

The Screwtape Letters

Study Guide

For the novel by C.S. Lewis

by Michael S. Poteet

CONFIDENTIAL

OFFICIAL

INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

TOP SECRET

TO: Wormwood, Patient Care Division

TO: *I Illustrious Screwtape, Home Office* RECEIVED

TO: Wormwood, Patient Care Division

URGENT

TO: *The Illustrious Screwtape, Home Office* RECEIVED

TO: Wormwood, Patient Care Division

TO: *Illustrious Screwtape* RECEIVED

PRIORITY

TO: Wormwood, Patient Care Division

TO: *Illustrious Screwtape, Home Office* RECEIVED

TO: Wormwood, Patient Care Division

TO: *Illustrious Screwtape, Home Office* RECEIVED

TO: Wormwood, Patient Care Division

STAMPED

TO: *Screwtape* RECEIVED

TO: Wormwood, Patient Care Division

TO: *Most Illustrious Screwtape, Home Office* RECEIVED

TO: Wormwood, Patient Care Division

TO: *Uncle Screwtape* RECEIVED



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Synopsis

Screwtape, an undersecretary in the Lowerarchy of Hell, has undertaken the guidance and tutelage of his nephew Wormwood, who has been assigned a human patient to secure for eternity. In a series of letters, Screwtape guides the young demon through the finer points of temptation, the weaknesses and foibles of human beings, and the disaster of his patient becoming a Christian. Though this certainly complicates things, the two infernal beings won't let it stop them.

From this very skewed perspective, C. S. Lewis digs into human nature, revealing some interesting, and sometimes embarrassing, tendencies. Touching on everything from sleeplessness to the “absurdity” of God's love for humanity, Screwtape imparts his wicked wisdom to Wormwood. Though the mirror he holds up to humanity is warped and cracked, it is still painfully revealing. Wit and parody mask a very serious analysis of what makes humans tick; and though it may make readers smile, it will also make us squirm as Screwtape picks at the cracks in our façades.

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Questions About the Preface:

1. According to C. S. Lewis, what two mistaken beliefs about devils can human beings hold? What do you see as the dangers inherent in each view? What is your belief about the literal existence or non-existence of devils? Why do you believe as you do?
2. *The Screwtape Letters* is an *epistolary novel*—that is, a novel told in the form of letters. Authors use this style to create *verisimilitude*—to make it look as real and true as possible. What details in the Preface allow Lewis to create verisimilitude?
3. Apart from verisimilitude, what other motives might Lewis have had for using the epistolary approach in this book?
4. Lewis tells us that Screwtape—the narrator through whom we “hear” the book—is unreliable. What does Lewis’s evaluation of Screwtape have in common with Jesus’ words about the devil in John 8:44? Why would Lewis tell us that the voice through which he is speaking is unreliable?

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Epigraphs:

5. An *epigraph* is a quotation put at the beginning of a piece of literature that sets a tone or introduces a theme. What do the epigraphs from Martin Luther (1483–1546) and Sir Thomas More (1478–1535) suggest about *The Screwtape Letters*?

Parody:

A *parody* imitates something else, usually for satirical effect. Often parody is for comic effect—sometimes to make fun of, but often to have fun *with*. An example of comic parody might be a Veggie Tales cartoon like *Larry Boy and the Fib from Outer Space*, which parodies superhero cartoons. Some parody, however, may use the form, style, or subject of another work to add insight or perspective to the original work or to bring insight to the new work.

6. What specific items from scripture or Christian theology do you see parodied in these letters? Add to your list as you read the rest of the book.

7. Throughout *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis presents Hell—and its representatives, including Screwtape—as a parody of Heaven. Why do you think Lewis presents Hell in this semicomical way, rather than with more traditional images of “fire and brimstone”? What serious theological claim about Hell might Lewis be making through his use of parody?

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Analysis:

5. The word “Wormwood” is found in Scripture, though generally not as a proper name. In the King James Version or the New American Standard Version of the Bible, read Jeremiah 9:15; Lamentations 3:15, 19; Amos 6:12; and Revelation 8:10, 11. What connotations does this name have (you may also wish to read the verses in the New International Version)? Why do you think Lewis chose it for Screwtape’s nephew?

6. Throughout the book, Lewis satirizes several modern philosophies by having Screwtape remark that Hell can take credit for them, or for human beings’ response to them. In Letter 1, for instance, Screwtape encourages Wormwood to keep the patient devoted to “materialism” as “the philosophy of the future.” Based on inferences you can draw from this letter, what is the philosophy of materialism, and why does Screwtape view it as an ally in the devil’s cause?

7. Screwtape encourages Wormwood to keep his patient’s attention fixed on “real life.” What does Screwtape mean by “real life”?

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do these passages speak to the issues of (1) our ability to know fully the extent of our sin; (2) the meaning of true humility; and (3) whether or not we can, as Screwtape puts it, “run up a very favourable credit balance” with God?

15. In Letter 3, Screwtape implies that true conversion is not a merely internal process. Read Luke 3:7–14; Romans 12:1, 2 and Ephesians 2:8–10. What is to be one of the results of true conversion? In your opinion, what biblical figures best exemplify true conversion? How have you seen true conversion in the lives of Christians you know or know about?

16. How might you apply Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:1–5 and Paul’s in Romans 12:10–18 to the patient’s relationship with his mother? How has the behavior Jesus condemns here been a problem for you? How have you dealt, or might you deal, with that problem?

17. In Letter 3, Screwtape notes that Wormwood’s patient has tricked himself into praying for “an imaginary person”: his mother’s “soul,” rather than the body-*and*-soul mother with whom he actually lives. Read Matthew 6:11 and James 5:13–18, and skim the book of Psalms. What do all these texts suggest about praying for tangible needs and real people? Why do you think it is so easy to

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Dig Deeper:

4. Screwtape says Wormwood should exploit these new friendships by postponing the patient's realization that his faith opposes his friends' worldview. Once that realization does occur, however, the patient should be induced to lead "two parallel lives"—i.e., to think and act one way among his new friends and a different way among fellow believers. He should also encourage the patient to think he is better than both groups because he sees the "other" side of life.
5. Responses will vary.
6. Students will think of various biblical friendships based on their knowledge of the Bible; possible responses include Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, or Jesus and the disciples. Proverbs 17:17 and 18:24 point to faithful loyalty as a defining characteristic of godly friendships; 22:24 advises the faithful not to make friends with the "hot-tempered," and 27:6 speaks of a friend who inflicts "wounds," but only for another's good. James states that we cannot be friends with both "the world" and God. Jesus is our friend because, as he tells his followers, he laid down his life for us and has shown us God.
7. Joy comes from abiding in obedience Christ's love (John 15:10–11) and in living in relationship with God the Father through the resurrected Christ (John 16:22).
8. Screwtape is referring to the guilt we feel because of our sinfulness versus God's perfection. If we do not confess our sin, we are claiming to be sinless; John identifies this as self-deception (1:8). If, however, we confess our sin, we can expect forgiveness and purification (1:9) through "Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (2:1) who is "the atoning sacrifice" for sins (2:2). Our guilt will be replaced by reassurance, but only through confession.
9. Screwtape says the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the road we do not recognize we are on until it is too late. Matthew 7:13, 14 teaches that the road to destruction is broad (i.e., easy to follow), while the road to life is narrow (i.e., more difficult to follow).

Letters 13–16

Vocabulary:

Accept reasonable responses; consult a dictionary or thesaurus. Some possible responses are: 1. suffocating/encouraging breath; 2. brutal/gentle; 3. observable, obvious/hidden, concealed; 4. pride/humility; 5. one full of expertise, expert/one lacking expertise, philistine; 6. trite comments/profound comments

Questions:

1. He allowed the patient to experience true pleasures.
2. Pains and pleasures are both "unmistakably real" and, as the previous letters have demonstrated, Screwtape and the other demons lead us away from God by way of unrealities and falsehoods.
3. As long as the patient does not act on feelings of piety, he will not draw nearer to God; also, lack of action leads to lack of further feeling.
4. Screwtape advises Wormwood to draw the patient's attention, and therefore pride, to his own humility. Screwtape also tells Wormwood to lead his patient to mistake self-deprecation for genuine humility.
5. That God really loves human beings.
6. The past is like eternity because "it has a determinate nature"; in other words, it IS. In contrast, the future is unknowable to humans, and is "the most completely temporal part of time"—i.e., that