is its creator. While some kinds of pleasure can be sinful, it’s only sinful because of the *quantity* of pleasure being demanded.

There is a lull in the war in Europe, filling the patient with fear and anxiety. During this lull, Screwtape addresses a wide variety of questions Wormwood has raised about humanity,

virtue, and sin. Screwtape notes that humans corrupt themselves when they become “connoisseurs” of churches, and also notes with amusement that the Church of England has torn itself apart with hundreds of petty debates. He makes a thorough study of gluttony, concluding that it is just as gluttonous to fuss over small portions as it is to insist on large portions. Finally, Screwtape writes Wormwood a series of letters on the difference between love and lust, concluding that a weakness of modern European society is that it conflates these two things. As a result, millions of young couples marry out of lust, or, even worse, out of the mistaken belief that love is the only reason to marry someone. In reality, Screwtape writes, a marriage requires loyalty, respect, and hundreds of other virtues to work properly. Screwtape expresses his exasperation with the principle of love, noting that the goal of all beings is to fight and compete with other beings.

Wormwood writes Screwtape a letter in which he points out a contradiction in Screwtape’s reasoning—if God loves humanity, then how can it be true that the goal of all beings is to fight with other beings? Screwtape revises his own opinion, worriedly begging Wormwood not to show his letters to the “Secret Police,” which is responsible for punishing devils who commit heresy. Screwtape explains that God does *not* love humanity—on the contrary, his love for humanity is only a smokescreen to disguise his true, mysterious plan—a plan that no devil has ever understood.

In the following letter, Screwtape illustrates the fallacy in the patient’s belief that he is entitled to “free time.” On the contrary, the patient owes everything to God—his talent, his intellect, his body, and his time. Thus, it is sheer foolishness to suppose that one “deserves” anything at all. Screwtape speculates that God wants humans to reach the point where they can be aware of their talents and abilities, and yet also be fully aware that they owe everything to God.

Screwtape learns from Wormwood that the patient has fallen in love with a Christian woman, someone so virtuous that she makes Screwtape physically ill, and causes him to transform into a giant centipede. Screwtape smugly tells Wormwood that Wormwood’s attempts to report Screwtape to the Secret Police have failed, and that Wormwood faces a horrible punishment if he fails to corrupt the patient.

Now that the patient is with his lover, and is meeting her educated, Christian family, Screwtape advises Wormwood to appeal to the patient’s vanity and desire for the new. Modern humans, he explains, have an irrational desire for new things and fashions—this desire is ridiculous, he concludes, because new things aren’t inherently good or bad. When the patient begins courting his lover, Screwtape advises Wormwood to make the young couple think of love and nothing else. In this way, Screwtape explains, they will sacrifice their own happiness for one another’s sake, meaning that in the future, they will come to resent each other.

The war commences, and the patient is shipped off to fulfill his “duties.” Screwtape warns Wormwood that the patient could die in a state of virtue, before Wormwood has a chance to corrupt him. In general, he notes, humans are too afraid of death and too fond of life. Life and experience are good for devils, because over time, people begin to despair and become more prone to sin. Ironically, civilization values people who have had long lives and many experiences.

As the air raids on the patient’s community begin, Screwtape contemplates how to corrupt the patient. Wormwood’s goal, he writes, should be to encourage the patient to love his community and therefore hate all Germans. But this is difficult, since Wormwood runs the danger of encouraging the patient to feel more love and therefore be a more virtuous person. In the same way, Wormwood could encourage the patient to feel cowardice, but this would result in the patient feeling humility and therefore moving closer to God. In general, Screwtape admits, devils have a very difficult job—no matter how hard they try, mankind has a way of embracing faith and piety.

In his final letter to Wormwood, Screwtape greets Wormwood with false warmth and explains that the patient has died in an air raid. In his final moments of life, the patient “saw God,” and realized that no evil could ever corrupt him. Screwtape admits that he has no idea what God is trying to accomplish by loving humanity, and that he doesn’t know what awaits the patient in Heaven. He even expresses his desire to learn what lies in Heaven. Screwtape reminds Wormwood that he feels “the same love” for Wormwood that Wormwood feels for Screwtape. In the end, he reminds Wormwood that the penalty for failing to corrupt a human is being eaten alive—and Screwtape himself will be the devil to eat Wormwood.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Screwtape** – The experienced devil whose letters to his nephew, Wormwood, form the bulk of *The Screwtape Letters*. Screwtape has successfully corrupted thousands of human beings, convincing them to embrace sin and thereby condemning them to eternal punishment in Hell. As a result, he gives Wormwood copious advice on the best way to corrupt a modern man—advice which, in its thoroughness, forms a “negative” of Lewis’s own theory of Christianity. In spite of, or perhaps because of his vast experience, Screwtape struggles to understand God’s love for humanity, and—thanks to a treacherous Wormwood—his suggestion that God loves humans and wants them to love one another briefly places him in danger of being convicted of heresy. Screwtape believes in a doctrine of “realism,” according to which the only goal of life is to compete with other living things for power and resources. Yet at times—at the end of the novel, for instance—Screwtape

expresses his desire to understand God's love, and, implicitly, to embrace Christianity.

**Wormwood** – The young, inexperienced “junior tempter” whose continued, failed attempts to corrupt the patient are the subject of *The Screwtape Letters*. Wormwood is never actually heard from in the novel, as we hear about his experiences entirely through Screwtape, his uncle. Despite having attending “college”—or rather, the Satanic counterpart to college—Wormwood is ignorant of many of the basic strategies that experienced devils like Screwtape use to pull humans away from God. In a sense, Wormwood isn't really a character at all: he's a convenient plot device that allows Screwtape to spout his theories of Good and Evil, thereby allowing C.S. Lewis to express his own beliefs. Yet Wormwood also proves himself to be a treacherous, backstabbing individual, trying to report his uncle for speculating on the nature of love. Furthermore, it is Wormwood's failure to tempt the patient that brings the book to a close.

**The patient** – The weak, young, and deeply uncertain human being whose moral progress—and lack of progress—defines the plot of the novel. Much like Wormwood, the patient is less of a character with unique thoughts, feelings, and motivations than he is a plot device allowing C.S. Lewis to construct a theory of Christianity. (In Christian fiction, there is a long tradition of “blank” characters of exactly this type—in fact, the general name we give to this kind of character—Everyman—is an allusion to a Christian morality play from the 16th century.) Even so, the patient can be taken as an embodiment of the virtues and vices of Europe at the time when C.S. Lewis wrote his book. Thus, the patient is capable of some virtues, such as honesty, loyalty, and bravery, and yet he is also weak, arrogant, and prone to exaggeration, with a bad habit of valuing new fashions more highly than old truths. Ultimately, the patient finds a Christian community for himself, and dies in an air raid during World War II, having ensured his place in Heaven.

**The patient's mother** – The patient's mother, much like the patient, has few specific qualities—she's an embodiment of clichés and stereotypes about middle-class, 20th century English mothers. One exception to this rule is that she is dainty and fussy with her food, therefore qualifying her as a glutton in Screwtape's eyes. The patient's mother is often irritable with the patient, since they have a bad habit of arguing and bickering with each other. At the same time, she's shown to be capable of immense love for her son.

**The married couple** – The married couple befriends the patient early on in the novel, tempting him away from Christianity with their talk of atheism and their sarcastic attacks on the church. As Screwtape points out, the married couple damages the patient's faith by encouraging him to accept their beliefs as his own. The married couple also encourages the patient to conceal his faith from the married couple, thereby making him proud and arrogant about his ability to live a “double life.” After

a few chapters, the patient abandons the married couple and meets his lover.

**God** – Because *The Screwtape Letters* is told from the perspective of a devil like Screwtape, God is almost always referred to as The Enemy. In spite of his antagonistic role in the novel, God inspires a great deal of Screwtape's moral theorizing. Screwtape accuses God of wanting humans to be separate from him—in other words, free—and yet united with him in their Christian faith. Screwtape also grudgingly acknowledges that God loves humanity—at least until Wormwood reports this “heresy” to the authorities of Hell. In the end, Screwtape regards God as a mystery, concluding that his love for mankind must involve some secret plan. Much of the comedy in *The Screwtape Letters* arises from the reader's recognition that there is no secret plan behind God's love—he loves mankind, and that is all.

**Satan** – The leader of the devils, whom they refer to as “Our Father,” Satan is nonetheless rarely mentioned in *The Screwtape Letters*, and is a far less conspicuous a presence than God. Nevertheless, on the occasions when Screwtape mentions Satan, he's portrayed as a jealous, angry tyrant, who, like Screwtape himself, cannot understand God's love for humanity, and resorts to trickery and temptation to corrupt humans. Satan was God's loyal servant until God revealed that he had created mankind, which made Satan jealous. Afterwards, Satan led some of God's angels in a rebellion against Heaven. Inevitably, God defeated Satan and cast him out of Heaven, confining him to Hell.

**The patient's lover** – A virtuous, beautiful Christian woman, the patient's lover is instrumental in attracting him toward God and leading him from temptation. Nevertheless, she is capable of some vice: because she has been raised in an educated Christian family, she has a tendency to look down on atheists and members of other religions.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Glucose** – The devil who has been assigned to tempt the patient's mother.

**Scabtree** – A devil and acquaintance of Screwtape who sees war as an excellent opportunity for devils to corrupt the human race.

**Triptweeze** – A fellow devil of Wormwood.

**Slubgob** – A devil who teaches young devils about sin in college.

**Toadpipe** – Screwtape's secretary, who occasionally transcribes Screwtape's dictations.

**Slumtrinket** – The devil tasked with corrupting the patient's lover.

**C.S. Lewis** – The author of *The Screwtape Letters*, who briefly appears in his own book on two occasions—once to claim that he has “received” Screwtape's letters but refuses to explain

how, and again to explain a change in Screwtape’s handwriting.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### PROVING CHRISTIANITY TRUE BY EXPLORING EVIL

Although *The Screwtape Letters* is a novel about Christian morality, it’s written from the perspective of evildoers—devils. It’s important to understand why Lewis chooses to tell his story in this way, and what the advantages and limitations of his form are.

Throughout the book, the devil Screwtape gives Wormwood, his nephew, advice about how to corrupt human beings. In giving this advice, Screwtape makes observations about human nature and humanity’s potential for virtue. In other words, in order to talk about doing evil, Screwtape has to talk about good. The result of this is that Screwtape’s letters form a “negative” portrait of Christianity. For example, when Screwtape tells Wormwood that he should try to convince the “patient”—the human they’re trying to corrupt—to embrace fashion and progress as his ideals, it’s very clear that C.S. Lewis believes that fashion and progress impede Christians in their quest to remain pious. In short, *The Screwtape Letters* is a thorough guide to how *not* to be a Christian—and therefore, it’s an equally thorough guide to how to be a Christian. Screwtape essentially expresses Lewis’s beliefs—the only difference is that Screwtape views and expresses these beliefs in a negative way, whereas Lewis sincerely believes them.

One consequence of Lewis’s writing *The Screwtape Letters* in this “negative” fashion is that he can “disprove” evil by means of the logical strategy known as “*reductio ad absurdum*.” In this technique, the logician first *tries* to prove that “not X”—the opposite of X—is true. But if, in following the logic of “not X,” the logician reaches a logical impossibility, the logician then demonstrates that “not X” is absurd—and, therefore, that “X” is true after all.

In this way, by depicting Screwtape’s efforts to logically explain his theories, Lewis ends up showing that those theories of God and morality are self-contradictory. At one point, Screwtape acknowledges that God loves humanity. Elsewhere, he expresses his belief that love doesn’t exist, and that the only goal of life is to conquer other life. When Wormwood calls him out on this contradiction, Screwtape is forced to backpedal and amend his beliefs. Following the rules of *reductio ad absurdum*, the message is clear: love *does* exist, and God has boundless

love for human beings.

Ultimately, the form and logical structure of *The Screwtape Letters* supports the traditional Christian idea that, in the end, evil actually aids the side of good. Screwtape explicitly acknowledges this toward the end of the novel, when he angrily points out that devils “can’t win” when it comes to corrupting humanity. If they fill humans with fear, then humans will feel humility for their sins, and ultimately come closer to God. The devils’ attempt to corrupt humanity usually backfires. In this sense, the form of *The Screwtape Letters* mirrors the content. Because it’s written from the devils’ point of view, it forms a perfect “negative” of Christian doctrine, and by showing that the worship of evil is ultimately self-contradictory and self-defeating, Lewis’s examination of evil ultimately pushes the reader back to morality and piety.



### RELIGION AND REASON

In Screwtape’s first letter to Wormwood, he tells Wormwood that the goal of a devil should be to prevent a human being from thinking. Through this advice from one devil to another, C.S. Lewis makes the argument that if a person thinks critically and analytically about Christianity and religion in general, then that person will come to understand it and embrace it. While this idea may sound simplistic, it’s by no means the common view of Christianity. In fact, as Lewis readily acknowledges, many Christian authorities throughout history have actually repressed critical thinking about religion. In contrast to many Christians before him, in *The Screwtape Letters* Lewis wants to use reason and logic—rather than just blind faith—to support Christian teachings.

In the novel, there are countless examples of Lewis’s belief that Christianity is fundamentally rational. In a sense, every letter Screwtape sends Wormwood is an attempt, at least on Lewis’s part, to use logic to prove one part of Christianity. One clear example of this principle is Letter XXI, in which Screwtape shows that the patient is foolish to think that his free time belongs to him. The patient does not “own” time any more than he owns the moon. The belief in ownership, Screwtape concludes, is a silly human superstition—indeed, if humans were to stop and think logically about the concept of ownership for even a fraction of a second, they would realize how irrational it is. Screwtape’s reasoning points readers in the direction of a key Christian idea: the notion that humans are not truly in control of their own lives at all. This is an idea that’s arguably best exemplified at the end of the Biblical Book of Job, in which God scolds the titular human character for falsely thinking that he “owns” his own health, success, life, or happiness.

Lewis uses *The Screwtape Letters* to prove that Christianity is a rational system of beliefs, but he also admits that reason by itself isn’t enough to convert anyone to Christianity. This

becomes obvious when one compares Lewis with Screwtape, his literary creation. They're both perfectly rational beings, and both have little patience for humans' foolishness and shortsightedness. And yet Lewis is a Christian and a lover of God, while Screwtape despises God and Christianity. Whatever the difference between Lewis and Screwtape might be, it has nothing to do with logic.

Ultimately, Lewis suggests that reason is an extremely powerful weapon for the Christian, but it's not the only weapon—in other words, reason is “necessary but insufficient” for a belief in Christian teaching. If one pairs rationality with a sincere love for God, then Christian teachings follow logically from one another. Without love, Lewis suggests, the rational thinker is no better off than Screwtape.



## LOVE

Try as he might, Screwtape cannot understand love. As a result, Screwtape cannot understand why God created mankind, why he wants humans to be good,

or why he wants to reward them in Heaven for their virtue.

Screwtape's reasoning is impeccable, but his total incomprehension of love means that he'll never be a Christian. By exploring Screwtape's misunderstanding of this basic human (and divine) idea, Lewis constructs his own theory of what humans' love, both for God and for other humans, should be.

Screwtape tries to define love by contrasting it with the devil's belief in “realism.” The only purpose of life, he insists, is to conquer other forms of life, taking things for oneself so that other beings can't have them. The technical term for this way of looking at the world is as a “zero-sum game”—any advantage earned by one person is seen as a lost opportunity for food, shelter, or pleasure for another person. Screwtape believes that love is the opposite of “realism,” that love is the belief that two beings can share the same needs, and that they can work together to satisfy these needs. This technical explanation of love may well define love for Screwtape, but it cannot convey love, in the same sense that looking at sheet music can't convey the sense of music. (It shouldn't come as a surprise that Screwtape admits that he cannot understand music, either.) In any event, Wormwood reports Screwtape to the authorities because Screwtape dares to suggest that God loves humanity—and this puts an end to Screwtape's thinking about love for some time.

In the second half of *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape continues his discussion of love with Wormwood, without ever admitting the “heretical” idea that God loves humanity. At the same time that Screwtape criticizes humans' love for one another, Lewis implicitly asks questions about love, such as, “How should people love?” and “Is it possible to love too much or too little?”

In order to answer his own questions, Lewis, writing in the

guise of Screwtape, investigates “modern love.” Modern lovers, Screwtape notes, are too eager to fall in love with others, and wrongly confuse love with lust. Most absurdly, they believe that love is the only reason to marry someone. While Screwtape's thoughts on love can hardly be trusted, his position is consistent with the beliefs Lewis subscribes to elsewhere in *The Screwtape Letters*. Lewis maintains that modern human beings are too “extreme” in their thinking and their behaviors. Love, he acknowledges, can often be extreme or excessive. There are many couples who avoid talking about their problems and their feelings, simply because they are in love. The result is that couples' problems with one another resurface years later, causing resentment and arguments. At the simplest level, Lewis believes, these kinds of modern behaviors are morally wrong because they encourage people to love imperfect things, such as people, more than they love God, the source of all perfection.

In the end, even though the devils in *The Screwtape Letters* cannot understand love, Lewis spells out his own theory of love. Lewis maintains that love is of vital, indeed, self-evident importance for human civilization, but also that it can't replace other human virtues. When speaking about the love between human beings, Lewis wants people to moderate their love with other emotions and virtues: respect, loyalty, etc. The only time when love should be extreme is when a human loves God.



## FREEDOM, WILL, AND SIN

Early on in *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape explains the challenges that human beings face in their lives. God has created humans to be deeply

flawed—they have imperfect knowledge of the world and of themselves, they are foolish and irrational, and they often disrespect God. Humanity's imperfection, Screwtape maintains, is a consequence of its freedom.

In Christian theology, humans are unique insofar as they have free will. While free will is a notoriously difficult concept to define (even Lewis doesn't try to do so in *The Screwtape Letters*), one useful “test” of free will was proposed by the important Christian thinker Saint Augustine: if a being commits a wrongful act, the act can only be considered a “sin” if the being, placed under identical circumstances, could have behaved any other way. If the being was incapable of doing anything else, then it follows that the being was not truly “free,” and thus had no choice but to disrespect God.

Because humans have free will, they are constantly vacillating between good and evil, or between God and Satan. Screwtape and Wormwood cannot “force” the patient to do anything, because forcing the patient to behave a certain way would mean that he has not acted freely, and therefore not really sinned. Both God and Satan can only “encourage” the patient to behave a certain way—whether the patient will embrace good

or evil is ultimately up to him. While humans' free will makes them weak and prone to temptation, Screwtape grudgingly admits that free will is also a major problem for devils. Because humans face constant temptation, God respects and rewards them for resisting it throughout their lives. In this way, humans can only redeem themselves and go to Heaven *because* they are free—if humans had no choice but to be good, there would be nothing impressive about their actions or voluntary about their love.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis implicitly asks an important question about free will: if humans, being free, are constantly being encouraged to do good and evil by God and Satan, respectively—in other words, if they're constantly moving between virtue and sin—then how is it possible for humans to make any real *progress* toward Heaven? Won't good behavior always be canceled out by sinful behavior?

While Lewis acknowledges that it's impossible for any human being to behave with perfect virtue, he thinks it's extremely important that human beings try to behave this way. This is why the human will is of the utmost importance to Lewis. Screwtape points out that a human's will is the "closest thing" to his being, followed by his intellect. Screwtape explains that a devil must tempt a human to *will* evil—in other words, to commit evil actions. By the same logic, God wants human beings to *behave* morally—in other words, to be able to point to their moral actions, not just their moral thoughts. By translating will into action, humans can "train" themselves to behave morally in the future, ensuring that their behavior is much closer to perfect good than perfect evil.

Ultimately, Lewis concludes that freedom is humanity's greatest weakness, but also its greatest strength. While freedom may allow humans to sin, and thus go to Hell, it also allows them to overcome their sins, train themselves to commit moral actions, and go to Heaven.



### FASHION, PROGRESS, AND CHANGE

At many points in *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape expresses his satisfaction with the modern European emphasis on fashion, change, and "the new." This is a signal, of course, that Lewis isn't at all fond of this emphasis.

At the time when Lewis was writing *The Screwtape Letters*, Europe's intellectual history was (and still is) in the shadow of such monumental 19th century thinkers as George Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Charles Darwin. While it would take thousands of pages to make a thorough analysis of all four of these thinkers, one important thing all four have in common is their emphasis on vast, historical processes. Marx, for instance, believed that all economics would gradually move toward a state of communism, according to which the proletariat (working class) would control the means of

production. Similarly, Hegel believed that history is a history of ideas—that an idea that is true and "right" at one time may eventually change into another idea. Nietzsche went even further in saying that truth, as we understand it, was impossible—there were many, contradictory truths.

Part of the problem with these intellectuals' emphasis on change, at least as Lewis sees it, is that they focus too much on the future. By celebrating progress, thinkers like Marx and Hegel point us toward a bright future. One side effect of this, Lewis believes, is that people learn to think of the present as secondary in importance to the things to come. This is dangerous for morality, because all sin is committed because people think about the future instead of focusing on the present. People steal, for instance, because they need the money in the future—they ignore the feelings of guilt and sin that will afflict them in the present. By the same logic, people often commit murder on the pretext that the murder is necessary in order to achieve some lofty, future goal.

Another reason that Lewis distrusts the emphasis on change is that it makes people distrust the simple notions of truth and falsehood. Thus the reader of Hegel or Nietzsche, comfortable with thinking about "relative" truths, or information which can be true at one time and false at another, will lose sight of the one most important truths: the existence of the Christian God.

A final reason that Lewis rejects the emphasis on change, progress, and fashion is that it encourages people to ignore truthful ideas, simply because those ideas have existed for a long time. Thus, Screwtape notes that humans ignore the late classical philosophy of Boethius, who wrote insightfully about God and free will, simply because Boethius died more than a thousand years ago. Similarly, humans reject the doctrine of Puritanism simply because Puritanism—a good ideology that encourages people to be honest, chaste, and moral—has been around for centuries. The overvaluation of new things encourages people to embrace the new simply because it is new. Lewis has no patience for such foolishness—the existence of God and the supremacy of Christianity cannot, in his opinion, go in and out of fashion.

Ultimately, Lewis is skeptical of change, but he's not a reactionary. Change, he argues, is neither inherently good nor inherently bad—it just is. There may well be new philosophies and ideologies that are worth studying and practicing, but they shouldn't be taken up simply because of their novelty. By the same logic, people shouldn't abandon Christianity simply because it *isn't* new.



### SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS

*The Screwtape Letters* is a treatise on Christianity, consisting of many short observations about God, good, and evil, all expressed ironically through the character of Screwtape. While the novel is a work of fiction, it lacks many of fiction's basic qualities. For example, there are few if any descriptions of specific places or objects. (In fact, at several points in the book Screwtape dismisses all descriptions of specific places and objects as wastes of time.) Similarly, there are very few pieces of information about the characters' specific, individual qualities. Even after we finish the book, we have no idea what the patient looks like, where he works, what his hobbies are, etc. This means that there are few discrete symbols in the novel—few concrete details that could be said to symbolize broader themes or ideas. And yet *The Screwtape Letters* is a highly symbolic work of literature, in the sense that every character and event is intended to symbolize something else. The patient may not have specific tastes or character traits, but this is the whole point—because he's a "blank slate," he comes to symbolize the entire human race in all its strength and weakness. Similarly, when the patient struggles with one specific challenge—lust, for example, or jealousy—his struggle is meant to be interpreted symbolically. His experiences represent the temptation with which all human beings are confronted, at least in Lewis's view. While there are no specific symbols in this summary, it's important to keep in mind that *The Screwtape Letters* abounds with symbolism. Far more overtly than in most other works of literature, in this book the characters represent something far broader than themselves.

that humans make a mistake when they deny the existence of devils (and evil more broadly)—it's easier for devils to manipulate human beings when human beings don't know what's manipulating them. But on the other hands, it's almost as bad when humans are too interested in devils. Their interest suggests a general attraction to evil, and this attraction itself is, of course, evil.

Lewis's observations are interesting because they establish a reason for the format of his book. Lewis wants to write about devils, but he doesn't want to convey too much shock or awe in association with them. In other words, Lewis writes about devils in a light, comic tone, portraying his characters as petty, obnoxious, and frequently clumsy. In such a way, Lewis avoids falling into the trap he details in the quotation—nobody could read *Screwtape* and walk away feeling an "excessive and healthy interest" in evil—Lewis shows evil to be second-rate in every way.

### Letter I Quotes

☝ Your man has been accustomed, ever since he was a boy, to have a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing about together inside his head. He doesn't think of doctrines as primarily "true" or "false", but as "academic" or "practical", "outworn" or "contemporary", "conventional" or "ruthless". Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), The patient, Wormwood

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 1

### Explanation and Analysis

Screwtape argues that it's now common for "intelligent" people to speak about philosophy in terms of fashion and history, not truth and falsehood. Thus, in studying religions and philosophies, people like the patient are encouraged to learn ideas are in vogue or are controversial, rather than which ideas are actually true. Furthermore, some doctrines (like the ideas of philosophers such as Hegel and Nietzsche) relativize the concepts of truth and falsehood altogether, arguing that a statement isn't necessarily true or false—instead, it might be true at one time and false at another, or somewhat true and false simultaneously.

In all, the passage argues that Christianity is the ultimate rational doctrine—the doctrine that maintains that ideas are



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper edition of *The Screwtape Letters* published in 2001.

### Preface Quotes

☝ There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.

**Related Characters:** C.S. Lewis (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** IX

### Explanation and Analysis

In the preface to his book, C.S. Lewis makes an interesting point about devils, and about evil in general. Lewis argues

either true or false, and nothing else. The passage is important, then, because it sets up the project of Lewis's entire book: to use logic, reason, and careful thought to "prove" that Christianity is correct, and all so-called "intellectual" doctrines are nonsensical.

●● If he must dabble in science, keep him on economics and sociology; don't let him get away from that invaluable "real life". But the best of all is to let him read no science but to give him a grand general idea that he knows it all and that everything he happens to have picked up in casual talk and reading is "the results of modern investigation". Do remember you are there to fuddle him. From the way some of you young fiends talk, anyone would suppose it was our job to teach!

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), The patient, Wormwood

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 4

### Explanation and Analysis

The passage reinforces the idea that reason and Christianity are friends, not enemies. Lewis, writing from the perspective of a devil, shows that the best way to corrupt a human being is to make him believe in the vague *idea* of science, not to practice reason itself. The key point here is that real science is dangerous to the devils, because it supports the principles of Christianity (at least according to Lewis)—so the patient must not be allowed to get too close to science.

By implication, the passage suggests that people choose to believe things because they're novel and interesting, not because they're true or false. The patient chooses to identify as a "scientific" *kind* of person, not because he knows anything about science, but because he wants to seem intelligent and knowledgeable. As Lewis suggests, a devil's best course of action is to keep human beings bouncing from one trendy ideology to another, never actually teaching anyone anything. The only real source of knowledge about the universe, it's further suggested, is Christianity.

## Letter II Quotes

●● He has a curious fantasy of making all these disgusting little human vermin into what He calls His "free" lovers and servants—"sons" is the word He uses, with His inveterate love of degrading the whole spiritual world by unnatural liaisons with the two-legged animals. Desiring their freedom, He therefore refuses to carry them, by their mere affections and habits, to any of the goals which He sets before them: He leaves them to "do it on their own". And there lies our opportunity. But also, remember, there lies our danger. If once they get through this initial dryness successfully, they become much less dependent on emotion and therefore much harder to tempt.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), God, Wormwood

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 7

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Screwtape discusses God's "plan." Although he phrases his analysis negatively, it's clear from the reader's perspective that Lewis himself thinks of God positively—the more a devil is supposed to hate something, the more we the readers are supposed to like it.

Screwtape chooses to focus on the principle of free will here. Humans are born in a state of uncertainty: they have the option to embrace God or embrace evil. On one hand, devils have a great advantage over humans: because of their state of limbo, humans can easily be drawn toward the path of evil. But on the other hand, the fact that humans have free will means that when they *do* choose to embrace God, God is more pleased with the achievement, and offers greater love as a reward.

## Letter V Quotes

●● But that is where He is so unfair. He often makes prizes of humans who have given their lives for causes He thinks bad on the monstrously sophisticated ground that the humans thought them good and were following the best they knew. Consider too what undesirable deaths occur in wartime. Men are killed in places where they knew they might be killed and to which they go, if they are at all of the Enemy's party, prepared. How much better for us if all humans died in costly nursing homes amid doctors who lie, nurses who lie, friends who lie, as we have trained them, promising life to the dying, encouraging the belief that sickness excuses every indulgence, and even, if our workers know their job, withholding all suggestion of a priest lest it should betray to the sick man his true condition!

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), God, Wormwood

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 23

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lewis offers his own interpretation of Christianity (one that's by no means shared by all Christians). As Lewis sees it, God rewards human beings who sacrifice their lives for a cause they *believe* to be noble and good, even if God himself considers the cause immoral. In this way, humans who die in battle with good intentions may go to Heaven, no matter which side they're fighting for.

The passage further suggests that most hospitals, in spite of their reputation for kindness and mercy, endanger the souls of human beings by depriving them of the religious care they desperately need, and by lying to them about their true condition. Paradoxically, it's better (in terms of the state of one's soul) for a human being to die in the army than in a modern hospital—at least the army provides chaplains and priests to listen to soldiers' final confessions before they die.

## Letter VII Quotes

☝☝ All extremes, except extreme devotion to the Enemy, are to be encouraged.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), God, The patient, Wormwood

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 32

### Explanation and Analysis

In this famous passage, Screwtape argues that extremism is always easy to twist into sinfulness (and therefore helpful to the cause of evil)—unless the extremism is a form of devotion to God himself.

There are several senses in which extremism appears to be a danger to the soul. By devoting themselves to an idea or a cause, human beings turn away from God, worshipping a "false idol" instead. No matter what the idol might be—football, Marxism, alcohol, etc.—the implication appears to be that humans are equipped to worship one and only one divine authority. Thus by holding extreme opinions about anything other than God, they're essentially replacing him.

## Letter VIII Quotes

☝☝ He really does want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of Himself—creatures, whose life, on its miniature scale, will be qualitatively like His own, not because He has absorbed them but because their wills freely conform to His. 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. Our war aim is a world in which Our Father Below has drawn all other beings into himself: the Enemy wants a world full of beings united to Him but still distinct.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), Satan, God, Wormwood

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 38

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Screwtape paints a picture of the universe as God wants it, and as the Devil wants it. Screwtape describes God's world as loathsome and insufferable (although in rather poetic language), though from the reader's perspective it's perfectly clear that God's world is the desirable one, and the Devil's world the loathsome one. As Screwtape says, God gives human beings free will so that they can be "separate" and yet "united" with God: a human who is born in a state of uncertainty and yet chooses to worship God has fulfilled God's plan for him.

In the passage, Lewis cleverly refutes some of the most common objections to the Christian worldview. It's been suggested that Christianity is unimaginative and tyrannical, since it demands that all humans join together in slavish worship of God. Yet Lewis argues that the opposite is true: the Devil wants to pull all human beings to Hell (and, Lewis suggests, eat them), while God wants humans to worship him, but he doesn't want to dominate his own creations. Rather, he gives human beings the gift of free will, so that they'll always be separate and "free" from his control. In choosing God, they actually become more free and more personally fulfilled.

☝☝ Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger, than when a human, no longer desiring, but 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.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), God, Wormwood

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 40

### Explanation and Analysis

As the quotation makes clear, God offers the handsomest rewards to the human beings who continue to obey him even when all comforting emotion and faith has disappeared. (The quote is also a reference to Jesus's words on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") God brings humans into the world in a state of doubt because he wants humans to *choose* to worship him, using their powers of free will. An angel who's been created for the purpose of serving God simply isn't as impressive as a human who chooses to do the same—the former has an easy choice, while the latter has a difficult one. This quote in particular emphasizes the ideal of *will*—it's easy to obey God when one is filled with feelings of faith, love, and satisfaction, but when it seems that God has abandoned the Christian, then it's only his will and conviction that can keep him faithful.

In a broader sense, then, Screwtape, Wormwood, and the other devils are really a crucial part of God's plan for humanity. If the most admired and loved human being is one who continues to obey God even despite doubt and temptation, then Screwtape is crucial to humanity's progress toward Heaven. By making humans doubt God, Screwtape only "sweetens" God's victory when humans eventually see the truth about Christianity.

### Letter IX Quotes

●● The mere word phase will very likely do the trick. I assume that the creature has been through several of them before—they all have—and that he always feels superior and patronising to the ones he has emerged from, not because he has really criticised them but simply because they are in the past. (You keep him well fed on hazy ideas of Progress and Development and the Historical Point of View, I trust, and give him lots of modern Biographies to read? The people in them are always emerging from Phases, aren't they?)

You see the idea? Keep his mind off the plain antithesis between True and False. Nice shadowy expressions—"It was a phase"—"I've been through all that"—and don't forget the blessed word "Adolescent"...

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), The patient,

Wormwood

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 46

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Screwtape reiterates the importance of jargons, trends, and fashion to the devils' cause. Because Christianity is the only true doctrine—and a very simple truth at that—the devils must corrupt humans by appealing to their vanity and their love for "something new." Thus Screwtape suggests that Wormwood fill the patient's head with the word "phase." This word, Screwtape explains, is important to the devils' cause because it can be used to relativize and dismiss truth. Screwtape hopes that the patient will come to dismiss the periods of the patient's life in which he was a Christian, reasoning that these periods were just passing phases. The word "phase" further reflects the intellectual trends of the 20th century, when the doctrines of Hegel and Marx argued that truth was relative—what was true yesterday may be false tomorrow.

Humans, it's suggested, don't know what's good for them. Although Christianity is plain and true, humans have an unfortunate habit of embracing the new for its own sake. Thus, they'll often move past Christianity simply because it's "old news." Because of the embrace of "phases" in the intellectual life of the time, it's much easier for humans to trick themselves into turning their backs on ideas that they once knew to be true.

### Letter XII Quotes

●● Obviously you are making excellent progress. My only fear is lest in attempting to hurry the patient you awaken him to a sense of his real position. For you and I, who see that position as it really is, must never forget how totally different it ought to appear to him. We know that we have introduced a change of direction in his course which is already carrying him out of his orbit around the Enemy; but he must be made to imagine that all the choices which have effected this change of course are trivial and revocable. He must not be allowed to suspect that he is now, however slowly, heading right away from the sun on a line which will carry him into the cold and dark of utmost space.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), The patient, Wormwood

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 57

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Screwtape insists that Wormwood mustn't be too hasty in drawing the patient toward the path of evil. If the patient moves toward evil too quickly, he'll realize he's becoming evil, "wise up," and return to Christianity. In short, the more quickly successful Wormwood is the less successful he'll be in the long-run.

The passage establishes that the deck is stacked against Screwtape and the other devils. Humans have a natural instinct to embrace good and righteousness, and God *wants* them to turn to him—it's this instinct that would prevent the patient from joining with evil too rapidly.

The image of the patient traveling through space is also a potent one, and a reflection of the idea that Heaven and Hell aren't necessarily places, but are states of closeness to God. Heaven is blissful and beautiful because it involves being near to God, while Hell is torture because it means being alone in the "cold and dark of utmost space."

**Letter XIV Quotes**

☛☛ Fix in his mind the idea that humility consists in trying to believe those talents to be less valuable than he believes them to be. No doubt they are in fact less valuable than he believes, but that is not the point. The great thing is to make him value an opinion for some quality other than truth, thus introducing an element of dishonesty and make-believe into the heart of what otherwise threatens to become a virtue. By this method thousands of humans have been brought to think that humility means pretty women trying to believe they are ugly and clever men trying to believe they are fools. And since what they are trying to believe may, in some cases, be manifest nonsense, they cannot succeed in believing it.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), The patient, Wormwood

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 70-71

**Explanation and Analysis**

Along with defending Christianity, Lewis also uses *The Screwtape Letters* to voice many of his opinions about the problems with society and its view of religion. One of these issues is the idea of humility—many people think that being humble means being self-deprecating, even when to do so is untruthful. But as Screwtape explains, God never said he wanted human beings to deny their own talents—and yet it's often assumed that this is precisely what "good

Christians" are expected to do. In reality, God tells humans to celebrate themselves, and yet accept that they are not the "owners" of their own talents. Nobody "makes" their own intelligence, strength, or good health—only God can give such gifts to his own creations. As always, Lewis stresses that humility—true humility, not the typical caricature of humility—is the obvious truth: nobody could argue that Albert Einstein was in any way responsible for his own genius, but also no one would argue that Einstein should have pretended he was stupid. Therefore, it's the devils' job to confuse humans, preventing them from seeing the obvious truth.

**Letter XV Quotes**

☛☛ Hence nearly all vices are rooted in the future. Gratitude looks to the past and love to the present; fear, avarice, lust, and ambition look ahead. Do not think lust an exception. When the present pleasure arrives, the sin (which alone interests us) is already over. The pleasure is just the part of the process which we regret and would exclude if we could do so without losing the sin; it is the part contributed by the Enemy, and therefore experienced in a Present. The sin, which is our contribution, looked forward.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), God, Wormwood

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 76-77

**Explanation and Analysis**

Through the character of Screwtape, Lewis argues that sin is almost always rooted in thoughts of the future. Humans have a natural instinct to do the right thing—don't hurt other people, don't steal, etc. The only way for humans to justify their sins to themselves is to think ahead to the future. (For example, one could rationalize stealing from a store on the grounds that the "payoff" for the theft outweighs the guilt one feels in the moment.) Evil, then, is both rational and irrational: humans sin because they can convince themselves that somewhere down the line, their evil will be balanced out with good. Yet in sinning, humans are ignoring the most basic and logical thought process imaginable: the notion that one shouldn't do things that make one feel bad.

## Letter XVI Quotes

☞☞ At the other church we have Fr. Spike. The humans are often puzzled to understand the range of his opinions—why he is one day almost a Communist and the next not far from some kind of theocratic Fascism—one day a scholastic, and the next prepared to deny human reason altogether—one day immersed in politics, and, the day after, declaring that all states of us world are equally "under judgment". We, of course, see the connecting link, which is Hatred.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), Wormwood

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 83

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Lewis offers a dark critique of the modern state of the church. Some modern preachers, Lewis suggests, embrace a startling array of doctrines, and use Christianity essentially as a tool to justify them. The preacher Screwtape mentions here, Friar Spike, functions as a caricature of the clergy as a whole: always moving back and forth between new ideas.

That a friar could move between so many new ideas suggests that not even the clergy is immune to the trend of fashion, progress, and change. Priests, no less than other people, will often abandon an idea they sense to be true, simply because they're tired of it. Moreover, Friar Pike's behavior illustrates another important respect in which Christianity can go wrong: Christianity can be used to persecute different kinds of people. Christianity can be twisted to justify anti-Semitism, anti-elitism, anti-imperialism, etc.—but in focusing so exclusively on the hatred of specific groups of people, Screwtape points out, preachers turn away from the most basic tenets of Christianity: that humans should love God.

## Letter XVIII Quotes

☞☞ The whole philosophy of Hell rests on recognition of the axiom that one thing is not another thing, and, specially, that one self is not another self. My good is my good and your good is yours. What one gains another loses.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), Wormwood

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 94

### Explanation and Analysis

In the simplest possible terms, Screwtape sketches out the philosophy of hell. Screwtape argues that life is a "zero-sum game"; in other words, no two people can ever "share" a goo—on the contrary, every time one person enjoys something, he's depriving some other person of happiness.

Although Screwtape's explanation might seem logical, it neglects one of the most basic parts of the human experience: love, cooperation, and unity. All humans instinctively know that Screwtape is wrong: there are many situations in which one person's good is also another person's. When a mother gives a present to her child, the child's happiness *becomes* her own happiness. The whole of human existence, Screwtape implies, rests on escaping the philosophy of Hell and embracing the philosophy that people can find happiness by helping one another.

☞☞ For humans must not be allowed to notice that all great moralists are sent by the Enemy not to inform men but to remind them, to restate the primeval moral platitudes against our continual concealment of them.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), Wormwood

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 125

### Explanation and Analysis

One of the paradoxes of Lewis's book is that it's designed to communicate some incredibly simple ideas: be kind to other people; don't be bad; love your friends and neighbors, etc. In Lewis's view, humans often forget these basic moral lessons, *because* the lessons are so simple. Humans feel a natural craving for complex, new ideas (Lewis, a lifelong academic, knows this craving very well). So-called intellectual people dismiss the teachings of the Bible because they consider these teachings simple and old-fashioned—thus, it's out with Christianity and in with Marxism, Hegelianism, etc.

Screwtape's argument in the passage also clarifies an important point about Christ and other important moral teachers. The genius of Christ, Screwtape insists, was that he reminded people of what they already knew to be true, not that he offered up any big, complicated theories of right and wrong. It's precisely because humans get bored with moral platitudes that figures like Christ (or, one could argue, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Buddha, etc.) are so important: they cut through man's unhealthy craving for difficulty and complexity and offer up morality in its purest,

simplest form.

## Letter XIX Quotes

☝ I have been thinking very hard about the question in your last letter. If, as I have clearly shown, all selves are by their very nature in competition, and therefore the Enemy's idea of Love is a contradiction in terms, what becomes of my reiterated warning that He really loves the human vermin and really desires their freedom and continued existence? I hope, my dear boy, you have not shown my letters to anyone. Not that it matters of course. Anyone would see that the appearance of heresy into which I have fallen is purely accidental.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), God, Wormwood

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 99

### Explanation and Analysis

Screwtape has previously told Wormwood that 1) God loves humans, and 2) love is an impossible idea. As Wormwood rightly points out, 1) and 2) can't both be true—Screwtape has contradicted himself. Here, Screwtape tries to backpedal in order to avoid saying something contradictory to the philosophy of Hell—something which, we're invited to believe, could get Screwtape punished and eaten alive. Screwtape seems genuinely nervous that Wormwood will reveal Screwtape's heresies to other devils. (It's suggested that the devils steadfastly deny the existence of love, and assume that God has some other, more selfish motive for creating and helping humans.)

From the reader's perspective, however, Screwtape's contradiction is proof that Christianity and only Christianity—understood in the simple sense as the doctrine that there is a God, who loves us and wants us to be happy—is the truth. Any doctrine that argues that competition and hatred are the bases for all life will eventually collapse on itself.

☝ You complain that my last letter does not make it clear whether I regard being in love as a desirable state for a human or not. But really, Wormwood, that is the sort of question one expects them to ask! Leave them to discuss whether "Love", or patriotism, or celibacy, or candles on altars, or teetotalism, or education, are "good" or "bad". Can't you see there's no answer? Nothing matters at all except the tendency of a given state of mind, in given circumstances, to move a particular patient at particular moment nearer to the Enemy or nearer to us. Thus it would be quite a good thing to make the patient decide that "love" is "good" or "bad".

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), The patient, Wormwood

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 101

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Screwtape continues to backpedal regarding his philosophy of love. Screwtape has previously claimed that God loves humanity, while also arguing that love is loathsome or even impossible. While he's managed to weasel his way out of appearing to contradict himself, Wormwood appears to be trying to get Screwtape to contradict himself again, asking Screwtape, point-blank, if love is good or bad.

Screwtape is forced to answer that love is neither good nor bad. While Screwtape's answer might seem like more backpedaling, there's a grain of truth in it. Screwtape has already made it clear that love for God is the only kind of love that should be unconditional. Other kinds of love—indeed, other kinds of human behavior—may be either good or bad. To argue that celibacy or patriotism are always good or bad would be to make a judgment in a vacuum, and as Screwtape argues, vacuums don't exist in life. Every virtue, belief, or action serves in its time and place to move a human soul either towards or away from God.

## Letter XXI Quotes

☝ He regards his time as his own and feels that it is being stolen. You must therefore zealously guard in his mind the curious assumption "My time is my own". Let him have the feeling that he starts each day as the lawful possessor of twenty-four hours. Let him feel as a grievous tax that portion of this property which he has to make over to his employers, and as a generous donation that further portion which he allows to religious duties. But what he must never be permitted to doubt is that the total from which these deductions have been made was, in some mysterious sense, his own personal birthright.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), The patient, Wormwood

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 112

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Screwtape satirizes the notion that humans have a "right" to their own free time. Screwtape knows perfectly well that human beings don't own their own time—instead, God has given them their time on the Earth. But humans falsely believe that time is their "birthright"—and therefore, that anyone or anything that deprives them of their time is an annoyance or an enemy.

The notion that human beings own their own time is so fundamental to human life that few people ever stop to consider how illogical it is. Lewis uses the character of Screwtape to shed light on the fallacies of time, reinforcing the point that Christianity is the only logical doctrine, while all other ideas about the universe are contradictory.

## Letter XXII Quotes

☞ I have looked up this girl's dossier and am horrified at what I find. Not only a Christian but such a Christian—a vile, sneaking, simpering, demure, monosyllabic, mouse-like, watery, insignificant, virginal, bread-and-butter miss. The little brute. She makes me vomit.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), The patient, Wormwood

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 117

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage is a good example of how Lewis uses humor, contradiction, and the principle of *reductio ad absurdum* to defend Christianity. From the perspective of Screwtape, the patient's new lover is revolting: she's sweet, virtuous, and lovable; everything a devil would hate. From the reader's perspective, however, the patient's lover is obviously a wonderful person whom the patient is lucky to have met. The fact that Screwtape refers to this woman as a "brute" is a clear sign that we're not meant to take any of his judgements seriously: his inability to feel the basic human emotion of love renders him incapable of seeing the beauty in the patient's relationship with his new lover.

## Letter XXV Quotes

☞ It is here that the general Evolutionary or Historical character of modern European thought (partly our work) comes in so useful. The Enemy loves platitudes. Of a proposed course of action He wants men, so far as I can see, to ask very simple questions; is it righteous? is it prudent? is it possible? Now if we can keep men asking "Is it in accordance with the general movement of our time? Is it progressive or reactionary? Is this the way that History is going?" they will neglect the relevant questions.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), God, The patient, Wormwood

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 138-139

### Explanation and Analysis

Screwtape explains that the recent trends in European intellectual life (he seems to be referring to such movements as Marxism, Freudianism, Hegelianism, etc.) are destructive to humanity—in fact, he claims that devils were largely responsible for popularizing such intellectual movements in the first place. The reason that recent trends in intellectual life are so harmful, Screwtape goes on, is that they distract humanity from the basic, relevant questions about the world—questions about right and wrong.

Lewis was a lifelong opponent of the "big three" intellectual doctrines of the 19th century: Marxism, Freudianism, and Darwinism. (See Background Information.) As has been pointed out many times, all three of these ideologies deprived human beings of their free will by arguing that people do things for more complicated and elusive reasons than had previously been assumed. Suddenly, the basic question, "is this the right thing to do?" was replaced by a flurry of other questions: "what social group will benefit?" (Marxism), or "how's your relationship with your mother?" (Freudianism). In Lewis's view, modern ideologies replace truth with a mountain of irrelevant information, distracting human beings from their most basic moral instincts.

## Letter XXVII Quotes

☞ To regard the ancient writer as a possible source of knowledge—to anticipate that what he said could possibly modify your thoughts or your behaviour—this would be rejected as unutterably simple-minded. And since we cannot deceive the whole human race all the time, it is most important thus to cut every generation off from all others; for where learning makes a free commerce between the ages there is always the danger that the characteristic errors of one may be corrected by the characteristic truths of another. But thanks be to our Father and the Historical Point of View, great scholars are now as little nourished by the past as the most ignorant mechanic who holds that "history is bunk"...

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), Satan, Wormwood

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 150-151

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Screwtape satirizes the state of modern academia. There's a strange tendency among so-called intellectuals, Screwtape claims, to trust more recent scholars and distrust older ones. Such a tendency is odd, since there's no automatic reason why new thinkers should be any wiser or more perceptive than thinkers who lived 500 years ago. The end result is that even many accomplished scholars would never consider actually basing their behavior around the lessons from long-ago thinkers—they only want to study the historicity of such thinkers. (The quote about history being bunk is usually attributed to Henry Ford, the famous car manufacturer.)

Lewis is *not* saying that intellectuals make no progress over time—in fact, he freely admits that often, a later thinker will look over the work of his predecessors and correct an error or a lapse in logic. And most importantly, he reiterates the point that we can gain wisdom of thousands of years simply by reading old writings and actually taking them to heart, instead of having to figure everything out for ourselves or only trusting the most modern, fashionable philosophy.

## Letter XXVIII Quotes

☞ The truth is that the Enemy, having oddly destined these mere animals to life in His own eternal world, has guarded them pretty effectively from the danger of feeling at home anywhere else. That is why we must often wish long life to our patients; seventy years is not a day too much for the difficult task of unravelling their souls from Heaven and building up a firm attachment to the earth. While they are young we find them always shooting off at a tangent.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), The patient, Wormwood

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 155-156

### Explanation and Analysis

Screwtape makes the argument that older, more confident people are easier to corrupt than younger, more innocent people. At a young age, human beings feel a natural desire to be close to God in Heaven—in other words, they have an easier time grasping the basic moral truths of the world, and they feel a sense of discomfort on Earth, a longing for something more. As humans grow up, however, they become more and more attached to their lives on the Earth, and thus more narrow-minded and worldly.

Lewis steers his readers toward the strange idea that life isn't all that good for human beings. The longer humans spend on the Earth, the easier it becomes for devils to corrupt them to Satan's point of view. The goal of one's life on Earth is to increase one's love for God by living a happy, moral life. Most of the usual benefits of having a long life—making money, becoming famous, etc.—are just distractions from the salvation of the soul, the only thing that ultimately matters to a human being.

## Letter XXIX Quotes

☞ There is here a cruel dilemma before us. If we promoted justice and charity among men, we should be playing directly into the Enemy's hands; but if we guide them to the opposite behaviour, this sooner or later produces (for He permits it to produce) a war or a revolution, and the undisguisable issue of cowardice or courage awakes thousands of men from moral stupor.

This, indeed, is probably one of the Enemy's motives for creating a dangerous world—a world in which moral issues really come to the point.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), God, Wormwood

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 161

### Explanation and Analysis

Through the character of Screwtape, Lewis answers one of the most basic criticisms of Christianity—"If God is perfect, why is the world a dangerous place?" Screwtape begins by giving a reason why it's so difficult for devils to successfully corrupt human beings. On one hand, devils sometimes try to promote chaos and violence among human beings, hoping that an atmosphere of fear and death will promote greater evil. The problem is that in such a time, a larger proportion of humans will demonstrate their bravery and loyalty by recognizing the wicked state of affairs and revolting against it, thereby undermining the original purpose of the devils' plans. No matter what course of action devils take, then, humans will tend to behave morally and go to Heaven.

Screwtape is perceptive enough to realize that God created the world to be a dangerous place precisely so that human beings could prove their loyalty to him. God offers the greatest rewards to the humans who continue to believe in him, in spite of danger—therefore, a flawed, chaotic world is a good one, since it gives humans opportunities to prove their faith.

## Letter XXXI Quotes

☞ Rest assured, my love for you and your love for me are as like as two peas. I have always desired you, as you (pitiful fool) desired me. The difference is that I am the stronger. I think they will give you to me now; or a bit of you. Love you? Why, yes. As dainty a morsel as ever I grew fat on. You have let a soul slip through your fingers.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), The patient, Wormwood

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 171

### Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the book, we've been wondering whether Screwtape really cares about Wormwood at all. We're told again and again that devils believe in practicalities and

selfishness and nothing else, and yet we've also been given some evidence that Screwtape genuinely wants to help Wormwood succeed. Thus, it's not until the finale of the book that it becomes clear that Screwtape despises Wormwood, as all devils despise all other devils. Like all the citizens of Hell, Screwtape believes in the doctrine of strength and the "zero-sum game"—his victory is someone else's defeat, without exception. Thus, when Wormwood fails to corrupt the patient, Screwtape is overjoyed: he gets to punish the unfortunate Wormwood by eating him and absorbing him into himself.

☞ If only we could find out what He is really up to! Alas, alas, that knowledge, in itself so hateful and mawkish a thing, should yet be necessary for Power! Sometimes I am almost in despair. All that sustains me is the conviction that our Realism, our rejection (in the face of all temptations) of all silly nonsense and claptrap, must win in the end.

**Related Characters:** Screwtape (speaker), God, Wormwood

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 175

### Explanation and Analysis

At various points in the book, Screwtape has shown faint signs of believing in Christianity: for example, he can't reconcile the notion that God loves humanity with the notion that love is loathsome or impossible. Screwtape is a perfectly logical creature, meaning that he should be able to see that Christianity is the only logical doctrine. The reason why Screwtape can never be a Christian, however, is that he's incapable of understanding love. As he sees it, the universe is all about competition: one person's victory is always another person's defeat.

In this quotation, Screwtape seems to long for some understanding of God—suggesting, perhaps, that even Devils aspire to go to Heaven. But of course, Screwtape can never really embrace God, because he clings to his belief that Realism—the belief that the world is a competition, with winners and losers—is the truth.

Interestingly, Lewis never really tries to disprove Screwtape's Realism. One could say that Realism is a premise of Screwtape's argument, used to prove other points, but impossible to prove or disprove in and of itself. By the same token, it's impossible to prove that love exists—and yet if you believe in the premise of love (as

almost all human beings do, Lewis hopes), then Christianity

follows as the logical next step.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PREFACE

The book begins with a brief explanation from C.S. Lewis, the author. Lewis insists that he will not explain how he came to “find” the material that makes up the book. He argues that there are two ways to be influenced by devils: don’t believe in them, or believe in them and admire them.

Lewis goes on to remind the reader that the devils in his book shouldn’t be trusted. Screwtape (a character who hasn’t yet been introduced) distorts the truth and portrays certain characters inaccurately.

Lewis explains when the book is “set.” Although several letters refer to the events of World War II, Screwtape clearly isn’t interested in human history. His letters are dated, but their dates have little to do with human conceptions of time.

## LETTER I

The chapter is written as a letter, addressed to “my dear Wormwood.” A yet unnamed writer encourages Wormwood to influence “our patient” by controlling what he reads and who he talks to. The writer points out, however, that Wormwood is naïve to believe that the best way to influence the patient is to use logic—this has ceased to be the case for at least a few centuries. The writer mentions that Wormwood must keep the patient away from the “Enemy.”

*In his preface, Lewis sets the tone for the novel: while it’s a work of fantasy, and an amusing one at that, it has serious Christian and moral overtones that can’t be ignored.*



*While it might seem obvious that we shouldn’t trust devils, Lewis wants to distinguish his work from other notable texts about Satan and the underworld. Most notable among these might be John Milton’s [Paradise Lost](#), which is explicitly mentioned later in the text. While Milton arguably leaves it unclear whether or not we’re meant to sympathize with his Satan character, Lewis wants to make it crystal clear that Screwtape is meant to be distrusted.*



*Paradoxically, this offhanded explanation of the novel’s setting actually encourages us to apply its moral teachings to the present day. Because the novel takes place during World War II, Lewis’s original readers can more easily compare it to their own experiences, while at the same time Lewis makes it clear that one can understand his book outside the context of war—it’s a text for “all time.”*



*From the first, Lewis’s point is very clear: the path of reason leads directly to Christianity. His novel is an attempt to prove this by disproving the “contrapositive”—in other words, showing that the path to evil is caused by ignorance, which is encouraged by devils like Wormwood and Screwtape. It’s not yet clear who the characters are, but one can guess that this is a religious book, and thus the characters are religious entities like angels and devils.*



The writer explains how humans have changed in recent times. Humans used to believe in truth and falsehood, but nowadays, they're trained to study dozens of beliefs that contradict one another. The patient thinks of beliefs as being useful or useless, not true or false. For this reason, Wormwood's best strategy is to use jargon, not logic, to convince the patient to stay away from "the Church." Wormwood's goal is to make the patient believe in the doctrine of Materialism. The writer's point, however, is that Wormwood should "sell" this belief on the grounds that it's "strong," not that it's correct.

The writer recalls a "young atheist" he was trying to keep away from the Enemy. One day, the atheist was thinking "the wrong way." Instead of trying to convince him to think the opposite, the writer tried to convince the atheist to eat lunch. The Enemy tried to convince the atheist to continue thinking, but the writer managed to get him to go eat. During lunch, the atheist became distracted by reality—streets, newspapers, cars, etc.—and soon he forgot his train of thought. The atheist is now "safe in Our Father's house."

The writer tells Wormwood that Wormwood must impress upon human beings the ordinariness of the world. Trying to influence humans using science is counterproductive, he argues, because it encourages humans to think abstractly. Wormwood's goal, the writer concludes, is to confuse the patient, not educate him. He signs the letter, "Your affectionate uncle, Screwtape."

*One of Lewis's most important arguments is that Western society has moved away from doctrines of logic in favor of "moral relativism"—the notion that there are multiple truths, some of which are "truer" than others, or may be true at one time and false at another. This isn't an unreasonable assessment of Western thought in the 19th century: philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche and George Hegel wrote about the multiplicity of "truths" in their works, influencing their readers to adopt relativism.*



*Here, Lewis suggests that by default, people continue thinking in the terms they've already adopted for themselves. This may sound like a simple point, but it has some surprising implications. People, Lewis suggests, aren't as clever as they'd like to think they are: once they've decided something, they have a tendency to forget about it and cease questioning it. For Lewis, the consequences of maintaining a false belief—that God doesn't exist, for example—can lead to disastrous consequences and so it is important to keep reasoning and questioning one's beliefs. It's also in this section that Lewis outlines the "players" in his novel. "Our Father" is Satan, ironically—not God, the usual "Father." Similarly, "the Enemy" is God, the opponent of Satan.*



*Here, Lewis claims science for his "side," the side of Christianity. While science might appear to "explain away" the existence of God, Lewis believes that it actually encourages people to think about the entire universe, and approach it with a tone of wonder and amazement. It's interesting that Lewis argues all this "negatively"—that is, he writes about the opposite point of view, as articulated by Screwtape, and then shows it to be absurd. This style of logic is known as reductio ad absurdum, and Lewis uses it skillfully throughout his book.*



## LETTER II

Screwtape's second letter begins with the news that Wormwood's patient has become a Christian. Screwtape encourages Wormwood not to despair, since many humans have flirted with the Enemy before returning to evil.

*There are many Christian works (see Background Info for more details) about good Christians who "lose their way" and take up atheism or sinful behavior. Lewis flips the clichés of these texts, and writes about an immoral man who "loses his way" and becomes a Christian.*



Screwtape points out that the devils' greatest ally is arguably the Church itself. Humans cannot see the Christian church in its historical majesty—instead, they see half-ruined old buildings. As a result, they come to disrespect the Church, and gravitate toward evil.

Wormwood should try to control where the patient sits when he goes to church, Screwtape advises. The patient is a fool, meaning that he confuses Christianity with the specific Christians he sees: old, ugly, or foolish people. As a result, the patient will come to disrespect Christianity if, when he goes to church, he sees people of this kind. Screwtape reminds Wormwood that he'll have plenty of time to show his patient "clarity" when the patient is in Hell.

One of Wormwood's most important weapons is disappointment. Screwtape reminds him. All humans feel disappointment in the moment after they've bravely begun a new project—which could be marriage, school, or, in the patient's case, Christianity. This disappointment occurs because the Enemy creates humans to be free. Freedom is both an advantage and a disadvantage for the devils: they have more of an opportunity to tempt humans to Hell, but if humans freely convince themselves of Christianity, then devils have a much harder time swaying them in the future.

As the patient sits in church, looking at the odd, ugly people around him, it might occur to him that it doesn't matter what these people look like, or how they behave. Screwtape acknowledges that this is a very obvious thought. Nevertheless, Wormwood must keep the patient from thinking it. He should fill the patient with a smug sense of superiority to his neighbors, Screwtape concludes.

## LETTER III

Screwtape references information Wormwood has given him about the patient's mother. He advises Wormwood to talk to Glubose, a "colleague" whose job is tempting the patient's mother. Wormwood and Glubose must conspire to create small annoyances between the patient and his mother.

*Lewis suggests that the human disrespect for Christianity is based on a failure of imagination—humans can't imagine the full history of the Church, but instead see only what's right in front of their faces. This again implies that logic—along with a dutiful study of history—lead one to embrace Christianity, not reject it.*



*There are times when Screwtape is against God and Christianity, but there are also a few times when even he agrees with C.S. Lewis. Here, for instance, he calls the patient a "fool" for failing to see that Christianity consists of much more than the individual Christians in a church. In such moments it's as if Lewis is saying, "this is so obvious, even a devil can see it!"*



*Here Lewis addresses the moral problems of freedom for the first time in his novel. On one hand, freedom keeps humans away from Christian salvation, because they have the opportunity to move toward sin and Satan. At the same time, the fact that humans can sin makes it more impressive when they don't—and this makes their reward from God greater. There is a quote from John Milton, whom Lewis mentions in his book, about this idea: "sufficient to have stood yet free to fall." It is because humans are "free to fall" that Screwtape and Wormwood devote so much time to tempting them.*



*Again, Lewis and Screwtape accept the same facts—the only difference being that Screwtape treats the facts in a Satanic way, while Lewis uses them to support Christianity. In either case, the message is simple: one can't simply dismiss Christianity, as so many people do, on the basis that individual Christians are imperfect.*



*In spite of the fantastical premise of the book, it also includes passages like this one, which show Lewis's insights on human psychology. Just as much joy and pleasure begins with the mother-child relationship, much human misery originates here as well.*



Screwtape lists methods for creating a rift between the patient and his mother. The first method is to keep the patient thinking about “inner life.” In this way, the patient will only think about the most abstract truths, completely neglecting to think about himself in all his obvious weaknesses and idiosyncrasies. The patient must think he is examining himself without actually discovering the facts about himself that are obvious to everyone who knows him.

Screwtape’s second method for creating a rift between the patient and his mother is to render the patient’s prayers for his mother vague and dull. Ideally, the patient should pray for his mother’s soul but never for her concrete problems, such as her rheumatism. The result of this is that the patient will always be thinking about his mother’s sins and moral weaknesses, and thus, he will be reminded of the small annoyances his mother causes him. Screwtape notes that he has some patients of his own who can pray for their children’s souls and then beat their children in the same night.

Screwtape’s third method is to draw the patient’s attention to behaviors of his mother that he finds annoying. His fourth method is to encourage the patient and his mother to speak in a blunt or angry tone of voice, even when the content of their speech is normal. In this way, the two “fools” will come to take offense at everything the other says, but also believe that their own statements are completely inoffensive.

Screwtape asks Wormwood if the patient’s mother is angry or jealous that the patient has adopted Christianity without his mother’s help. He encourages Wormwood to remember the “elder brother” in the Enemy’s story.

*The real enemy here, one might say, is the notion of “inner” life as distinct from “life.” At least since the time of Rene Descartes, the 17th century French philosopher who famously declared, “I think, therefore I am,” Western society has tended to divide the individual from his surroundings—it’s as if there’s a tiny “man” in the patient’s head, staring out at the world around him. Lewis’s criticism of this Cartesian notion is that it neglects an obvious fact: human experience doesn’t just consist of “inner life,” of secret thoughts and emotions—it also consists of interactions, actions, etc. To focus excessively on “inner life” is thus to neglect an important part of the human experience.*



*Lewis suggests that Christians wrongly think of Christianity in the vaguest and most distant terms. Thus, they pray for others’ souls, but never their health or nourishment. The reason this is the case, perhaps, is that the Western world increasingly refuses to believe that Christianity has anything to do with the physical, concrete world.*



*Lewis is an insightful psychologist—we all know the phenomenon he’s talking about here, in which one person is intentionally rude to the other, but takes offense when the other responds in a similar tone of voice. There is something disturbing in the suggestion that sin and corruption can begin with something as simple—and ubiquitous—as this situation.*



*The “elder brother” to which Screwtape refers is the older, more respectful brother of the famous prodigal son parable—where the younger sibling sins and refuses to respect his parents, but is nonetheless welcomed back into his father’s house with open arms. In the story, the prodigal son’s elder brother is irritated that his father would treat his disobedient sibling more kindly than himself. It is this irritation that Screwtape wants Wormwood to produce in the patient’s mother—she must feel neglected, as if her love, respect, and teaching for the patient have all been for nothing.*



## LETTER IV

Screwtape notes that Wormwood is still too inexperienced to understand the concept of prayer. He mentions that Wormwood believes that Screwtape's advice about prayer has been unsuccessful. He scolds Wormwood for speaking in this impertinent way to him, and urges him to take responsibility for his own mistakes. Screwtape also mentions that he is the "undersecretary" of his department, while Wormwood is only a "junior tempter."

Screwtape argues that the goal of devils should be to keep humans from serious prayer. Adults often think the prayer is ridiculous because they remember praying as children, when they were too young to pray sincerely. Some humans think, absurdly, that they can pray silently, or without kneeling. It is strange, Screwtape says, that humans think of devils as "giving" them evil thoughts, when in reality, a successful devil keeps thought out of a human's mind.

Another way to tamper with prayer is to encourage the praying person to think of himself, rather than of God. Thus, when the patient prays for bravery from God, Wormwood should encourage the patient to try to be brave.

Wormwood can tamper with the patient's prayer by encouraging him to think of God in concrete, visual terms. There are many people, Screwtape notes, who get in the habit of praying to a specific place on their wall, or to an object like a cross. If the patient prays in this way, then he will remain far from God. Screwtape reminds Wormwood that humans don't want to feel God's presence as much as they sometimes think—this is a huge advantage for devils.

## LETTER V

In his previous letter, Wormwood has mentioned that the Europeans have begun a new war. Screwtape irritably tells Wormwood to focus on his tempting duties, not the war.

*Part of the comedy in The Screwtape Letters comes from passages like this one, in which Screwtape "scolds" Wormwood for his rudeness, impertinence, etc.—in other words, gives him moral guidance. There is a profounder point here, though—even though the devils in the novel are immoral beings, they can't help from occasionally behaving morally, effectively agreeing with Lewis. Lewis clarifies the levels of Hell in this section—Hell seems to be run like a business, with different levels devils must climb (or rather descend) throughout their careers.*



*The distinction between ignoring thought and receiving thought is a crucial one in the novel—essentially, this distinction boils down to the difference between Christianity as a rational philosophy and Christianity as a superstition. Lewis believes that Christianity is the former, and thus he sees the devils' job as limiting thought as much as possible.*



*Lewis illustrates how easy it is to deviate into sin, even in the middle of a seemingly moral action like prayer. The road to heaven, he implies, is often a difficult one.*



*In these early chapters, Lewis sketches the "mechanics" of devilry. Devils can't directly control humans' thought—they can only "suggest" things to humans. This coheres with the model of freedom Lewis has already outlined, that humans are "free to fall," but also free to accept God. He ends on a dark note: humans don't necessarily want to be saved.*



*Even as Screwtape ignores the information about "the war," we, the readers, cannot. The war Lewis refers to is, by his own admission, World War II. Following this bloody, half-decade-long conflict, millions of people questioned their faith in God and Christianity, inspiring Lewis to write books like [Mere Christianity](#) and, of course, The Screwtape Letters.*



Screwtape observes that Wormwood has experienced the thrill of success: the patient is anxious about the war, and has begun to doubt Christianity. Wormwood has encouraged this anxiety by giving the patient memories of the past and frightening pictures of his future. Nevertheless, Wormwood must focus on his duties, rather than gloating about his success. Wormwood must next decide whether to encourage the patient to be a pacifist or a patriot—either would be useful.

War is very entertaining, Screwtape acknowledges, but nevertheless it's not always as useful for devils as one might suppose. Although there is much short-term suffering on the Earth because of war, this suffering is useless to devils unless people go to Hell because of it. Moreover, God often rewards people for showing bravery in battle, even if they are fighting for a side that God considers immoral. Finally, war is often disastrous for devils because it encourages people to think about death and take religion more seriously.

There are some devils, Screwtape notes, such as Scabtree, who see war as a great opportunity to corrupt humans. While it's certainly true that war confuses people and makes them more susceptible to demonic influence, it's also true that war gives humans the opportunity for suffering, and therefore Christian redemption. On this "pessimistic" note, Screwtape ends his letter.

## LETTER VI

Screwtape is happy to hear from Wormwood that the patient is eligible for military service. The patient should be in a state of uncertainty and anxiety about whether or not he'll have to fight. God wants people to think about what they're doing, while devils want people to think about what "might" happen. The patient will try to accept the possibility that he'll have to fight as "God's will," but Screwtape notes that it's far harder for people to accept multiple, contradictory possibilities than it is for them to accept one concrete event.

*Here we see some of the ways that war challenges faith and religion. To begin with, war fills people with fear and the irrational expectation of pain or suffering. Fear, Lewis implies, is dangerous for religion because it encourages people to act irrationally and do things they'd otherwise be too "moral" to do. Once again, the implication is that Christianity is a rational philosophy.*



*In spite of the apparent advantages of war for evil, Lewis shows how war can actually be useful to Christianity. In order to do so, he must give his own opinion on the subject—that people are rewarded in Heaven for bravery of any kind. Thus, the familiar idea that "God is on our side" is foolish, Lewis argues, as God is on the side of anyone who fights bravely. Lewis then suggests that the fear of death encourages people to be more, not less Christian, because at least they must think seriously about their own mortality during wartime, whereas generally people prefer to avoid the issue.*



*Screwtape's pessimism, is, of course, optimism for Lewis. Ultimately Lewis sees war as an opportunity—for both sin and for redemption. One could treat war as a series of temptations to be evil—to kill, to steal, etc.—but at the same time, war can also inspire people to behave better, knowing that their lives are in danger.*



*Again Lewis implies that Christianity is a doctrine of rationality, while sin and evil involve foolishness and confusion—in this case, frantically thinking ahead to what might happen. When a person is forced to confront many possibilities at the same time, they can obscure his knowledge of the present and prevent him from behaving sensibly in the here and now.*



Screwtape alerts Wormwood to an important principle. Whenever a human thinks a Christian thought, Wormwood should focus his attention on the “thought” itself, not its object. When the patient thinks a sinful thought, Wormwood should focus his attention on the object of the thought. Thus, when the patient is lustful for a woman, he should think about the woman, not his lust itself. Contrariwise, when the patient is feeling kind or charitable, he should contemplate his own charity, not the people he wants to help.

*In a previous chapter, Lewis discussed the importance of “inner life” in obscuring humans’ understanding of right and wrong. Here, he builds on that point: when humans think of their virtues as being projections of “inner life,” they have a tendency to slide into arrogance, setting themselves apart from the world. Similarly, when humans ignore their inner life altogether, they can continue to sin without considering what they’re doing. The only solution, it’s implied, is to merge “inner” and “outer” life, so that humans are always thinking about their own moral selves but also the other people whom their actions affect.*



By the same logic, Screwtape goes on, Wormwood should convince the patient to feel malice for those nearby and love for those far away. In this way, the patient’s malice becomes more real and powerful than his love. In a sense, Screwtape concludes, the patient is a map of concentric circles. In the center is the patient’s will, then his mind, and then his imagination. Wormwood must try to keep all moral thoughts as far from the central circle as possible.

*Lewis’s decision to write the book from the perspective of a devil makes very clear what Lewis doesn’t believe in, but it doesn’t always clarify what Lewis does believe. Thus, we have to extrapolate from this passage that Lewis believes humans should keep morality as close to their “will” as possible. It’s unclear, however, if malice has a legitimate part to play in will, or if it should be banished from the mind altogether.*



## LETTER VII

Screwtape discusses whether or not Wormwood should reveal the existence of devils to the patient. Devils should conceal their existence, Screwtape argues. In the past, however, devils would occasionally reveal themselves to humans. The paradox of evil is that when devils conceal their existence, humans don’t believe in God, but they also don’t act directly on behalf of evil. On the other hand, when devils reveal themselves, humans sometimes ally with the devil directly, but they also believe in God more fervently. If only it were possible to create a “materialist magician,” Screwtape thinks: a man who acts directly on behalf of evil and yet doesn’t believe in God.

*There’s a famous movie quote: “The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.” Here, Lewis elaborates on this witty saying. It’s interesting that Screwtape admits that devils face a challenge here: when humans are at their most conscious of the existence of evil, they’re also least willing to do evil. Unbeknownst to Lewis, Screwtape’s desire for an “evil” man who doesn’t believe in evil anticipates men like Stalin and Pol Pot, who committed acts of immense brutality but disavowed the existence of God altogether.*



Screwtape takes up the problem of whether to make the patient an extreme patriot or pacifist. In the end, he suggests, it doesn’t matter what the patient is, as long as he’s an extremist of some kind. Extreme thinking always favors the devil, except when it’s extreme Christianity.

*Lewis, a brilliant scholar of classics, alludes to Aristotle’s famous “doctrine of the golden mean.” For both Aristotle and Lewis, moderation is the goal: to be extreme about anything (except, for Lewis, God) is to be irrational and thus immoral.*



If the patient is a physical coward and an uneasy believer in God, as Screwtape guesses he is, then Wormwood should try to make him a pacifist. As a pacifist, he will be a member of a small, vocal, unpopular group of people—this will undoubtedly alienate him from his newfound Christian community.

Whether Wormwood makes the patient an extreme pacifist or patriot, he should try to convince the patient to incorporate Christianity into his newfound belief. The result of this will be that the patient will use Christianity to “prove” patriotism or pacifism, and slowly, Christianity will become incidental or secondary to the patient’s belief in patriotism or pacifism. Screwtape notes wryly that there are plenty of people “down here” who have gone down such a path.

## LETTER VIII

Screwtape has previously received a letter from Wormwood in which Wormwood expresses his “Great hopes” that the patient is losing his religion. Screwtape angrily tells Wormwood that he must consider the law of “undulation.” Because humans are half spiritual and half physical, they are always bouncing between these two worlds. Thus, the patient is always moving between satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the material world—his friends, his job, etc.—and the same is also true of the spiritual realm. Wormwood shouldn’t take pride in the patient’s dissatisfaction with Christianity, because this dissatisfaction is bound to happen at some point, and it doesn’t necessarily last. Indeed, Screwtape notes that God relies on these periods of dullness and dissatisfaction for converting people to Christianity.

Screwtape acknowledges, grudgingly, that God really does love human beings, and wants to fill the universe with them. The goal of devils is to force God to draw all life “into himself.” God, however, wants to fill the universe with beings who are a part of God, and yet distinct from him.

*Here Lewis critiques the antiwar movement in the United Kingdom, both during World War I and World War II. Elite intellectuals like Bertrand Russell bemoaned Britain’s aggressive foreign policy and explicitly attacked the church for supporting war. Obviously, Lewis wasn’t terribly fond of Russell’s school of social activism.*



*Lewis remains insightful about Christianity and extremism: his argument isn’t just that extremists reject Christianity, as Russell did—he’s saying that they include Christianity in their beliefs, and then ignore it altogether. The implication of this is that Christianity should never really be a part of politics, because it will inevitably end up being secondary to a specific political goal. This is a complicated issue, and Lewis will return to it toward the novel’s end.*



*It’s curious that Screwtape is so quick to attack Wormwood for his hope and optimism about corrupting the patient. Perhaps this is supposed to illustrate that to devils, the idea of optimism is utterly foreign. It’s in this section that Screwtape—and the side of evil in general—first shows signs of weakness in the battle with God and Christianity. There’s a sense that even lapses into sin are ultimately useful to God, because they help to give humans the opportunity to repent and embrace God with new devotion. This is the ultimate implication of human freedom itself—it’s only when humans can be evil that they can also truly be good.*



*This grudging acknowledgment will come back to haunt Screwtape a few chapters from now. For now, however, it sketches the fundamental difference between God and Satan: God wants man to be free and good, while Satan wants man to be enslaved and miserable.*



In order to populate the universe with loyal followers, God uses periods of sadness and pain. Instead of simply proving his existence to humanity, as Wormwood might expect him to do, God challenges humans to believe in him even when there are no signs of his existence or his benevolence. Therefore, the prayers people make during periods of sadness please God the most.

Screwtape concludes that the devils' cause is most threatened when a human being lives through a period of great suffering, and continues to believe in God. Nevertheless, periods of suffering can be useful to devils—Screwtape promises to tell Wormwood how they can be so in his next letter.

## LETTER IX

Screwtape fulfills his promise to Wormwood: he will now explain how the “trough periods” of human life—the times when humans are sad, lonely, or otherwise in pain—can be useful for swaying humans away from God and Christianity.

Trough periods encourage humans to embrace sensuality, especially sex. In a trough, a human is more likely to feel lust, since his moral defenses are weaker, and also less likely to feel love. The same is true of alcohol: a human is more likely to become an alcoholic in a period of depression than in a time of happiness.

Screwtape notes that devils have yet to invent a single form of pleasure. Every pleasure humans are capable of experiencing was created by God. Thus, devils sway human beings by encouraging them to enjoy God's pleasure “at times, or in ways or in degrees” that God discourages.

Another way to sway humans during a trough period is to give the human a false version of Christianity. If a depressed Christian turns to the Bible without the proper guidance, then he is likely to regain some of his happiness, but not all of it. As a result, he will modify his view of Christianity, and conclude that Christianity is good, but only “up to a point.” Moderate Christianity, Screwtape notes, is as useful to the devils as no Christianity at all.

*Lewis alludes to Job here—a Biblical character whose righteousness and faith God “tested.” Whenever God caused Job pain and sadness, Job praised God's name. The Book of Job is a complex and intriguing piece of writing, but on one level it declares that suffering and misery can actually bring people closer to God—just as Screwtape affirms here.*



*Having stated God's great advantage in the war with Satan, Screwtape will now begin to explain how devils can take advantage of suffering in other ways—but how successfully they do so remains to be seen.*



*We've already heard how periods of misery can bring humanity closer to God. Now it's time to hear how they can be used to tempt people away from God.*



*Lewis's insights in this section seem fairly accurate, though perhaps he's ignoring the huge number of alcoholics who develop an addiction when they celebrate, not when they're unhappy. More generally, though, Lewis predicts the rise of hedonism and sensuality in the post-war period: one thinks of the “Sexual revolution” of the 1960s, often interpreted as a belated reaction to the devastation of World War II.*



*It's surprising to hear Screwtape argue that pleasure is strictly heavenly, since we often hear of sinful or forbidden pleasures. Yet this notion is actually a familiar Christian belief, that evil arises not from new forms of pleasure, but from abuses of “good” pleasure.*



*Christianity, it's suggested, is an “all or nothing” proposition. One can't embrace this religion half-heartedly, or only conclude that Christianity has “some good points.” Instead, Lewis offers a vigorous defense of Christianity in all its glory: the doctrine of good, evil, heaven, and hell that's laid out in the Bible.*



Another way to sway depressed humans away from God is to make them think that their depressed phase is a mere reaction to the Christianity of their youth. They might well think that their religion was a mere “youthful phase,” and now they have to move past it. Popular modern ideas of progress and development support this mistaken belief, Screwtape observes. The concept of progress encourages people to avoid thinking in terms of what is true and false.

*Lewis will return to this problem of believing in “progress” many times, and he’s already mentioned it in previous chapters. The Hegelian notion of history, still widely popular in Europe at the time, implies that a belief can be true at one point and false at another. It would be a mistake, Lewis argues, to believe this of Christianity.*



## LETTER X

Screwtape has heard from Triptweeze, an associate of Wormwood’s, that the patient has made new acquaintances who are tempting him away from God. There is a middle-aged married couple—rich, clever, seemingly intellectual, pacifist—with whom the patient seems to enjoy spending time.

*Up to this point, there haven’t been any specific characters in the novel who tempt the patient away from God, with the obvious exception of the devils. Here, Lewis introduces a new challenge—humans who, through their own arrogance or ignorance, lead the patient astray.*



Screwtape acknowledges that the patient will quickly realize that his Christianity conflicts with the couple’s skeptical, secular way of looking at the world. He will begin to ape the couple’s attitudes, and then the couple’s words. Ultimately, he may grow to adopt their beliefs as his own.

*Screwtape makes clear the basic challenge to the patient’s faith. He’s describing it as a glorious possibility, but we understand it as a new conflict in the plot (unless we’re on the devils’ side!).*



Screwtape notes, amusedly, that the patient must not realize that he is being tempted. The patient probably associates the entire concept of temptation with Puritanism, a much-ridiculed form of Christianity that nonetheless makes people sober, chaste, and moderate. When the patient realizes that his Christianity conflicts with his friends’ secularism, Wormwood can then encourage the patient to enjoy the feeling of a “double life.” Thus, when the patient prays in a church, he will be thinking about the witty conversation he had with his new friends.

*There’s a lot of important information in this section. First, Lewis reinforces the fallacy of “progress” when he discusses Puritanism. Puritanism is often understood to be old-fashioned and outdated—this reflects humans’ tendency to believe that ideas need to change over time. Second, Lewis illustrates the fallacy of the “double life,” a fixture of modern philosophy from Sartre to W.E.B. DuBois. For Lewis, the double life is anything but an inevitability: it’s consciously embraced by modern people because it’s pleasurable.*



Screwtape advises Wormwood to encourage the patient to spend more time with the married couple, thereby causing him to neglect his work, his church, and his mother. His mother will become jealous and alarmed, increasing the tension between the two of them.

*The plot of the novel here approaches a sort of “romantic triangle,” where the devils try to use the patient’s affections against him and make those close to him jealous or unhappy.*



## LETTER XI

Screwtape has learned from Wormwood that the patient has befriended the married couple's other friends. In his last letter, Wormwood mentioned that these new friends are "great laughers." Screwtape explains the role of humor and laughter in the devils' cause.

Screwtape divides the causes of laughter into four groups: happiness, amusement, jokes, and flippancy. Happiness is beyond devils' understanding, much like music, and the experience of being in Heaven. These sensations cannot be explained or analyzed—they just "are." As such, they're useless to devils.

Fun is sometimes useful to devils, because it can distract them from God, but it also promotes courage, peace, and generosity, meaning that it's usually bad for devils. Jokes are more complicated. There are many kinds of jokes, and they all have different purposes. One use of humor is to render sin acceptable. Thus, meanness and cruelty in their naked forms are for the most part socially unacceptable, but if they are disguised with humor then they become social acceptable. In this sense, jokes can be useful to devils.

Flippancy is the best form of laughter for devils. When people speak flippantly about serious things, they belittle them and imply that they're not important. Thus, when people talk flippantly about Christianity, they are more likely to move away from God's majesty.

## LETTER XII

Screwtape praises Wormwood for his excellent progress in corrupting the patient, but warns him that if he moves the patient away from God too quickly, the patient will become aware of what is happening and try to regain his Christian faith. Ideally, the patient should continue to *think* that he is a pious Christian.

*The structure of the novel is loose and free-wheeling—one gets the sense that Lewis throws new challenges in the patient's way simply so that Lewis has a chance to talk about them. This gives Lewis the freedom to follow his own stream of thought about Christianity, making the work a personal, thoughtful look at God.*



*There's a limit to how much Screwtape can say about humanity, in spite of his experience with temptation. His knowledge of basic human emotions (like happiness) is essentially zero—because anything pure and true originally comes from God.*



*In a way, Lewis is using his book to "reclaim" thoughts and emotions that are typically understood as being un-Christian and immoral. Thus, he shows that fun, sex, pride, etc., can actually be virtuous, not sinful. This is a bold and brave attempt to keep Christianity from being boxed out of the modern world. Lewis wants to show that Christianity is directly relevant to humans' everyday emotions and experiences—not an outdated and joyless institution.*



*Lewis is remarkably insightful about "flippancy," which we can understand as sarcasm or excessive irony. In a way, he's predicting the rise of the "irony generation" of the present, when nothing is taken too seriously and nothing is "sacred"—this does immediate harm to religion.*



*Another major disadvantage of the devils in their war with God is that can't succeed "too much." In other words, if they pull humans into evil too quickly, they will fail to keep them in a state of sin. When one thinks about famous tragic plays and novels, the hero's slide into evil is always slow and gradual, just as Lewis describes.*



Wormwood should try to inspire a feeling of vague dissatisfaction in the patient. This feeling shouldn't be powerful enough to "shock" him back into piety, but a weak sense of dissatisfaction will make the patient reluctant to think about God any further, or even to go to church. Over time, the patient will become unhappy and dull, and he'll spend long chunks of time talking about boring subjects, staring at the fire, etc.

Screwtape notes that Christians think of God as a being "without whom Nothing is strong." In a sense, Nothing is the devils' greatest weapon—Nothing will encourage the patient to avoid God and feel miserable. Screwtape encourages Wormwood to push the patient away from God, one small sin at a time—"the safest road to Hell," he says, is gradual.

## LETTER XIII

Screwtape has just received a letter from Wormwood in which Wormwood describes having let the patient "slip through his fingers." The end result of Wormwood's error is that the patient has repented his recent actions and returned to the church with new faith. Screwtape warns Wormwood that such repentance can be very dangerous to the devils' cause.

Screwtape lists Wormwood's errors. He allowed the patient to read a book for the patient's own pleasure, and he allowed the patient to walk to the old mill, again giving the patient happiness. Wormwood's biggest mistake was to allow the patient to feel material pleasure of any kind, instead of continuing to expose him to Nothing. As a result of Wormwood's negligence, the patient has forgotten his cynical sensibility, undoing all the progress Wormwood has made.

Humans' tastes and pleasures are the basic material with which God encourages them to become Christians, Screwtape says. When he tempts humans, Screwtape always begins by trying to make them forget their enjoyment of cricket, stamps, chocolate, etc. The danger of a human enjoying a thing for its own sake is that the human cannot be tempted, as the patient has been, by appeals to what other people think or enjoy.

*It's a longstanding tenet of Christianity that to be evil is to be miserable. There's no way for a sinner to be truly happy—only to experience some pleasure in the short term. Lewis explores this idea, suggesting that the development of a vague displeasure is another obstacle to piety and joy.*



*One of the more interesting implications of this section of the book is that evil isn't, properly speaking, a "thing." Evil is the absence of Good or piety—a vacuum which humans don't know how to fill.*



*It is almost halfway through the book, and the devils have made no real progress in tempting the patient. Indeed, they've only confirmed Screwtape's observation that sin often actually brings mankind closer to God, since it encourages people to repent and embrace the faith.*



*The notion that evil is "nothing" rather than a "thing" is so counterintuitive that even Wormwood doesn't fully grasp it. And yet it's a central part of Lewis's Christianity. Give anyone real pleasure, he insists, and they'll eventually find their way back to the source of all pleasure: God. There's something amusingly simple about the patient's repentance—if something as pedestrian as reading saved him from evil, then the devils' job is more difficult than we'd thought.*



*Christianity has a lasting reputation as an ideology that encourages its adherents to abandon pleasures of all kinds: sex, wealth, partying, etc. Lewis tries to refute these stereotypes of by showing that his religion is, at its core, about encouraging pleasure of all kinds. It's only when pleasure is abandoned or abused, in fact, that evil results.*



Screwtape encourages Wormwood to continue working on the patient. Wormwood's most important strategy should be to prevent the patient from acting in any way on his newfound faith. Piety is always useless, Screwtape says, unless it influences the will. If the patient does not act on his faith, then eventually he will not feel his faith.

Another important tenet of Lewis's Christianity is based on the Biblical idea that "faith without works is dead." Simply professing faith in Christ isn't enough—it should also inspire one to act morally. If it doesn't, then it isn't real faith. Thus Screwtape advises Wormwood to work backwards against this, by discouraging moral actions, and so weakening the faith that inspires them.



## LETTER XIV

The patient has regained his faith in Christianity, Screwtape has learned from Wormwood, but—very alarmingly for the devils—he has not made any big resolutions. Instead, he has just promised himself to use Christianity to make his life better and avoid temptation. To counteract this dangerous development, Wormwood should try to fill the patient with pride at his new humility and piety.

One problem with Christianity, Lewis implies, is that Christians think that they have to use their religion to accomplish "big plans," when in reality, Christianity is meant to satisfy the most ordinary, everyday needs—happiness, friendship, etc. Demanding huge changes or blessings thus often leads to disappointed faith.



Screwtape advises Wormwood to influence the patient to forget the true meaning of humility. True humility is the forgetting of the self, not, as many people think, the denial of one's talent or character. Screwtape observes that God wants humans to believe that they could build "the best cathedral in the world," know the cathedral is beautiful, and also be no happier with the cathedral than if someone else had built it.

Lewis makes a complicate distinction here. The fallacy of pride, he suggests, is to believe that one's work is one's own, when in reality, it belongs to God. So long as one corrects this error, one can still take pleasure in one's creations—delight in a job well done isn't inherently sinful at all.



In a sense, Screwtape speculates, God wants humans to replace one kind of self-love with a different kind. Humans should love themselves because they are alive—they should be able to recognize their own talents and abilities. At the same time, humans should be able to forget their own talents, acknowledging that they have received these talents from God, rather than winning them for themselves. By the same logic, God doesn't want men to dwell on their sins—it's better for humans to sin, repent, and move on with their lives.

Lewis alludes to the Book of Job once again. When Job questions the punishment God has inflicted upon him, God tells Job that Job is lucky simply to be alive—he doesn't "own" himself, let alone his own fate, and so he should be grateful to God even for his misfortune. Lewis also offers his own interpretation of Christianity here—where some other Christians emphasize the importance of acknowledging one's sins again and again, Lewis wants Christians to forget their sins as soon as they repent of them.



## LETTER XV

Screwtape has learned from Wormwood that there is a lull in the war in Europe. Wormwood is unsure whether it is better for the devils to fill humans with a foolish confidence or a crippling fear. In order to answer this question, Screwtape raises issues of time, freedom, and eternity.

Even before Lewis answers his own question (which is more sinful, confidence or cowardice?), it's clear that he's alluding to the doctrine of the mean once again. Extreme emotions of either kind—bravery or cowardice—can lead to questionable morality. Only moderation can be called virtuous.



Humans live in a single moment in time, the present, yet they are destined to go to Heaven and live in eternity. God wants humans to contemplate the present moment in which they live, as well as the eternity in which they will one day live. As a result, devils have two main strategies for tempting humans: encourage them to live in the past, or encourage them to live in the future. Devils tempt humans to think in terms like “progress,” “evolution,” and “Communism.” These are dangerous ideas because they focus mankind too keenly on the future.

*Lewis’s thinking in the subjects of time and eternity are similar to those of Boethius, the last classical philosopher who proposed that God can “see” all time simultaneously. At the same time, Lewis criticizes such modern ideologies as Communism and evolution. Karl Marx, the father of communism, and Charles Darwin, the discoverer of evolution, have often been compared to one another in the sense that they “took man’s fate out of his own hands”—in other words, focused too excessively on the abstract processes of “progress” that pointed toward the future. For more information on Darwin and Marx, see Background Info.*



Screwtape explains why an emphasis on the future is dangerous for humans. All human sin is “rooted in the future”—greed, fear, pride, ambition, etc. While it is true that God wants humans to think about the future, too, he wants them to think of the future in simple terms, without “giving the future their hearts.” Devils, by contrast, want humans to be chasing after the future constantly. In this way, humans are more likely to ignore pleasure in the present and even commit sin, thinking that it will be justified at some point in the future.

*Lewis’s diagnosis of sin is a disturbing one for humanity. Politicians, philosophers, and intellectuals are always talking about “looking ahead to the future”—but by Lewis’s estimation, this kind of thinking is dangerous. One notable philosopher who agrees with Lewis was Karl Popper. In The Open Society and its Enemies, Popper explained how ideologies—communism, for example—focus excessively on realizing a glorious future. This allows proponents of Communism to justify any actions in the short-term, on the basis that they’re necessary to achieve future aims.*



As a result of his arguments about the future, Screwtape concludes that it is equally good for Wormwood’s patient to be afraid of the future or hopeful for the future. In either case, the patient will be dissatisfied with the present, and will ignore the things that make him happy.

*Lewis is fond of counterintuitive arguments with this structure (he’ll later make similar points about gluttony, politics, etc.). In a sense, to argue which is worse, fear or love for the future, is to miss the whole point: thinking too much about the future at all is what leads to immorality.*



## LETTER XVI

Screwtape has learned from Wormwood that the patient only visits a single church. Screwtape is angry that Wormwood has not told him this information sooner. It is a dangerous thing, he explains, for a person to only visit one church. The purpose of a church is to bring unlike people together. It’s better for the person to become a “connoisseur of churches”—this way, he will ultimately surround himself with people whose tastes—both in churches and in general—are like his. This defeats the purpose of churchgoing, which is surrounding oneself with unlike people who are nonetheless equal before the Lord.

*Although Lewis is fundamentally optimistic about human salvation, he still never hesitates to show how difficult it is for organized religion alone to lead its followers to God. Even churchgoing can be an immoral act, if one treats a church as a mere “vacation spot” to be sampled and critiqued like a restaurant. The danger Screwtape is encouraging here is that a church can then become a place to affirm one’s sense of self-righteousness and piety, instead of a place that challenges one to grow in faith and charitable love.*



God wants humans to approach churches with some skepticism about the information they learn there. At the same time, God doesn't want humans to waste time thinking about why they reject what they reject—he wants them to reject it, and move on. As a result, humans become very sensitive to Christian teachings—this is very displeasing to devils.

Screwtape discusses the two churches near the patient's home. One is run by a vicar who tries to make his sermons as secular and "watered down" as possible, in order to attract bigger crowds. The second church is run by Friar Spike. At times, Spike is a Communist, and at other times he's almost a theocratic Fascist. The common thread between these two seemingly contradictory beliefs is hatred, a useful emotion for the devils. At the same time, Spike's one defect, as far as the devils are concerned, is that he sincerely believes what he says.

The one common trait of the two churches, Screwtape continues, is that they are "party churches"—churches whose congregations subscribe to their own petty interpretations of Christian tenets—things like what kind of candles to use, or whether to say "mass" or "holy communion"—and hate rival interpretations. Without the multitude of small debates of this kind, Screwtape concludes, the Church of England would be a place of love and piety. As always, Screwtape signs his letter, "your affectionate uncle."

## LETTER XVII

Screwtape has received a letter from Wormwood about the uselessness of gluttony in tempting humans. Screwtape sternly explains that Wormwood is clearly ignorant of history. Wormwood should talk to Glucose about the patient's mother, who is a glutton for delicacy. It is gluttony in this form, not gluttony of excess, that is most useful for devils. The quantity demanded makes no difference to measures of gluttony—what is important, Screwtape maintains, is the amount of fussiness, impatience, and self-concern it produces. Thus, the patient's mother always insists on receiving the smallest, most delicate portions of food and drink. Paradoxically, her stomach dominates her entire life, even though she thinks she is being healthy and frugal.

*In this section, Lewis proposes a deliberately simple answer to the problem of negation. For many modern thinkers (Freud, for instance), true "negation" is impossible: one can't truly stop thinking about something, because deciding not to think about the thing means, of course, thinking about it. Lewis agrees with this in one way, but mostly encourages us to simply act or feel, instead of overthinking our actions and feelings.*



*Here Lewis suggests that two seemingly competing ideologies—Communism and Fascism—are ultimately just two sides of the same coin. Less than a decade later, the political philosopher Hannah Arendt would publish *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in which she essentially came to the same conclusion as Lewis: in spite of their vast differences, Fascism and Communism turned out to be virtually indistinguishable.*



*There's a longstanding history of "quibbles," of the kind Lewis describes, in the English Christian community. Less than a hundred years before Lewis's book was published, there was an influential series of debates between F. W. Newman and Matthew Arnold, two of the greatest theological minds of their times. These debates involved seemingly insignificant matters—where pews should be located, what language certain sermons should be read in, etc.—but they provoked enormous vitriol between the defenders of either man. Lewis looks on debates of this kind with a mixture of amusement and annoyance—if Christians could put aside their petty differences, their community would be far stronger.*



*Once again, Lewis uses a counterintuitive logical maneuver to show that two seemingly opposite actions—eating too much and eating too little—are guilty of the same sin: worrying excessively about the quantity of one's food. Lewis is fond of this kind of rhetorical trick, in part because it reflects his studies of Aristotle and the doctrine of the mean. Lewis would probably have some harsh words for the current generation of American gourmards and gourmets.*



Screwtape explains the mindset of the patient's mother. She believes in the principle of "all I want." She thinks that her food should be prepared in the perfect way, and often thinks about the "past," when it was supposedly easier to get the kind of food she wants. In earlier years, the patient's mother thought that she was thinking about food too much—but at these moments, Glucose convinced her that she was only "looking out" for her child, the patient.

Screwtape encourages Wormwood to use the patient's gluttony against him. Because he is a man, he is more likely to indulge in the traditional gluttony of excess. Over time, Wormwood can encourage him to indulge in his gluttony, to the point where any deviations in his usual meals and drinks will make him angry and irritable, opening him up to weaknesses in his charity and kindness.

The main use of gluttony as excess, Screwtape concludes, is that it weakens chastity. If the patient tries to repair his chastity, Wormwood should convince him to take up exercise rather than revising his diet. It is a great lie, Screwtape notes, that exercise can curb lust at all—clearly, sailors and soldiers disprove this theory.

## LETTER XVIII

Screwtape scolds Wormwood for his "college" education. Even though Wormwood studied under Slubgob, Screwtape insists that he must have learned at least a little bit about how to inspire sexual temptation in humans. Screwtape will try to explain the "finer points" of sexuality to Wormwood—points that Wormwood must have missed in college.

Devils have achieved great victories over mankind through sexuality, Screwtape explains. Their first victory of all, the fall of man, was a sexual victory. Henceforth, they have succeeded in using human poets and artists to convince the human species that "being in love" is the only reason to marry.

*It's all too easy, Lewis shows, for a human to sin while deluding herself into believing that she is behaving morally. Thus, the patient's mother sins in gluttony even as she believes that she's being a good, loving parent.*



*In many ways, gluttony is the least familiar of the "seven deadly sins" of Christianity. (The others are greed, lust, pride, wrath, sloth, and envy.) While many people believe that they're entitled to care about how their food is prepared, Lewis believes that this care too easily becomes excessive and fussy, the opposite of what God wants for humans.*



*Here, Lewis is arguably at his most anachronistic. There doesn't seem to be anything inherently lustful about eating food. (It could be argued that drinking too much alcohol leads to lust, but this is hardly an indictment of gluttony itself.) Lewis sounds curiously medieval in his thinking, as if he were authoring an early medical text.*



*We begin to get a better sense of "life" (if it can be called that) for the devils—they have jobs, promotions, and colleges. Lewis's comical portrayal of life for the devils is a caricature of modern human life—defined entirely by one's education and employment, rather than one's religion.*



*So far, we've seen how devils influence humans by suggesting certain thoughts to them. Here, we see that the devils can use this to exercise some control over art and culture as a whole. Thus, they've helped develop a skewed cultural view of romance.*



Screwtape explains the fundamental philosophy of Hell: “My good is my good and your good is yours. What one gains another loses.” God’s philosophy is the exact opposite: to promote cooperate, generosity, and love. This is the reason that God claims to appear in three forms as well as one: to show that the doctrine that things are separate is not the truth.

Screwtape criticizes God for creating something as absurd as love. Even worse, God associates “innocent” sexual desire with love. The process of getting married is described as being of “one flesh” in the Bible.

Screwtape explains how devils manipulate God’s love to tempt humans. Because God has associated love and sexuality, devils try to convince humans that they must be in love with everyone they have sex with, and vice versa. As a result, many humans believe that lust is the only prerequisite for marriage—things like loyalty and respect are no longer important to them. Screwtape promises more information on love and sex in his next letter.

## LETTER XIX

Screwtape uses this letter to answer a question Wormwood has asked recently: if, as Screwtape has insisted, all beings are by nature in competition with each other, then how can God be said to love humanity, as Screwtape has also insisted? Screwtape begs Wormwood not to show his letters to anyone else, since he could face charges of heresy even for suggesting that beings are not by nature in competition. Screwtape also apologizes for his “jocular” references to Slubgob, and again asks Wormwood to keep his letters private.

Screwtape revises his opinion of God. God does not really love humans, he now insists. It would be impossible for God to love humans, since God is a being, and thus in competition with all other beings of the universe. Therefore, God’s love must be a pretext for some other desire. This would explain why God causes so much trouble for humanity.

*Here again, Screwtape and Lewis don’t dispute the “facts” that distinguish Heaven and Hell—they only disagree on which philosophy is better. Screwtape and Lewis see evil as a “zero-sum game,” whereby any victory for one person means a failure for others.*



*There is nothing inherently un-Christian about sexual passion or love—as Lewis has already suggested, sin arises in the distortion or manipulation of these feelings.*



*The relationship between love and sex is clearly too complicated for Lewis to do it justice in only a few paragraphs. Yet his key insight is clear and simple: humans conflate love and lust. It’s certainly true that there have been millions of unhappy marriages caused by precisely the error that Lewis identifies.*



*We open on an unusual note: instead of offering sage advice to Wormwood, as he usually does, Screwtape now seems desperate and subservient, terrified that he could be punished for “heresy.” It’s clear that Screwtape has erred from devilish doctrine in suggesting that God loves humans. This points to what Lewis sees as a fundamental contradiction in the devils’ position: they can’t accept the existence of disinterested love (what God feels for humans, and wants humans to feel for him and each other) without undermining their whole worldview of eat-or-be-eaten. By suggesting that devils can be persecuted for heresy, Lewis cleverly takes a traditional attack on Christianity—that it’s repressive to all other ideologies—and pins it on the opposition.*



*Screwtape backpedals with little success. He’s already explained, very concisely, that God wants to help his creations—to now say that God has ulterior motives or wants to hurt humans is unconvincing. God is a mystery to Screwtape, since devils are incapable of feeling love.*



Screwtape explains that it was the ambiguity in God’s reasons for creating mankind that first led “Our Father,” Satan, to rebel against God. God gave a “cock and bull” explanation about “disinterested love.” Because Satan refused to accept this explanation, he was banished from Heaven. In general, devils do not understand exactly what God means by “love” for humanity. There have been thousands of theories about what God’s true intentions for humanity might be, but none of these theories have ever been confirmed.

*Devils have struggled to understand God’s definition of love since the beginning of time. While readers are supposed to laugh at their confusion—it’s should be obvious to us that God loves everyone, plain and simple—we’re also supposed to identify with devils, at least a little. Just as Screwtape can’t understand God’s plan in all its complexity, so humans can never grasp the extent of God’s wisdom, and must accept that his plans for humanity are often incomprehensible.*



Screwtape notes that Wormwood has complained that Screwtape has not explained whether love is a desirable state for a human or not. Screwtape explains that there is no right answer to this question—the only thing that matters is whether or not a human is moving toward Satan or away from him. He adds that it would be “quite a good thing” to make the patient decide that love is either good or bad.

*It’s a little more difficult than usual to interpret Lewis’s true meaning in this passage, because Screwtape is still backpedaling and disguising his true beliefs—in this sense, we’re three times removed from what Lewis himself believes. One way of resolving this problem is to remember Lewis’s fondness for the doctrine of the mean. Thus, romantic love is neither inherently good nor bad—it’s somewhere in the middle.*



The patient might decide that love is bad, Screwtape suggests. If this is the case, then he will live a lonely, ascetic lifestyle. If, on the other hand, the patient decides that love is inherently good, then he will overflow with passion for other women, and hopefully, will ruin his life with a murder or a suicide. Better yet, the patient could be induced to marry someone. While marriage is God’s invention, it can be useful for devils. There are certain brides who would corrupt the patient and make him hate Christianity. Screwtape concludes his letter by reminding Wormwood that love is neither inherently good nor bad for devils—love is simply a state, like health, peace, or illness, that both God and Satan try to exploit.

*Lewis shows how either the unconditional rejection or acceptance of love in one’s life can be harmful. There are plenty of people one could fall in love with who could do harm to a person’s soul, but by the same logic, rejecting love altogether leads one to misery. Moderation in love is Lewis’s implicit alternative to a life lived with too extreme or too little love. And yet this conclusion may reflect Screwtape’s backtracking, not Lewis’s sincere opinion. Lewis probably believes that humans should love God unconditionally and love other human beings in moderation.*



## LETTER XX

Screwtape notes that God has ended Wormwood’s attacks on the patient’s chastity. While this was inevitable, Screwtape argues, Wormwood should think about convincing the patient that chastity is unhealthy, or researching the eligible women who live near the patient, so that the patient can fall in love with one of them.

*Lewis suggests how “Science” can be used to manipulate humans and cause corruption—the belief that chastity is bad for the health is clearly an excuse to have more sex and so give into vice.*



Screwtape explains that standards of feminine beauty are invented by devils far “lower down in the lowerarchy” than either Screwtape or Wormwood. Devils influence artists, designers, and other creative humans to produce new standards of beauty that make it increasingly difficult for human beings to find partners who are kind, happy, and loyal. This helps to explain why standards of beauty change so quickly: at times, beautiful women were tall and statuesque, and at other times, they were boyish or masculine. The devils have also conspired to bring more idealized sexuality into the public arena. This creates unrealistic standards of beauty, and makes men and women hungry for bodies and faces that do not, properly speaking, exist.

Screwtape explains to Wormwood that he should make the patient hunger for women, of which there are two fundamental types in every man’s mind. The first type is calm, obedient, and wholesome, and the other kind is wild and mysterious. The second type, Screwtape notes, inspires men to commit adultery and acts of violence. Wormwood could induce the patient to marry a woman of the second type, an act that almost always produces misery. Screwtape concludes by encouraging Wormwood to manipulate the patient through sexual means, since sexual unhappiness is highly painful for humans, and thus highly enjoyable for devils.

## LETTER XXI

Screwtape is here writing to answer Wormwood’s question about manipulating the patient’s irritability through sexual temptation. Screwtape assents that sexual temptation “is an excellent time” for attacking the patient’s irritability. Wormwood has already noticed that a good way to make the patient irritable is to steal his free time: unwanted visitors, for instance, always anger him. Thus, Wormwood must encourage the patient to believe that “his time belongs to him.”

The assumption that the patient’s time belongs to him, Screwtape acknowledges, is absurd. The patient does not own time, any more than he owns the sun or the moon. Indeed, the patient, at least according to his Christian beliefs, is the servant of God all day. Thus, every day that the patient has nothing irritating to do except listen to an annoying friend or an unwanted visitor is actually a blessing. If the patient thought about this at all, he would realize that he shouldn’t jealously guard his own time. Wormwood’s task is therefore to prevent the patient from thinking about time at all.

*Here, Lewis goes into some detail on the “lowerarchy” of Hell, clearly a parody of the “hierarchy” of human businesses and institutions. Perhaps in ironically reversing the structure of a bank or a law firm, Lewis is implying that modern human society isn’t tremendously different from Hell. We also see how art and literature can corrupt the human mind. Lewis is aware of this firsthand, having devoted a huge chunk of his life to studying European art and culture at Oxford and Cambridge. The pattern of idealizing the female body is as old as Western civilization, and Lewis knows it.*



*While Lewis is often criticized for taking a misogynistic view of modern society (there’s a fascinating essay by Terry Castle on the sexism of The Chronicles of Narnia), it could be argued that in this section he opposes such views. Men see women as caricatures, rather whole human beings, he seems to be saying. Instead of appreciating women for their own particular qualities, men see them either as gentle “Earth mothers” or fiery “sirens.”*



*Lewis returns to the question of ownership. While it’s intuitive to think that one owns one’s own body, life, time, etc., Lewis insists that this is a fallacy—in truth, God owns everything. To be angry with unwanted visitors, then, is to disrespect God in two ways—first, by rejecting the “gift” of friendship that God is offering, and second, by falsely claiming ownership of one’s own time.*



*In order to make his counter-intuitive point understandable, Lewis adopts the tone of a stern parent, reminding the patient that he’s lucky to have any free time at all. Lewis regards it as almost self-evident—once one reasons it out—that one’s time isn’t one’s own property, and so this point is only counter-intuitive because we’re so used to ignoring the concept of time altogether. Once again, sin is caused by ignorance, not reason.*



In general, humans are obsessed with making false claims of ownership. For example, they claim that they own their own bodies, and can do with them as they want—have copious sex, for instance. This belief is no more rational than a young child believing that he owns the house he lives in. Indeed, humans cannot truly claim that they “own” anything—God has given them everything.

*Lewis brings us to the conclusion he’s already made clear—all “ownership” is an illusion. The rise of Romanticism in the 19th century depended in no small part on the idea that Lewis critiques in this chapter. Poets and authors of the time were taken with the notion that they own their own selves, and were thus free to roam the world, obligated to no one.*



## LETTER XXII

Screwtape has learned from Wormwood that the patient is in love. Moreover, he is in “the worst kind of love” possible. Wormwood has clearly failed to tempt the patient in the manner Screwtape explained. Screwtape then takes this opportunity to tell Wormwood that Wormwood’s attempts to tell the “Secret Police” about Screwtape’s theories of love haven’t been successful. In retaliation, Screwtape says he will be telling the authorities about Wormwood’s incompetence in tempting the patient. He even sends Wormwood a booklet about the punishments meted out to “incompetent tempters.”

*We gather that Wormwood has tried and failed to rat Screwtape out to the authorities of Hell, apparently a “secret police.” (It’s worth noting that there’s a villainous secret police in The Chronicles of Narnia, too, as well as in most dictatorial governments.) Lewis builds the suspense by raising the stakes of Wormwood’s temptation—it’s clear that Wormwood must lead the patient into damnation or else risk punishment himself.*



Screwtape describes the woman with whom the patient has fallen in love. She is Christian, “simpering” in her sincerity, and virginal. She is so virtuous that she makes Screwtape “vomit.”

*This section is funny partly because it’s possible to identify with it—we all know people who are “too” nice. Nevertheless, Lewis wants us to sympathize with the patient and respect his newfound lover.*



Based on his description of the patient’s love interest, Screwtape criticizes God for being “a hedonist at heart.” Although God appears to surround himself with crosses and other symbols of suffering, he is essentially a lover of pleasure for its own sake. It is for this reason that God allows humans to do so many happy things without punishment: sleep, eating, drinking, having sex, playing, working, etc. Essentially, Screwtape concludes, God is a bourgeois bore.

*This may be the most counterintuitive twist in a book full of them. Though Christianity has a lasting reputation for being severe, ascetic, controlling, and generally repressive to human happiness, Lewis maintains (through Screwtape’s voice) that Christianity is essentially a religion of happiness and pleasure. The Church should respect the virtue of pleasure for its own sake.*



Screwtape knows from Wormwood’s letters that the patient has met his lover’s entire family, and visited their house many times. The house is a “wretched” place, full of love and affection. While describing the house, Screwtape is reminded of a description of Heaven he once heard: nothing but “music and silence.” Music and silence, he goes on, are a devil’s least favorite things. Indeed, devils have tried very hard to eradicate silence from the Earth, and make music as noisy and un-melodic as possible.

*It’s often said that it’s impossible to convey the power of music in a rational way. (Elvis Costello once said that “talking about music is like dancing about architecture.”) In this sense, music is like love—it’s impossible to explain it to the devils, and it will always be outside their understanding. The comparison of music and love adds an important addendum to Lewis’s theory of Christianity as a rational religion: while Christianity can be “demonstrated” through reasoning and thought, there are certain tenets of the religion, such as the acceptance of love as a desirable state, that can’t be rationalized—you simply have to believe them.*



In brackets, C.S. Lewis notes that the message breaks off for a moment, and then resumes in “a different hand.”

*We’re reminded that the novel we’re reading has been “discovered,” supposedly, by Lewis himself.*



The letter resumes. Screwtape apologizes for his anger—because he is so furious, he has accidentally transformed into a centipede. As a result, he is dictating the remainder of his letter to his secretary. Screwtape notes that humans are under the mistaken belief that devils have been punished for their revolt against God by being transformed into ugly creatures. In fact, he explains, devils simply take on the form that corresponds to their emotions. It is this magical ability to transform—a manifestation of the “Life Force”—that Satan would worship, assuming that he could worship anything other than himself. This letter is signed, “Toadpipe, for his abysmal sublimity under secretary Screwtape.”

*Throughout this chapter, Screwtape has been getting more and more furious—thinking about the patient’s lover irritates him immensely. By portraying the true nature of this fury, Lewis shows that evil and sin are, in an important sense, self-generated. Thus, Screwtape makes himself ugly and monstrous because he acts ugly and sinful. This is important because it shows that God isn’t directly responsible for sin—the sinner is.*



## LETTER XXIII

Screwtape reveals that the patient is meeting more and more Christians every day through his new lover. This means that it will be very difficult to tempt the patient. Because Wormwood has tried and failed to tempt the patient using the World and the Flesh, he must now pursue a third strategy. While this third strategy is the hardest of all for devils, it is also the most satisfying. Wormwood might be able to pursue this third strategy by manipulating the patient’s conversations with his new Christian friends, many of whom are of a political and historical turn of mind.

*Where before the patient was being exposed to an ever-growing group of militant atheists, he is now being welcomed into the fold of good Christians. There is something almost inspiring about the way that Screwtape refuses to give up hope, even when it seems likely that the patient will never abandon his faith again—and yet emotions like hope are foreign to the devils. They act only out of obligation to Satan, hatred of God and humanity, and fear of being punished themselves.*



Screwtape explains the third strategy that Wormwood can use to manipulate the patient: he can appeal to arguments about the history of Christianity. Many Christian writers, he explains, believe that Christianity has been going downhill since the era of its founding. This point of view claims that “the historical Jesus” was very different from the figure that Christians worship in the 20th century. “The historical Jesus” has been used to bolster arguments for liberalism, humanitarianism, Marxism, and more. The irony is that there is no historical Jesus for these writers—they simply invent a historical Jesus whom they use to support their ideologies.

*Lewis’s arguments and musings have become more and more specific as the story goes on. Here, he addresses a phenomenon that isn’t immediately relevant to 21st century readers: the worship of the “historical Jesus.” During the first half of the 20th century, however, there was an effort to “split the difference” on Christ—in other words, to respect him as a great man, but doubt his divine powers. (One early proponent of this view was President Thomas Jefferson, who wrote a new version of the Bible with all mentions of Christ’s divinity edited out.)*



One common quality of every version of the historical Jesus is that he was a “Great man” in the modern sense of the word: in other words, he was a proponent of great, radical ideas that he used to attack the injustices of his time. The problem with this idea, Screwtape explains, is that Jesus’s teachings aren’t any different from the teachings of other famous moral teachers—God’s moral teachings, whether they come from Jesus or anyone else, are not new lessons, but rather reminders.

The historical Jesus, Screwtape continues, is actually ahistorical insofar as the intellectual aspects of Jesus Christ are emphasized over the singular fact about his life—namely, that he died and was resurrected. By obscuring this truth, which is the central tenet of Christianity, writers and historians do a disservice to their faith, and thus, Screwtape concludes, devils should encourage their efforts.

Screwtape discusses the relationship between Christianity and politics. While devils do not want Society to be based on Christian teachings, since such a society would be alarmingly just and loving, devils *do* want people to use Christianity to enact social justice. The reason for this is that political figures who use Christianity as a means to a political end will come to value Christianity less and less. There are also people who celebrate Christianity because it has survived for so long, instead of because it is true. Screwtape delights in questionable logic of this kind.

## LETTER XXIV

Screwtape has been in contact with Slumtrinket, the devil in charge of the patient’s lover. Slumtrinket has found a weakness in the patient’s lover: like so many young women who grow up among intelligent people, she has disdain for those who do not share her beliefs, and calls them foolish and ridiculous. Although the patient’s lover sees her attitude toward those unlike herself as a projection of her faith, it is actually the result of her habits of mind.

Screwtape explains how the new information about the patient’s lover can be used to influence the patient. He argues that young novices are always prone to exaggeration. Thus, if the patient spends enough time with his lover, then he will echo his lover’s vice in an exaggerated form. He will dislike and show disdain for those who do not accept Christianity.

*Here again, modern Westerners are flawed in their need to find novelty in the least novel things. Thus, rather than accept that Christ simply told the truth—to accept God and be good to other people—intellectuals feel the need to portray him as a radical, controversial, or difficult teacher. This obscures the simple beauty of Christ’s life and teachings, Lewis argues.*



*One can almost hear the impatience in Lewis’s voice here as he speaks through Screwtape. Lewis wants Christians to rejoice in Christ’s resurrection—obviously the most memorable thing about Christ’s time on the Earth—rather than focusing on using his words to support certain ideologies or political philosophies.*



*The relationship between politics and Christianity has challenged thinkers for hundreds of years. There are those who see Christianity as the cornerstone for any just society—a theocracy—but Lewis maintains that it’s important to divorce political causes from Christianity, since they will obscure the faith itself. One thinks of all the politicians who claim divine backing for their laws and wars—by Lewis’s standard, they’re diluting the value of Christianity.*



*As Lewis nears the end of his book, he proposes a major problem with being a Christian: believing that one is right and the entire world is wrong. This can’t help but create a sense of arrogance toward the world—Christopher Hitchens, a notable atheist, once accused Christianity of being “arrogance masquerading as humility.” It is a version of Hitchens’ critique that Lewis will try to refute.*



*While Lewis is writing about a specific problem that the patient has regarding exaggeration, this problem could also be said to apply to almost everyone. When we first accept a new fact, ideology, or religion, we have a tendency to embrace it too whole-heartedly, and therefore exaggerate its tenets.*



Wormwood must convince the patient that his new friends and lover are “his people,” and that he has finally found a community for himself. This belief is useful to devils because it encourages the stranger to look down on those who are unlike him. Wormwood should make the patient laugh and sneer at atheists, and use phrases like “we Christians” as much as possible.

Screwtape irritably tells Wormwood to stop mentioning the war in Europe in his letters. While he admits that the war is important to Satan, he also believes that it isn’t his concern—those who are lower in the lowerarchy should focus on such matters.

## LETTER XXV

Screwtape points out that the problem with the patient’s new friend group and community is that it is “mere Christianity.” If men must be Christians, Screwtape reasons, then devils want them to embody the state of mind, “Christianity And…” In other words, the most vulnerable Christian is the one who sees everything in a Christian light: vegetarianism, physical research, health, etc. This kind of Christian is vulnerable to the devils because he can quickly grow weary of his faith—a horror of “the same old thing.”

Devils can manipulate Christians of the “Christianity And” mindset in much the same way that they tempt gluttons by exaggerating the natural pleasure of eating: by exaggerating the natural pleasure of change. It is human nature to enjoy change. The change of the seasons, for instance, is a cause of pleasure for all people. Devils can manipulate this desire for change, to the point where humans desire change for its own sake. Thus, devils can encourage Christians to desire an alternative to Christianity, simply because it is an alternative.

One of the devils’ most valuable weapons is fashion. Fashion is useful because it encourages people to abandon their beliefs simply because they’ve grown old. For this reason, civilization has abandoned the doctrines of Puritanism, Liberalism, etc. The celebration of Fashion is one manifestation of humans’ belief in the values of progress and evolution, values that hold the truth in relative terms. The truth, Screwtape observes, is that some changes are good and some are bad—there’s nothing inherently good or bad about change itself.

*Lewis now reaches what can be a fundamental problem in Christianity: it is a religion based on a strong sense of community with a unique culture, and yet it is meant to offer universal salvation, available to anyone who wants it. As a result, Christians often face the charge of being too exclusive and “cliquey.” This exclusivity flies in the face of universal love, and so is to be avoided at all costs.*



*Wormwood is only a “junior tempter,” and so his only responsibility is trying to corrupt his own “patient.” Screwtape implies that more important devils do work like orchestrating wars and influencing cultural norms.*



*“Mere Christianity” is the title of one of Lewis’s most famous books, a defense of Christianity that he delivered as a series of radio broadcasts during World War II. Just as Lewis cautioned against using Christianity as a support for political ideologies or nationalism, here he insists that Christianity should not be made into an obligatory part of every aspect of one’s personal life, because it dilutes the power of the faith.*



*We’ve previously seen how the love of change for its own sake can be harmful to the Christian mindset. Here, Screwtape explains how change can become an end in itself. This is an insightful observation related to the rise of advertising and consumerism: an economy in which change for its own sake—fashion, short attention spans, and the need for constant novelty—is what makes the world go round.*



*Lewis, a dedicated student of history and the classics, doesn’t have much patience for those who embrace change and novelty for their own sake. On the contrary, there are many things that should be accepted because they are inherently better, despite the fact that they’ve been around for centuries. Lewis obviously counts Christianity in this group, but also classics, philosophy, Puritanism, etc. Newness is overrated, he concludes.*



## LETTER XXVI

Screwtape tells Wormwood that courtship is the time during which the “seeds” of resentment are sown. During courtship, couples think that they’ve solved their problems with love, when, in reality, they’ve only hidden these problems from view for a short time.

The great problem of courtship, Screwtape says, is that of charity, which the “Philological Arm” of Hell calls “unselfishness.” Men and women think of unselfishness in different ways, due to the values of Western culture. Women think that unselfishness consists of helping other people as much as possible. Men, by contrast, think that unselfishness consists of not bothering people whenever possible.

Another problem with unselfishness is that it sometimes leads to more resentment and anger than selfishness. Screwtape gives an example: a large family tries to plan an afternoon tea. One member of the family politely suggests that he doesn’t want to have tea. In response, the other members unselfishly suggest that they not have tea at all. The original opponent of tea retaliates by politely saying that they should have tea. Soon, a big argument builds, and all the resentment of the parties comes out from beneath the façade of unselfishness.

As the patient pursues a courtship of his lover, Screwtape advises that Wormwood should try to influence him to be unselfish, rather than selfish. Even though unselfishness seems bad for the devils’ cause in the short term, it often leads to anger and resentment years later. In general, the two young lovers must never realize that love alone is not enough for a marriage to last.

## LETTER XXVII

Screwtape criticizes Wormwood for doing very little to tempt the patient. Wormwood has tried to distract the patient from thoughts of God by encouraging him to think only of love. But this has been counterproductive, because when the patient prays, the subject of his prayers is precisely his *failure* to think about God sufficiently. This means that Wormwood has failed to truly distract the patient from his Christian faith.

*Here Lewis clarifies his theory of love. One issue with romantic love is that it’s seen as the solution to all human problems, when on the contrary, it just distracts people from their problems. Then when the emotion of romance wears off, the problems return.*



*In an almost Orwellian turn, Lewis imagines that Hell has a department devoted to creating buzzwords and phrases that conceal the teachings of God. He also takes the opportunity to differentiate between the sexes—or more precisely, between the way Western culture encourages the sexes to behave.*



*Lewis is trying to defend Christianity from the charge that it’s excessively fussy, priggish, old-fashioned, or generally lifeless. One of his important arguments comes in this section, when he shows how excessive politeness—a stereotype of the good Christian—can actually be harmful and even sinful. Being a Christian doesn’t mean being polite to a fault, Lewis concludes—it often means speaking one’s mind and being assertively honest.*



*In general, Lewis is skeptical of the modern interpretation of romantic love as eternal and unconditional, because it encourages people to make promises that they’re incapable of keeping. In many ways, Lewis’s interpretation of love feels very contemporary: he’s skeptical of marriages and relationships because they place unfair expectations on both lovers. A good relationship, he maintains, takes love, but also lots of other things.*



*Screwtape reveals that the patient has not become suffused with arrogance, as Screwtape had suspected he might. Instead, he continues to acknowledge his weaknesses and limitations to the Lord, and keeps praying for improvement.*



Screwtape suggests a new way of tempting the patient: “petitionary” prayers. These are prayers in which the patient asks for specific things, such as health or peace in the war. Because he is in love, however, the patient may indulge in “false spirituality”—he may make non-petitionary prayers to God. This is good for devils, since God commands Christians to pray for bread and health, rather than for abstract things. Another way that Wormwood can corrupt the patient is to fill him with doubts about the effectiveness of petitionary prayer. If the patient prays for a thing and receives it, then he will assume that it was he alone who did the work that led to his gaining the thing, not God. If, on the other hand, the patient prays for something and doesn’t receive it, then he will conclude that prayer does not work.

It is strange, Screwtape tells Wormwood, that people don’t have more trust and respect for prayer. While devils and angels stand outside of time and see that prayer works when given enough time, humans live in the present and process slowly toward the future, meaning that they’re often unable to see the causal link between their prayers and the answering of those prayers. There are some “meddlesome” Western authors, such as Boethius, who have already pointed out this very problem in the human appreciation of prayer. Nevertheless, writers of this kind usually lived so long ago that they’re not taken seriously, due in part to the devils’ promulgation of the “Historical Point of View.” When modern people study writers who lived long ago, they almost never discuss the validity of their arguments—instead, they talk about their culture, their lives, etc. As a result of the Historical Point of View, most people in the Western world distrust prayer, and indeed, regard history as “bunk.”

## LETTER XXVIII

Screwtape reprimands Wormwood for writing him a letter about the war in Europe, including lots of details about mortality and destruction of various cities. Wormwood has written, gleefully, that there will probably be air raids in the town where the patient lives. Screwtape angrily reminds Wormwood that the patient’s death would be a disaster—his soul is so pious at the moment that if he is killed now then God will have defeated the devils. Screwtape suggests that Wormwood has spent too much time around humans: he’s echoing their belief that death is the worst thing and survival the best. Screwtape reminds Wormwood that this “human prejudice” is nonsense.

*Lewis leaves the problem of prayer almost until the end of his novel. In part, this is because prayer is one of the most challenging parts of Christianity for outsiders to understand. While Lewis doesn’t say outright that prayer always works—if it’s petitionary—he does imply that people are wrong for doubting that prayer works. The implication is that everyday, petitionary prayer does work, provided that people pray for things they genuinely need, and allow sufficient time for their prayers to be answered.*



*Lewis has already alluded to the thinking of Boethius, the late classical philosopher who proposed that a Christian God could see all of time simultaneously. Here he explicitly mentions Boethius, bemoaning the fact that modern thinkers ignore Boethius just because he lived a long time ago. This ignorance is only another manifestation of the general bias against the past that Lewis has already identified. Because intellectuals are loyal to the ideals of progress, Communism, Darwinism, etc., they turn their backs on the past and call it irrelevant.*



*The final letters of Lewis’s novel are concerned with arguably the most terrifying problem humans are capable of discussing—the problem of death. Lewis begins by boldly claiming that death is actually the least terrifying problem humans are faced with. Death may seem horrible from our perspective, but from a divine perspective it leads to an eternal life in Heaven, and so should be welcomed when it comes—provided one’s soul is safe.*



Screwtape hopes that the patient will survive the air raids so that he will enter middle age, which is an excellent time for temptation. So far, God has protected the patient from the temptations of youth, but those of middle age are arguably even more dangerous for humanity. Middle age can be a time of great pain and disillusionment: love wanes, beauty declines, and often loneliness grows.

Screwtape continues that old age is an even more dangerous time for humanity. Because God created men to live in Heaven, they find it difficult to live on Earth. Thus, if humans live to be 70, then they are often miserable in their final decades of life, meaning that it's easy for devils to tempt them.

Humanity's desire for Heaven is so enormous, Screwtape suggests, that they spend great energy and effort trying to build Heaven on Earth. This is the explicit purpose of eugenics, politics, Communism, psychology, and science. It is often the elderly and experienced who think themselves most qualified for these utopian projects, but their sense of qualification is usually nonsensical. A genuinely great philosopher once wrote that "Experience is the mother of illusion," but luckily for the devils, this philosopher is now very out of fashion.

Screwtape concludes that devils are only ever able to tempt a minority of human beings. Most humans die in infancy, and of those who don't, many of them die very young. With this in mind, Screwtape hopes, on Wormwood's behalf, that the patient survives and lives into old age, so that Wormwood will have ample opportunity to corrupt his soul.

## LETTER XXIX

Screwtape has learned that the Germans are certain to bomb the patient's community, and that the patient, due to his "duties," will be in the most dangerous part of the city. With this in mind, he tells Wormwood that he must produce a sin in the patient's mind. This sin could be cowardice, or courage followed by pride, or racist hatred of Germany.

*It's ironic, Lewis believes, that we think of young people as being the most susceptible to temptation. Arguably, it is middle-aged and elderly people who are most at risk of corruption, because they have had more time to become set in their sinful ways and grow dissatisfied with life.*



*Lewis believes that the elderly are just as they're just as corruptible as younger human beings, if not more so—age doesn't always mean wisdom.*



*One of the main fallacies of human society, Lewis believes, is to attach some inherent value to experience, and therefore to old age. The elderly may think they have everything figured out on earth, but this just makes them forget about Heaven—and they are given extra authority and respect because of their experience. The result is that the "experienced" often do great damage with worldly philosophies like Darwinism and Communism.*



*Lewis reverses the usual perception of human life, turning tragedy into miracle. The fact that so many humans die at an early age, he insists, is actually a blessing, because this means that more humans go to Heaven. The more time a human spends on earth, the more opportunity they have to be corrupted.*



*Although it seems as if the patient is in grave danger, he is actually, in Lewis's estimation, now "safer" than he has ever been. He is close to death, and thus Heaven, and he is focused on virtuous duty. Screwtape and Wormwood are getting desperate, and their attempts to corrupt the patient are increasingly clumsy.*



Of the sins that Wormwood could instill in the patient, Screwtape encourages Wormwood to avoid pride, because this would involve filling the patient with courage first, and devils don't know how to create virtue of any kind. Hatred, on the other hand, the devils can produce easily. The challenge for Wormwood will be to make the patient identify with his friends and loved ones enough to despise the Germans who are trying to kill them, but not so much that the patient learns to selflessly forgive his enemies and love them, too.

Screwtape considers the possibility that Wormwood could fill the patient with cowardice. Cowardice is one of the only sins that Western society has not learned to glamorize and celebrate. One of the reasons for this is that cowardice is often followed by genuine self-hatred, which leads to humility and personal growth. This leads to an irritating dilemma for devils: if they promote justice and peace, then they are serving God. If, however, they promote chaos and war, then in the ensuing violence, millions of people will discover their cowardice, and thus acquire humility and faith. Either way, the devils are helping God. In general, Screwtape continues, God creates a dangerous world because it is only in a world of this kind that truly moral, pious people can live.

Because Wormwood cannot safely fill the patient with cowardice, he must adopt a subtler tactic. In a moment of panic, Wormwood must fill the patient's mind with a long list of possible courses of action he could take. In this way, the patient will never actually lapse into cowardice, and thus humility, but he will also train himself to think that he has something other than God to "fall back on," namely, superstition and elaborate plans and courses of action. Screwtape concludes by reminding Wormwood that convincing the patient to feel fear is entertaining, but not enough to bring him away from God—fear itself is not a sin.

## LETTER XXX

Screwtape begins his letter by telling Wormwood that he has heard from the Infernal Police that the patient's actions in the first air raid were "the worst possible." He was terribly frightened, meaning that he thought himself a coward and therefore felt no sinful pride. His only sinful behavior was a brief moment of anger with a dog that nearly made him trip.

Wormwood's only success is in making the patient extremely tired, meaning that he is more susceptible to vice. Nevertheless, Screwtape reminds Wormwood that tiredness can also make people more gentle and peaceful, meaning that they are actually less sinful than usual.

*Lewis, psychologically perceptive as ever, shows how a seemingly virtuous feeling—love for one's family—can devolve into a highly sinful feeling—hatred for people who are unlike oneself. Implicit in Lewis's thinking is the idea that the remedy for racism is more love: racism is a failure to love all people equally.*



*Screwtape illustrates the huge disadvantage that devils face when they try to fight against God. This only reinforces what has been obvious all along (and what should surely be obvious to all devils, if they exist): one is always guaranteed to lose a war with God. In order to corrupt humanity, devils wind up inadvertently doing good—in this case, filling humans with loyalty, humility, and piety. It's strange (and impressive) that Lewis has managed to make a suspenseful, well-plotted novel when, essentially, we already know how it's going to end. God is all-powerful and all-knowing, so he always wins.*



*As we reach the end of the book, Screwtape becomes increasingly apprehensive, and here, his advice to Wormwood repeats what he said in earlier chapters. Once again, he tells Wormwood to fill the patient with multiple, competing ideas about what could happen to him. It's intriguing that Screwtape ends by observing that fear itself isn't a sin. Here, more than anywhere else in the novel, Screwtape speaks with C.S. Lewis's "voice." Lewis is reminding us that it's okay to be afraid.*



*Earlier in the book, we were worried that the patient would lapse into sinfulness during World War II, but now his sinfulness is laughably trivial compared with what Wormwood was attempting—the patient only gets angry with a dog.*



*Again, the patient's sin is amusing in its banality—in fact, he has not actually sinned in being tired, but only made himself slightly more susceptible to sinful behavior.*



In order to capitalize on the patient's fatigue, Wormwood must fill him with false hope. The patient should believe that the air raid will not be repeated. If the patient meets his lover, he will talk less than usual, while she will talk more—this can be useful for Wormwood, since it could lead to more resentment.

Another way that Wormwood can manipulate the patient involves his perception of reality. When the patient sees dead bodies on the ground, he will question what the “real” world consists of, and he may even come to believe that his notion of religion has been a childish fantasy. Humans don't understand what “real” means. At times, they treat the word to mean the bare physical facts of the universe, while at other times, they use the word “real” to refer to the emotional impact of such facts on a human consciousness. The devils' triumph is in convincing people that only physical facts, or feelings of pain, are real, while joy and other emotional experience is “subjective” and therefore false. On the contrary, *Screwtape* notes, happiness is just as real as pain or the physical world.

With Wormwood's encouragement, the patient will come to regard the nightmares of war as more “real” than his love for his lover, his job, or his day-to-day life. This will be a huge victory for the devils, *Screwtape* concludes.

## LETTER XXXI

*Screwtape* begins his final letter with a different greeting: “My dear, my very dear, Wormwood, my poppet, my pignie.” He begins in this way to “assure” Wormwood that his professed affection for Wormwood is far from artificial. On the contrary, *Screwtape* insists, he loves Wormwood every bit as much as Wormwood loves him. *Screwtape* gloats that he is stronger than Wormwood—and as a result, when Wormwood is punished for letting a soul “slip through his fingers,” he will probably be fed to *Screwtape*.

*Screwtape* shows how evil can be built out of small, seemingly ordinary moments. While he has made this point before, he sounds desperate when he makes it now—Wormwood has almost let the patient slip through his fingers.



This is arguably the most important and topical attack on literature that C.S. Lewis addresses in the book. The horror and devastation caused by World War II—the Holocaust, the air raids, etc.—pose a challenge to God's existence and authority because they suggest that God doesn't love humanity, doesn't exist, or isn't all-powerful. But Lewis dismisses these criticisms as failures of imagination. He has already explained how the grimness of death is “greatly exaggerated” in human culture. Here, he elaborates that the specific, gruesome details of World War II are no more “real” than happiness, faith, and God himself. A frequent criticism of Western philosophy is that it places more value on pain than on pleasure—it makes pain alone intellectual. Lewis insists that pleasure is just as real as pain, and this can outweigh, or at least balance out the devastation of World War II.



*Screwtape* ends by restating his aims for the patient: convince him (and, presumably, the human race) that pain is more real than pleasure. This reinforces Lewis's argument that Christianity, contrary to popular belief, is a religion of pleasure, not suffering.



[The final letter of the book begins differently, with \*Screwtape\* exaggerating his displays of affection for Wormwood. In a sense, we already knew that \*Screwtape\* was lying when he called Wormwood his “Dear,” but here it becomes clear that \*Screwtape\* has no love for his nephew whatsoever—in other words, he and Wormwood love each other equally: not at all. This shows that Hell is, as \*Screwtape\* has already suggested, a “zero-sum game”—the strong eat the weak instead of supporting them.](#)



The patient has died in an air raid. In the moments leading up to his death, the patient became fully conscious for the first time of the influence that Wormwood had on his mind. As he became conscious of this, he also came to realize that Wormwood no longer had any influence on his behavior. The patient died quickly—he won't have to stay in a nursing home or a hospital. This is a disaster for the devils.

In the final seconds before he died, the patient saw God. Wormwood, Screwtape guesses, saw God too, and cowered before him. Perhaps Wormwood was amazed that a mere human being could see God with love and affection while a devil couldn't find the strength even to look at him. In this instant, the patient realized that at every sad or lonely moment in his life, God was standing by his side. It was also in this instant that the patient became completely aware of his sins—even more aware of them than Wormwood had been.

Screwtape reminds Wormwood that the patient is now in a place where Wormwood can no longer tempt him—indeed, any temptation he offers the patient will seem as disgusting as the temptations of a prostitute to a man who has just learned that his dead love is still alive.

Here, Screwtape acknowledges that he can say no more of the patient—he has no idea what fate awaits him in Heaven, since devils aren't allowed there. Screwtape even admits that he sometimes despairs that he doesn't know what occurs in Heaven. The only thing that sustains Screwtape is the knowledge that the devils' realism will ultimately defeat God's nonsensical love. Screwtape signs his final letter, “your increasingly and ravenously affectionate uncle, Screwtape.”

*It reinforces Lewis's argument that the patient becomes “fully conscious” in the same instance that he fully embraces Christianity and sets aside corruption altogether—this again implies that Christianity is the religion of consciousness and rationality. It's interesting that what might seem the cruelest fate for the patient—a sudden death early in life—is actually a great blessing.*



*Screwtape's efforts to describe the patient's contact with God are three times removed from the patient's actual experience. Wormwood witnessed the patient, Screwtape heard about the patient's death from Wormwood, and we are hearing about the patient from Screwtape/Lewis. This points to the devil's inability to understand God's wisdom, or his love. In a moment like this, we are meant to see how laughably pitiful the devils are in their “war” against God.*



*Lewis shows that God will inevitably defeat Satan. God is the author of all true pleasure and joy, while Satan can only corrupt those pleasures.*



*Throughout the book, Lewis has forced us to look at the human world through the eyes of a devil. Here, in the last chapter of the book, he “Sets us free,” reminding us that we are free, enlightened, and blessed in a way that devils can never be, even if they secretly want to be, as Screwtape tacitly admits. Screwtape is lost in his “zero-sum game” with Wormwood (aptly symbolized by his soon-to-be -satisfied desire to eat Wormwood alive), but our situation, unlike Screwtape's, isn't so hopeless. We recognize that there are times when it is inherently good to love one another and cooperate with each other. It's important that Screwtape confesses to Wormwood that he sometimes wishes he could know God better—but only when Screwtape knows that Wormwood is about to die, and thus can't report Screwtape to the authorities. This suggests that even devils, deep down, want to be loved by God. Ultimately, Lewis—like the other great moral teachers he references—doesn't tell us anything we don't already know. In this novel he just uses a twisted perspective to remind us of what he sees as fundamental truths.*





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