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Gardens of Eden

SINS WHITE PEOPLE LIKE:

A blog-era look at C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*

“I HAVE no intention of explaining how the correspondence which I now offer to the public fell into my hands” (Lewis, 9)

C.S. Lewis begins his book bluntly, but it’s necessary for the game he soon asks the reader to play with him; Lewis is ready to pretend that the contents are entirely real. Much like a play (and *Screwtape* has indeed successfully been adapted for the theater many times¹), the book invites us to suspend disbelief. *The Screwtape Letters* was published as a book in 1943, and dedicated to Lewis’ friend J.R.R. Tolkien. It is a satire, written as an series of letters of correspondence between an experienced “tempter” named Screwtape and his young, inexperienced Nephew Wormwood, who is engaged in the work of tempting a human being, referred to only as “the patient,” into damnation. Here we find Lewis’ first achievement—he has managed to create a developed cast for his novel while avoiding the descriptions and exposition that would shatter the underlying idea of us “listening in” on a “real” casual exchange in the world of demons. Screwtape is easy for us to imagine; every letter is written from his perspective, and so his pervasive voice allows us to become very familiar with this cruel, calculating, sinister and insightful creature. But I found Wormwood equally vividly imaginable; the missing half of this correspondence is easy for us to complete in our minds thanks to Lewis’ excellent control of the epistolary style. It is not long before an image of a bumbling, sniveling

¹ "About The Screwtape Letters." FPA Theatre - Screwtape Letters. Web. 11 Jan. 2011. <<http://www.screwtapeonstage.com/about>>.

Wormwood appears to us, though Screwtape mocks the way we infantilize demons as “men in red tights” when he suggests that Wormwood abuse this misconception to avoid detection.

This instruction for misdirection is a sample of the bulk of the content of the book. Screwtape gives a constant stream of advice for how best to corrupt a human away from God, referred to by Screwtape only as “the Enemy,” and toward waiting mouths of demons—through his letters, Screwtape reveals that the damned souls of humans form the diet of hell’s inhabitants; the more sinful, the more delicious. This narration of scheming is by itself enough to keep me entertained. Lewis exhibits a fantastic streak of dark humor that surprised me as a fan of his other works, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Screwtape is wickedly funny in his malicious joy, telling Wormwood that he should “Keep everything hazy in [the patient’s] mind now, and you will have all eternity wherein to amuse yourself by producing in him the peculiar kind of clarity which Hell affords” (17). Equally entertaining are his prescriptions for endless machinations against the hapless unnamed man. In one such case, Screwtape tells of his successful derailment of a patient’s religious epiphany by suggesting the issue was “much too important to tackle at the end of a morning” and sending him off to lunch instead (13). In another, while instructing Wormwood on how to properly exploit a man’s sexuality, Screwtape describes the methods used as “not only efficient, but delightful” (105). Lewis has created a character that is absolutely conniving, has the highest distaste for human beings, and demonstrates both these traits with an irresistible sort of subdued glee and malice. In addition to Lust, Lewis brings us material on Gluttony, Pride, Humility, Hypocrisy, and many more of our more “charming” sins, each bringing forth another brilliant subtle plan from Screwtape.

More than just being entertaining, however, these letters taken together form an interesting dialogue on the nature of temptation. Immediately, it appeals to a popular visualization of the process—an angel on one shoulder, a demon on the other, constantly at war with each other over a mortal soul. Lewis alludes to this idea of argument early in the book when Screwtape complains that “one can never *quite* overhear” “the Enemy’s” counter-arguments (13). But more interesting than the “who” of temptation is Lewis’ depiction of the act itself. Instead of a sudden impulse towards great evil or sin, Screwtape advises that “The safest road to hell is the gradual one -- the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.” Temptation here comes from a constant string of whispered betrayal, dragging a man slowly but surely towards his weaknesses and failings. But are humans inherently weak failures? Is it the cost of Adam and Eve’s “original sin” that we should be so backwards and hopeless? Screwtape certainly doesn’t have a high opinion of us (at his kindest, he has a tendency to refer to us with such pet names as “things of earth and slime” (158)), but his advice and in fact the whole system that he is a part of suggests that we do indeed need to be coerced into sin and damnation. More so, the manner of our downfall comes in the same way as Eve’s; did Satan not act as Eve’s own Wormwood, guiding her astray? For both “the patient” and Eve, doesn’t temptation come not from an act of great inherent evil but rather from a manipulation towards little crime? And now that we have been exiled from the Garden of Eden, now that we have the knowledge of good and evil, and have been marked by sin, why do we still need to be tempted? Why does God even allow us to be tempted? Screwtape's tirades against “The Enemy’s” goals and tactics give Lewis a chance to characterize and offer explanation for the choices of God, turning a collection of letters between two demons

into a rumination and even defense of the Christian faith, the exploration of which at least is certainly a goal of the author. Apart from these direct accounts on God's "behalf," the entire book, as a satire, functions as a sort of reverse-psychology approach to religious teaching; I find this much more effective towards the goal of ruminating on religious thought, as presenting situations from the opposite view is more unconventional and thought-provoking, whereas "The Enemy's motivations" are often familiar in perspective and content. Lewis tackles these and other issues of religion, and addresses many ideas and arguments within Christian thought, making this an excellent book for any Christian or religious person looking to probe their faith.

I however, am not religious, nor do I have much of a background in religion. So why do I enjoy this book so much? It is because, while dated in some of its references, this book appeals to me in the same way as a very modern piece of literature.

The Screwtape Letters is written in short bursts, addressing one or at most two at a time. While not common perhaps for a book, much of the content generated on the internet today takes similar form. Blogs, for instance, tend to consist of collections of a person's thoughts on single topics or events in their life, or in our culture. *Stuff White People Like* is one such online blog-turned-book by the author Christian Lander. In it, Lander satirically introduces people to "White Culture" by introducing readers to what are apparently "White people's" favorite things, such as "Scarves," "Hummus," "Living by the water" and "Threatening to move to Canada". The brilliance of this series is that it offers not simple humor of observation (e.g. "what's the deal with airline food") but goes one step further. The entries mock the underlying ridiculousness or foolishness of certain trends, actions, or policies. Take this entry on "Awareness" for example:

An interesting fact about white people is that they firmly believe that all of the world's problems can be solved through "awareness." Meaning the process of

making other people aware of problems, and then magically someone else like the government will fix it. This belief allows them to feel that sweet self-satisfaction without actually having to solve anything or face any difficult challenges².

While not universally true (a blog/book that refuses so strongly to take itself seriously is certainly not pretending to be scientific fact), many will find a pang of the familiar in this. But it is beyond the simple laugh of recognition, saying “that’s so true” ; it is almost *too* true. It is a series that is funny but unsettlingly accurate.

The Screwtape Letters succeeds in similar ways, bringing sharp self-awareness, and it is here that I think the true merit of the book lies. Regardless of my religious background, I can relate when Screwtape describes how to induce “domestic hatred” :

domestic hatred usually expresses itself by saying things which would appear quite harmless on paper . . . but in such a voice, or at such a moment, that they are not far short of a blow in the face. . . Your patient must demand that all his own utterances are to be taken at their face value and judged simply on the actual words, while at the same time judging all his mother's utterances with the fullest and most oversensitive interpretation of the tone and the context and the suspected intention. . . You know the kind of thing: "I simply ask her what time dinner will be and she flies into a temper". . . you have the delightful situation of a human saying things with the express purpose of offending and yet having a grievance when offense is taken (23).

Not only can I recognize this, but I feel implicated by it. These are my failings, my faults, my own lack of self-awareness, put before me. Lewis has a remarkable gift of becoming a bystander to human interactions, and what he sees is funny, sad, absurd and unnerving, but above all, human. It’s this overwhelming “humanity,” presented from an outsiders perspective, this mirror amongst the comedy, that makes both *Screwtape* and *Things White People Like* so satisfying and so devastating. But Christian Lander’s blog claims to cover only “White People,”

² "#18 Awareness « Stuff White People Like." Stuff White People Like. 23 Jan. 2008. Web. 11 Jan. 2011. <<http://stuffwhitepeoplelike.com/2008/01/23/18-awareness/>>.

and is really only written for and about certain demographics. Even if propelled by Christian belief, Lewis' novel takes the much more ambitious subject of every human, and achieves something remarkable. *The Screwtape Letters* is like a garden filled with shrines to all of our little moments of foolishness and hypocrisy. It's the painful moment of self-recognition behind the laughter. It's *too* true. And it's always worth a read.

References

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