C.S. LEWIS' THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS. THE NOVEL AND ITS DRAMATIZATION

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Abstract: The history of literature shows that the text is almost always adaptable to stage. A perfect example in this sense is the epistolary novel. Its form needs next to no adaptation when rendered on stage. The following article focuses on C.S. Lewis' famous epistolary novel, The Screwtape Letters, on its belletristic qualities and the features that are ideal instruments for a theatrical adaptation.

Keywords: novel, epistolary, stage, theatrical, adaptation

A look into the far-reaching gulf of the novelesque and one will effortlessly notice that, more often than not, it goes hand in hand with dramatization. In other words, it is fair to say that staging the contents of famous novels is a quite frequent and, in most cases, blissful phenomenon. From Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, adapted to the stage by Owen Davis and more recently John Harbison, to Nathanial Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Vladimir Nabokov's infamous *Lolita*, which was adapted to four stage-plays, to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, poetically staged numerous times around theatres in the United States, the list can continue for days on end.

A literary genre in particular is very suitable for rendering on stage, for obvious reasons regarding form and language, in particular: the epistolary novel. Quite used in modern fiction, the epistolary novel's uniqueness lies within its form which is letter-like. Its roots stem from the classic epistle, based on oratorical rules and rhetoric used by such classics as Homer and Ovid, through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and until today. The epistolary novel per se appeared somewhere around the middle of the 16th century with Juan de Segura's *Processo de cartas* in 1548. One of the most renowned of its kind is Honoré d'Urfé's *L'Astrée,* a five-volume novel based on hundreds of misplaced, stolen and lost letters. The reason for the growing fame of the epistolary novel in the 16th century is quite straight-forward: letters were an easy, and sometimes the only way to communicate once literacy became more common. What is more, they were history's most used communicational instrument, especially when we think of romances. But one of the most intriguing raison d'être of this genre is that letters are an endless source of inspiration for the novelist: they create intrigue, an opportunity of interpretation and misinterpretation, are easy to follow, keep the reader in suspense and are the perfect tool for achieving tension once read by the wrong person.

In the 17th century letters were far from being a private affair. Rather than representing an intimate exchange of information between two persons, letters were written with the purpose of being read by groups in high-brow salons of the day. Apparently, women within the French aristocracy used to write letters to their relatives and friends hoping that they would mingle in upper-class circles and thus they would increase their status. The French trend soon came to England, where, in 1741, Samuel Richardson published the book entitled *The Complete Letter Writer*, a guiding reference in writing letter. This must have been the outburst that lead to the creation of his famous epistolary novel *Pamela.* Aside from themes related to love, epistolary novels treated more general topics, in a familiar style of a written conversation between friends. And it is here that we come closer to the actual basis of this article, namely C.S. Lewis' novel *The Screwtape Letters*, an epistolary novel by

excellence, composed of several letters on the most diverse subjects, ranging from church and prayer, to family, war, politics, pain and pleasure, etc.

Both the 18th and 19th century witnessed the rise of the epistolary novel, with Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (1779) the most prominent of its century. This genre had the power to touch upon any given subject in a light, familiar tone, making use of the first person narrative and thus seeming more personal and true to life, creating a style that is very much appealing to the readers. The individual approach, the individual perspective and argument are the essence of the epistolary novel. This genre must not be taken merely at its face value, as, behind the apparent simplicity of form, there is a core that tackles the great issues of human existence in a very free and personal manner. In comparison to the extensive and bulky French epistolary novels, *The Screwtape Letters* is concentrated, but nevertheless highly impactful both in content and in style. It is the lack of formal restrictions in particular that re-stirred the interest of 20th century writers and critics in the epistolary novel. Even Jaques Derrida used the epistolary style in his *Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond,* employing a direct, personal voice. And he was not the only great thinker to have made use of this genre. But what is particularly striking about C.S. Lewis' novel is the dichotomy produced by the existence of a very personal and outspoken, witty voice that cannot be trusted entirely, given the fact that the narrator is, in the end, a devil.

It is, we think, crucial to the understanding of the novel that it was published in a weekly religious newspaper named *The Guardian.* The religious dimension is of tremendous importance here, as the entire novel is composed of thirty one letters written by Screwtape, an experienced devil to his nephew and apprentice, Wormwood. The letters are pieces of advice on how to lure and doom a human soul, and witty, humorous, and enticing they are indeed. The outcome of the novel published in a religious weekly is what one would expect it to be: the two devils lose their subject's soul, who dies at peace during a bombing attack, his soul saved by his faith. The letters are a narrative masterpiece which highlights the opposing view of Christianity, the voice that readers are less accustomed to hear, the other side of the battle between good and evil. The writer's art also lies within his ability to still maintaining the supreme Christian view of salvation through faith and the church. The witty language is guaranteed to attract the reader through its linguistic irony: Satan is referred to as the "Father Below", God is the "Enemy", and the entire devilish ensemble is gathered in the "Lowerarchy". The letters are filled with deep human and psychological insight and understanding, as well as philosophical and historical ideologies, science, reason, spirituality, existence and non-existence.

In his essay *The Screwtape Letters as Epistolary Fiction* Charles A. Huttar observes that "the book proceeds in what has struck some readers as a rather rambling, even disorganized, fashion, so far as the treatment of topics is concerned, with some major topics recurring more than once"[1], whereas the middle section, he points out, is more organized in thematic, dealing with human and worldly temptation and the devil. The themes circulated in Screwtape's letters are far from simplistic: war, pain and pleasure, eternity, love, sexuality, and marriage, the corruption of virtues, prayer, the confusion of falsehood and truth. Undoubtedly such themes of major interest and significance need to be re-addressed and reanalyzed. Moreover, this apparent unorganized return to certain topics makes the correspondence seem even more authentic and true to life. But, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the artistic quality of the novel lies within the outlining of the main, and sole character that the reader can identify directly: Screwtape, as well as the two characters that are

[1] Charles A., Huttar, "The Screwtape Letters as Epistolary Fiction", *Journal of Inklings Studies* 6 (1) (2016): 87-125

characterized indirectly through Screwtape's depictions. What is more, the reader can only see one side of the correspondence, Screwtape's letters of advice and response to Wormwood's accounts on the ongoing process of their "patient's" damnation. These are to be taken with a grain of salt, as mentioned from the very preface of the novel: "Readers are advised to remember that the devil is a liar. Not everything that Screwtape says should be assumed to be true even from his own angel."[2]

The one-sided, monologue-like structure of the novel is one of the most appropriate of its features that makes it so well adaptable to stage. The artistry and wit of the language, infused with significant doses of sly humor and an almost academic knowledge of the human soul, infuses the rendition from novel to stage with appeal. As Jean Alter puts it in "From Text to Performance" when speaking of theatrality: "A semiotic approach to theatre as a total artistic experience identifies the presence of two categories of signs, corresponding to its two pragmatic media of expression: text and performance."[3] In other words, the rendition from text to stage offers a two-dimensional way of expression: the textual, linguistic one, and the theatrical, almost meta-linguistic one on stage. The actual transition from the novelesque to dramatization requires not only a deep understanding of the original text, but the text itself becomes the medium and the tool of a smooth transition from page to stage. Both internalizing a novel and a play are cultural practices that are quite often interwoven, "in other words, we explore text-understanding in-the-making"[4]. *The Screwtape Letters'* construction enables internalizing the text by actually participating in its construction: reading the letters is a way of actually participating in the creation of the text – in a similar fashion to the actor's direct experience of participating at the unfolding of the novelesque on a stage and its transformation into drama.

Similarly to how the reader experiences the construction of the narrative by reading the letters, the dramatization of *The Screwtape Letters* on stage is a lived experience that is perceived even more authentically in the theatre hall. This epistolary novel in particular has the innate quality of expressing emotions directly, thus being the ideal material to work with on stage. Reading Screwtape's letters of instruction and advice is a way of co-experiencing the narrative and its unfolding, which is precisely what the theatre play enables best: a direct co-experience between character, actor and spectator. Even if the readers/spectators experience the "patient's" trajectory and Wormwood's trials indirectly through Screwtape's voice, being part of the theatrical moment and witnessing Screwtape's monologues on stage transform the experience into something significantly more personal and direct. There are three main branches to consider when adapting a novel to the stage: the subject, the language, and the form. In the case of C.S. Lewis' novel all three components are suitable for a performance on stage. As we have mentioned before the general setting of the novel: an elderly devil's instructions and his advice to his young apprentice on how to condemn a human soul, as well as the larger, timeless theme of Evil against Good, are both intriguing to readership and audience. Linguistically speaking irony is the strong point. In fact, the entire novel is a satire from its very onset. Thus, the play is an intriguing challenge to the human beliefs about eternal damnation, Heaven and Hell. Since it satirizes everything from the Anglican and Catholic Churches, to unconvincing spiritual leaders, modernity of the time, as well as the morals of newspaper contributors – an obvious self-irony of Lewis's, it becomes a humorous yet introspective experience on stage. Lastly, and probably the most straight-forward reason for the effortless transition of *The Screwtape Letters* from text to stage is its

[2] C.S., Lewis, "*The Screwtape Letters",* on-line version available at: http://www.preachershelp.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/lewis-screwtape-letters.pdf

[3] Jean, Alter, "From Text to Performance. Semiotics of Theatrality", *Poetics Today,* 1981, vol. 2:3, 113-139

[4] Martin, Göthberg; Cecilia Björk; Asa, Mäkitalo, "From Drama Text to Stage Text: Transitions of Text Understanding in a Student Theatre Production", *Mind, Culture and Activity,* 2018, vol.25, issue 3

form. The first-person monologue-like texts of the letters are the ideal landscape for dramatization, an existing prerequisite, an instrument ready to use on stage. An illustrative example of such sharp language is the following excerpt:

In civilised life domestic hatred usually expresses itself by saying things which would appear quite harmless on paper (the words are not offensive) but in such a voice, or at such a moment, that they are not far short of a blow in the face. To keep this game up you and Glubose must see to it that each of these two fools has a sort of double standard. 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. She must be encouraged to do the same to him. Hence from every quarrel they can both go away convinced, or very nearly convinced, that they are quite innocent. You know the kind of thing: "I simply ask her what time dinner will be and she flies into a temper."Once this habit is well established you have the delightful situation of a human saying things with the express purpose of offending and yet having a grievance when offence is taken.[5]

The investigation of the inner mechanism of the devil's mind is supported by the text itself. The first person narrative voice, the structure of the epistolary novel that we have already tackled above, the direct manner of addressing the virtual interlocutor, all of these elements create a direct effect upon reader and spectator, establishing a straight-forwards sense of veracity of this apparently fictional devilish world, which transformed into an even more unswerving experience in the theatre hall. The unreliability of Screwtape's discourse allows for information to be processed gradually in both novel and play, making the reader/spectator active and direct part in the construction of the narrative/dramatization. The complex religious, psychological and social issues analyzed in *The Screwtape's Letters* and their representation on stage thus become subject of internalization and analysis by the spectator, without seeming overly sentimental or profound, due to the satirical tone the ideas are conveyed in. The technicality of Lewis's epistolary novel is also more than suitable for its transition to the stage, as the author is also the editor. In Charles Huttar's words: "Part of the action, stated or implied, is that the author is acting as editor and the reader as uninvolved observer, both imposing their presence on material that has a prior existence in its own right."[6]

An additional strong point of the text under discussion is its power to create a vivid picture of an imaginary, demonic universe in the reader/ spectator's active mind's eye: "The setting of The Screwtape Letters is a palimpsest that includes both the ordinary mundane world of London, presumably during World War II, and a different kind of otherworld: that same ordinary world, in its invisible aspect."[7] It is known for a fact that the experience in a theater hall is a much more direct one than that of simply reading a text. And this becomes evident in the letters of Screwtape, when the unknown workings of Heaven and Hell and spiritual death become visible to the spectator's imaginative eye:

Just think (and let it be the beginning of your agony) what he felt at that moment; as if a scab had fallen from an old sore, as if he were emerging from a hideous, shell-like tetter [skin disease], as if he shuffled off for good and all a defiled, wet, clinging garment. By Hell, it is misery enough to see them in their mortal days taking off dirtied and uncomfortable clothes and splashing in hot water and giving little grunts of pleasure—stretching their eased limbs. What, then, of this final stripping, this complete cleansing? The more one thinks about it, the worse it becomes. He got through so easily! No gradual misgivings, no doctor's

[5] C.S., Lewis, "*The Screwtape Letters",* on-line version available at: http://www.preachershelp.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/lewis-screwtape-letters.pdf, p. 8

[6] Charles A., Huttar, "The Screwtape Letters as Epistolary Fiction", *Journal of Inklings Studies* 6 (1) (2016):12

[7] Ibid.: 17

sentence, no nursing home, no operating theatre, no false hopes of life; sheer, instantaneous liberation.[8]

At the heart of *The Screwtape Letters* lies the question of which stories are told and who tells them. Perspective is key in any epistolary novel – it is composed in the spirit of rewriting, reinterpreting perspectives. Ironic and witty as Scewtape's perspective and linguistics might be, at its core it is a truly insightful view upon religious matters. Of course, it is through the same linguistic irony that C.S. Lewis sheds positive light upon Christianity, church and belief in general. The apparent one-sided view offered by the novel and play are thus surprisingly realistic. It comes to no surprise that the performance of *The Screwtape Letters* by the Fellowship of Performing Arts has been described as follows in the New York Times: "The devil has rarely been given his due more perceptively", nor that the Wallstreet Journal named it "wickedly witty". The theatrical adaptation of the novel into a ninety minute play was, without doubt, a highly inspired decision, since spirituality from a demon's point of view, in monologue/letter form, is a theme that remained of interest since Goethe's *Faust.* The enticement of human souls into the depths of the Infernal, as well as the question of morality confer the play the profoundness and depth that are perfectly balanced out by the humour of the main character's language and the setting. The language used contributes to the subjectivity of the overall perspective that must not be understood at superficial level.

Speaking of setting, the depiction of the infernal world as an officious establishment, an administrative office-like construction, where superintendents control their subordinates, organized in different departments and even an intelligence division that analyzes the files of humans, is an ironic play on the bureaucracy and control of modern society: "In a rough and ready way, of course, this question is decided for us by spirits far deeper down in the Lowerarchy than you and I."[9] The infernal world, which is usually unseen, becomes visible through Screwtape's vivid description, and the human world, which the viewers are accustomed to see, becomes a rather psychological and spiritual realm. But as ideal as the setting and language of the novel may appear, the theatrical adaptation of the novel, in the adaptation of Max McLean, apparently leaves space for further improvement, as Michael Billington puts it in his article published in The Guardian: "Given our theatre's reluctance to tackle religion, there is room for a version of The Screwtape Letters. There are also moments when the force of Lewis's language is felt. When Screwtape, referring to God and the devil says, "We are empty and would be filled, He is full and flows over" the antithesis strikes home. But, for the most part, the sinews of Lewis's thought are obscured by the flesh of theatrical rhetoric. I found myself craving more simplicity, directness and faith in the power of the word."[10]

All in all, Screwtape's unreliable and self-reflecting character is what makes this epistolary novel so well mouldable into a theatre play. C.S. Lewis himself states in the preface that the reader should keep in mind that "the devil is a liar", but it is precisely this trait that makes him such delightfully unpleasant a character on stage. Screwtape is so self-absorbed into his own devilish beliefs that he cannot fathom other measures than his own, that love might truly exist or that God would have any reason for using it, which is why his self-sufficiency and sightlessness makes him humorous and delightfully comical. He is

[8] C.S., Lewis, "*The Screwtape Letters",* on-line version available at: http://www.preachershelp.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/lewis-screwtape-letters.pdf, p. 63

[9] Ibidem, p. 41

[10] Michael, Billington, "The Screwtape Letters review – a hell of a disappointment", *The Guardian,* December 11, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/dec/11/the-screwtape-letters-park-theatre-london-review-cs-lewis

entitled "his Abysmal Sublimity Under Secretary"[11], title which he is quite proud of – an extremely pompous creature to whom humans are merely food. Still, it is this profound inability to show compassion that keeps the theatrical conversion of the novel from being overly dramatic, sentimental and profound. Lewis's mastery also consists of reshaping the traditional epistolary novel, which is at times highly sentimental and introspective, through the creation of a character that is, by definition, incapable of any kind of sentimentality. His irony makes the educational side of the text more bearable and authentic, but most importantly extremely elastic and adaptable to stage, thus creating a vivid, humorous, satirical theatrical experience.

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[11] C.S., Lewis, "*The Screwtape Letters",* on-line version available at: http://www.preachershelp.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/lewis-screwtape-letters.pdf, p. 46