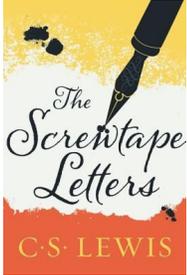


# Books by the Stack



## **The Screwtape Letters by C. S. Lewis**

At once wildly comic, deadly serious, and strikingly original, C. S. Lewis gives us the correspondence of the worldly-wise devil to his nephew Wormwood, a novice demon in charge of securing the damnation of an ordinary young man.

**Why you'll like it:** *Christian apologetics, epistolary novel, satirical, witty.*

**About the Author:** C. S. (Clive Staples) Lewis, "Jack" to his intimates, was born on November 29, 1898 in Belfast, Ireland. He enjoyed writing about, and reading, literature of the past, publishing such works as the award-winning *The Allegory of Love* (1936), about the period of history known as the Middle Ages. He is probably best known for his books for young adults, such as his *Chronicles of Narnia* series. This fantasy series, as well as such works as *The Screwtape Letters* (a collection of letters written by the devil), is typical of the author's interest in mixing religion and mythology, evident in both his fictional works and nonfiction articles. He became Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at Cambridge University, where he remained until his death on November 22, 1963. (Bowker Author Biography)

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Much of the appeal *The Screwtape Letters* derives from Lewis's startlingly original reversal: telling a story about Christian faith not from a Christian point-of-view but from the perspective of a devil trying to secure the damnation of one's man's soul. Why is this strategy so effective? What does it allow Lewis to accomplish that would have been impossible in a more straightforward approach?
2. In the first of Screwtape's letters, he instructs Wormwood not to attempt to win the patient's soul through argument, but rather by fixing his attention on "the stream of immediate sense experiences" (p. 2). Why is immersion in the particulars of "real life" fertile ground for temptation? Why is argument a risky strategy for devils to employ? Where else do you find this opposition between the particular and the universal—between materialism and spiritual faith—in *The Screwtape Letters*?
3. While Screwtape allows that war is "entertaining" and provides "legitimate and pleasing refreshment for our myriads of toiling workers," (p. 18) he fears that "if we are not careful, we shall see thousands turning in this tribulation to the Enemy, while tens of thousands who do not go so far will nevertheless have their attentions diverted from themselves to causes which they believe to be higher than the self" (p. 19). Why would war have this effect? How does war alter human consciousness in a way unfavorable to temptation?
4. In describing the differences in how God and the Devil view men, Screwtape says: "We want cattle who can finally become food; He wants servants who can finally become sons" (p. 30). What is it about God's relationship to man that Screwtape finds so unfathomable?

5. Why is Screwtape so pleased when the patient becomes friends with a group of people who are "rich, smart, superficially intellectual, and brightly skeptical about everything in the world"? (p. 37). What influence does Screwtape hope they will have on him? Why should their "flippancy" build up an "armor-plating" against God? In what ways does Lewis merge theology and social satire in this and other passages throughout *The Screwtape Letters*?
6. Screwtape assures Wormwood that although some ancient writers, such as Boethius, might reveal powerful secrets to humans, they have been rendered powerless by "the Historical Point of View," which regards such writers not as sources of truth but merely as objects of scholarly speculation. "To regard the ancient writer as a possible source of knowledge—to anticipate that what he said could possibly modify your thoughts or your behavior—this would be regarded as unutterably simple-minded" (p. 108). Why would Screwtape delight in this situation? How does this view of reading parallel post-modern approaches to literature? Where else does Screwtape encourage Wormwood to persuade humans that truth is irrelevant?
7. The sub-plot of *The Screwtape Letters* turns on Screwtape's relationship with his nephew Wormwood, the apprentice tempter and demonic understudy in charge of carrying out Screwtape's instructions. How do Screwtape and Wormwood regard each other? How does their relationship change over the course of the book? In what ways does their relationship offer an inverted reflection of God's relationship to man? What is Lewis suggesting by having the story end with Screwtape preparing to devour a member of his own family?
8. In discussing time, change, and pleasure, Screwtape asserts that "just as we pick out and exaggerate the pleasure of eating to produce gluttony, so we pick out this natural pleasantness of change and twist it into a demand for absolute novelty" (p. 98). Why is the demand for novelty necessarily destructive? What natural balance does such a demand disrupt? In what areas do you find this insistence on change, or overvaluation of the new, operating today?
9. Love is an important theme in *The Screwtape Letters*. Describing the human idea of love and marriage, Screwtape tells Wormwood: "They regard the intention of loyalty to a partnership for mutual help, for the preservation of chastity, and for the transmission of life as something lower than a storm of emotion" (p. 72). Screwtape is also confounded by God's love for man, which he grants as real but irrational. What is Lewis saying, in the book as a whole, about human and divine love?
10. Over the course of *The Screwtape Letters*, the state of the patient's soul fluctuates as he experiences a conversion, doubt, dangerous friendships, war, love, and finally, in death, oneness with God. What major strategies does Screwtape use to tempt the patient into the Devil's camp? Why do these temptations fail? In what ways can the patient be seen as an everyman?
11. In spite the patient's triumph over temptation, his glorious entrance to Heaven—"the degradation of it!—that this thing of earth and slime could stand upright and converse with spirits" (p.122)—Screwtape does not lose faith in his own cause. Why do you think Lewis chose to end the book in this ambiguous light? What warning is implied in the book's ending? In what ways does *The Screwtape Letters* speak to contemporary moral and spiritual issues both within and outside of the Christian Church?
- (Questions issued by publisher.)

