

The Use of Stylistic Devices to Raise Religious Consciousness in C.S. Lewis' "The Screwtape Letters"

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Abstract

Consciousness of religion is brought to the minds of readers by unusual means in the use of stylistic devices which make the reader pause to reflect. This descriptive and discursive study of "Screwtape Letters" reveals that each of the 31 letters exhibited a number of stylistic devices; however, only those that ran throughout the novel, thus giving a wholesome cumulative effect despite the use of letters were studied. Thus, bildungsroman, characterisation, irony and eristic arguments amongst several other devices are noted. The implication that stylistic devices enables one bring to the consciousness, religious and moral instructions in ways otherwise not taught or preached is highlighted. This fact underscores the usefulness of the use of stylistic devices in corpus based studies; and thus the recommendation that they be employed for purposes of raising consciousness in other discourse types.

Key words: bildungsroman, characterization, irony and eristic

Introduction

Stylistic analysis examines how linguistics and rhetorics are used in writing and it tries to explain the choices of the devices made by an author. This study examines the ways C.S. Lewis has used linguistic and rhetoric strategies and tries to proffer suggestions to justify the use of such strategies to achieve his purpose of conveying the moral development of a young man whilst also conveying the thought and techniques used by the devil to sway him from the harmony of religion and church into the follies of the devil and ultimately into hell. The “Screwtape Letters” is an epistolary novel consisting of 31 letters each written by “Your affectionate uncle, Screwtape” to “My dear Wormwood.” As it turns out from the instructions he receives and the sanctions imposed on him, Woodworm is a junior pupil devil under the tutelage and supervision of Screwtape.

Davy and Crystal (1969) assert that there are different varieties of language in Christianity and identify the language of sermons as stylistically akin to the variety of language used in public speaking; the theological discourse stylistically akin to “learned descriptive or discursive narratives (such as History or Philosophy)...” Also, they identify the languages varieties of liturgy and Biblical translation. Babatunde (1998) identifies the rhetoric strategies used in persuasive Christian religious speeches. Lewis, in the Screwtape letters creates a novel category of discourse in Christian Religious understanding. The theme that runs through all 31 letters are the instruction (thus justifying the epistolary form of the novel) of a senior devil to a junior on ways of causing temptation to the believer thus causing the reader to become one on how temptation in the faith may occur.

The language used in Christian religious teaching is usually dogmatic and predictable in its approach. The norm of conveying the precepts of religion are usually either in the prohibition – ‘thou shall not...’ or in the affirmative – ‘thou shall...’ The author of “The Screwtape Letters”, in an effort to find a new way of conveying church doctrines and messages uses various stylistic devices for purposes of gripping the reader’s attention to demonstrate ways the devil tempts. In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis style reveals the employment of various stylistic devices that make their referents unfamiliar, causing the reader to pause and reflect. These devices are now identified and discussed below.

Crystal and Davy (1969) have asserted that the study of stylistic is actually the study of “...certain aspects of language variation...” Agu (2010) asserts that when one studies a piece of literary work, one is actually studying the style of the author.

Nagar, (2008) suggests that the purpose of literature as an art is to “make objects unfamiliar so that a renewed perception of them creates a fresh awareness in the reader, beyond the stale routines of automatised schemes.” The plethora of stylistic devices used has served to identify this novel as literature and distinguish it from other varieties of language of religion. It is apparent that the devices used do not serve merely ornamental purposes but achieve specific functions. Most notably they have been used to achieve the result of foregrounding or drawing attention and emphasis to what is written. The category of foregrounding used here is deviation. Deviation allows a writer of literature, in contrast to the everyday speaker, to deviate from rules, maxims, or conventions. The deviation may relate to language use, as well as literary traditions or expectations set up by the text itself. In this novel, the attention of the reader has been drawn to both the form of the text itself as well as to its content.

Methodology

The study is corpus based so the design is descriptive and discursive. Because the novel being analysed consist of 31 letters, each with a plethora of stylistic devices, the dominant devices used throughout the novel will be considered and effect of such devices discussed.

Bildungsroman Plot

The plot or story-line of a novel reveals the rising action, climax, falling action and resolution of the events in the novel. The plot in this novel is revealed as Bildungsroman. Lynch (1999) and Patel (2011) are agreed that a bildungsroman is a literary genre that shows the development to maturation of the protagonist in a novel. In this novel, the main thematic development reveals the long, gradual and difficult process of the transformational development of the central character "Patient" in his Christian life. In the course of the various letters, Lewis has embellished the plot through the use of various stylistic devices which will be discussed in the course of the analysis.

In the novel, the development of Patient is revealed from being a person who becomes a Christian "...I note with displeasure that your Patient has become a Christian..." (Letter 2 page 5); through the various temptations to which he is subjected by the devil Wormwood acting on the instructions of Screwtape as in the following instances: "...keep the Patient from the serious intention of praying altogether." (Letter 4 page 15), "...you can make him waste his time and say these are very small sins..." Also, his development through sexual temptations are exposed "Even under Slubgob, you must have learnt at college the routine techniques of sexual temptation..." (Letter 18, page 93) Also,

"...you may have learnt about fornication and solitary vice, but there are more indirect methods of using a man's sexuality to his undoing... they are not only efficient, but delightful. The unhappiness produced is a very lasting and exquisite kind..." (Letter 18, page 109).

"Success here depends on confusing him." Letter 24, page 132

Eventually, Patient does fall in love, but it turns out to be an anticlimax for the devil who has worked so hard to lead Patient astray; as it turns out, he falls in love with a good Christian girl who will most likely further entrench him in church activities and consolidate his Christian belief.

"So! Your man is in love-and in the worse kind he could possibly have fallen into...I have looked up this girl's dossier and I am horrified at what I find. Not only a Christian bit such a Christian-a vile, sneaking, simpering, demure, monosyllabic, mouselike, watery, insignificant, virginal, bread-and-butter miss."

The situational ironies in the above examples are palpable. Situational irony is the discrepancy between expectation and reality. Known conventions and traditions are reversed so that good, for instance, becomes evil etc. Situational irony can be inferred not by the words themselves, but by the situation and context in which they are placed. So, for instance, contrary to what is normally expected of a situation where a man falls in love with a good Christian girl, (conventionally considered a good thing,) Screwtape considers it to be "...the worst kind..." and indeed, it is for his purpose, which is for distraction and sin. Also, in the text above, the use of asyndeton in the adjectives describing the girl accentuates the build-up of the frustration of Screwtape. This effect is achieved by the unpremeditated and spontaneous impression that the lack of use of conjunctions in the listing of the adjectives convey.

As far as bildungsroman go, the reader gets a sense that Patient has finally discovered himself as he accepts and inculcates the values of the Christian faith

"Or do you not realise that the patient's death at this moment, is precisely what we want to avoid? He has escaped the worldly friends with whom you tried to entangle him; he has 'fallen in love' with a very Christian woman and is temporarily immune from your attacks on his chastity; and the various methods of corrupting his spiritual life which we have been trying are

so far unsuccessful...and daily increasing in conscious dependence on the enemy, he will almost certainly be lost to us if he is killed tonight."

(Letter 28, page 153)

The reader learns that even though there is an on-going war, Screwtape does not want Patient dead on that day, because in his sound religious state, if he died, he would attain heaven and that would mean a loss for them for failure to lure on more soul into hell. Also from the above, situational irony is again realised.

Unfortunately, in letter 31, Patient dies. The implications of this are two-fold. First, for the bildungsroman plot, it is unusual to see the protagonist die; but rather, he goes on to achieve self discovery and even in some instances, goes on to guide others to success. Secondly, the death of patient causes much dismay of Screwtape who laments:

"How mistakenly now that all is lost you come whimpering... You have let a soul pass through your fingers. The howl of Sharpened famine for that loss re-echoes at this moment through all the levels of the Kingdom of Noise down to the very Throne itself..." (Letter 31 page171) "...Defeated, out-manoeuvred fool!"

(page 172)

Here, use of two metaphors is apparent: "...the howl of sharpened famine..." and "...all the levels of the kingdom of noise down to the very throne..." The former is used to describe the loud, moaning cry caused by the intense, keen loss of a soul; and that loss gives the impression that there is a famine-no soul for hell to feed on. Thus a comparison to famine is achieved. The latter metaphor describes hell as a place of several levels all full of noise. That the "Throne" is at the very bottom is ironic since the conventional expectation is that a throne is at the top. The cumulative effect of the use of these metaphors is that their referents are made vivid to the reader. The uses of irony, asyndeton and metaphor have caused the reader to pause and think about the content as they are unravelled. The devices achieve the effect of foregrounding.

The device of characterization

Characterization is the device used to reveal, develop and portray the characters in the novel to the reader.

The characterization of Wormwood

The first indication of the character of Wormwood, the recipient of the letters comes across when Screwtape, the writer of the letter writes as shown in the following examples:

Example 1

"Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church." (Letter 1, page 1). (Underlining supplied by research)

Example 2

"Do remember you are there to fuddle him. From the way some of you young fiends talk, anyone would suppose it was your job to teach! (Letter 1, page 4).

These examples utilize the specific lexemes underlined to characterise Wormwood as a devil (fiend) whose function is to confuse (fuddle) persons and to keep from the Church. Another glimpse into the character of Wormwood is supplied in the following:

Example 3

"Remember, he is not, like you, a pure spirit. Never having been a human...you don't realise..." (Letter 1, page 2)

This gives us insights that Wormwood is not human but a “pure spirit.”

Example 4

“So pray bestir yourself and send this fool the round of the neighbouring churches as soon as possible. Your record up to date has not given us much satisfaction.” (Letter 16, page 82)

The sense from the above is that Wormwood’s performance in keeping persons from the church is inadequate and disappointing and as such, he should motivate himself and get active.

Example 5

“and doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness...” (Letter 12, page 60)

Above, the specific lexeme ‘tempter’ is used to refer to Wormwood, and the fact of being anxious to report “spectacular wickedness” both conjure to reveal Wormwood’s true nature as a devil full of evil and.

Furthermore, the following throws more light on the character of Wormwood:

“It is a little disappointing to expect a detailed report on your work and to receive such a vague rhapsody as your last letter.” (letter 5, page 21)

“I haven’t yet got a report from you on young women in the neighbourhood. I should like it at once...” (Letter 20, page 105)

“Give me without fail in your next letter a full account of the patient’s reaction to the war, so that we can consider whether you are likely to do more good by making him an extreme patriot or an ardent pacifist...” (Letter 5, page 22)

“That is not the sort of thing that a nephew should write to his uncle-nor a junior tempter to the under-secretary of a department. It also reveals an unpleasant desire to shift responsibility; you must learn to pay for your own blunders.” (Letter 4, page 15)

From the above, the reader gets the impression that Wormwood reports to, takes orders from, and is disciplined by Screwtape. Also, the true identities and the extent of the relationship between Wormwood and Screwtape disclosed as Wormwood being the nephew and junior tempter and Screwtape the uncle or “under-secretary of the department”. In other words, Screwtape is Wormwood’s boss.

The characterization of Patient

Patient is revealed as a man who has just embraced Christianity, and because he was still not strong in his belief, a ready target to be tempted to leave the church. The following excerpts are suggestive of this:

“I note with grave displeasure that your patient has become a Christian.” (Letter 2, page 5)

“Work hard then on the disappointment or anticlimax...coming to the patient during his first few weeks as a churchman...And therein lies our opportunity...to tempt.” (Letter 2, page 7)

Furthermore, the various ways by which patient is to be tempted are suggested by Screwtape to Wormwood who has the duty of tempting Patient. Thus Wormwood is to:

“Keep his mind off the most elementary duties by directing it to. Aggravate that most useful human characteristic, the horror and neglect of the obvious.” (Letter 3, page 12-13)

“Yes. A period of sexual temptation is an excellent time for working in a subordinate attack on the patient’s peevisness...But here, as in everything else, the way must be prepared for your moral assault by darkening his intellect.” (Letter 21, page 111)

“So! Your man is in love-and in the worse kind he could possibly have fallen into-and with a girl who does not even appear in the report you sent to me...I have looked up this girl’s dossier and I am horrified at what I find. Not only a Christian but such a Christian... (Letter 22, page117)

“Through this girl and her disgusting family, the patient is now getting to know more Christians...” (Letter 23, page 123)

The characterization of Screwtape

Aside from the insights that a reader already has about Screwtape from his relationship with Wormwood, he specifically reveals his own character of being a “tempter” as shown in the examples below:

“I once had a patient, a sound atheist, who used to read in the British Museum. One day, as he sat reading, I saw a train of thought in his mind beginning to go the wrong way. The Enemy of course was at his elbow in a moment. Before I knew where I was I saw my twenty years work beginning to totter...I struck instantly at the part of the man which I had best under my control and suggested that it was just about time he had some lunch... the patient brightened up considerably;... once he was in the street the battle was won...He is now safe in Our Father’s house.” (Letter 1, pages 2-4)

From the above, we can discern that Lewis uses ellipsis to omit some vital words as well as the use of irony to state the opposite of what he truly means. For instance, what exactly the ‘train of thought’ was and the ‘wrong way’ it was going are omitted or elided by use of the device of ellipsis. However, since it was Screwtape’s (a tempter) opinion that the “train of thought” was going the “wrong way”, it can be deduced that the thoughts were going the right way towards the thought of God. And since the Patient at that time was thinking about God (“The Enemy”), this illustrates Lewis’ use of irony. His use of figurative device is also illustrated by God was “at his elbow in a moment”. Screwtape was distressed and had to react immediately.

The strategy used by the devil Screwtape at this particular instance was to divert Patient’s attention from the thoughts of God to the more trivial thought of food. Patient succumbed to the temptation and from Screwtape’s perspective, “the battle (between Screwtape and God) for the soul of the Patient was won” by him Screwtape.

Again, the use of irony is illustrated in the Patient being “safe in Our Father’s house”. Since it is Screwtape’s father’s house, it can only mean the devil’s abode. “Safe” in the devil’s abode can only ironically refer to being doomed.

The characterization of Our Father Below

In addition to the insights that the reader gets from the above about the Character of “Our Father Below”, the expression is an oxymoron as it combines two words that seem to be the opposite of each other (Nagar, 2008). The conventional expectation is that father, being a head, is above and thus to refer to father as below is an oxymoron. The following also makes the character of “Our Father Below more graphic:

“... How thankful we should be that ever since Our Father entered Hell-though longer ago than humans, reckoning in light years...” (Letter 22, page120)

From the above, the reader knows that “Our Father” is in hell and has been there for light years. He is the personification of the devil himself.

The characterization of Enemy

The character of Enemy is discerned from the use of implication and irony as has been shown above and can further be depicted below:

“Whenever they are attending to the Enemy Himself we are defeated, but there are ways of preventing them from doing so.” (Letter 4, page 16)

From this, it can be deduced that what it is that causes defeat for the devil is the consciousness of God; therefore “the Enemy” can only be referent for God.

“He has not been anything like long enough with the Enemy to have any real humility yet.” (Letter 2, page 8)

From this, it is implied that being with ‘the Enemy’ long enough teaches one humility. Thus God is revealed as ‘He’ in whose presence, humility and virtues are acquired.

“The Enemy presumably made the counter-suggestion (you know how one can never quite overhear what He says to them?) that this was more important than lunch...” (Letter 1, page 2)

This serves as an admission by Screwtape that God is Superior as he cannot entirely (quite) know the communion between God and His creatures. Screwtape also refers to “the Enemy” with reverence as illustrate below:

“You must have often wondered why the Enemy does not make more use of His power to be sensibly present to human souls in any degree He chooses at any moment...” (Letter 8, page 39)

Here, it is conveyed to us that the ‘Enemy’ is powerful and that he is capable of using this power to influence the mind of humans as He pleases though He doesn’t.

“Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are in a sense, on the Enemy’s ground” (Letter 9, page 44)

“For we must never forget what is the most repellent and inexplicable trait in our Enemy; He really loves the hairless bipeds He has created and always gives back to them with His right hand what He has taken away with His left” (Letter 14, page 72)(Italics that of the author’s)

It can be said that the expressions “our father below” and ‘Enemy’ have been neologised as they are existing phrase and word respectively, to which new meanings have been given by context, and thereby constitute instances of deviation. Nagar (2008) points out that deviation itself is considered as an instance of strategy of foregrounding.

Point of view

In this novel, the author Lewis uses the stylistic device, point of view to relate the happenings in the novel. Adamu (1998) asserts that this device relates to “ the way stories get told in a fictional work.” In this novel, Lewis uses Screwtape, the writer of all 31 letters as the narrator of the accounts given in the novel. Thus, the readers gain their insights of, and view the characters and actions in the novel through the point of view and voice of Screwtape who is also a character in the novel. While narrating accounts in the novel, Screwtape refers to himself as ‘I’. This gives the indication that it is the first person omniscient point of view that is used and it implies the authorial involvement of the narrator. Furthermore, the words of Wormwood, the thoughts of Patient and other characters in the novel, are conveyed through Screwtape and the reader never hears from Wormwood or Patient directly as illustrated in the following examples:

“I note what you say about guiding your Patient’s reading and taking care that he sees a great deal of his materialist friend...” (Letter 1, page 1)

“I am delighted to hear that your Patient’s age and profession makes it possible...that he will be called up for military service.” (Letter 6, page 25)

“You mentioned casually in your last letter that the patient has continued to attend one church...” (Letter 16, page 81)

“...you come whimpering to ask me whether the terms of affection in which I address you meant nothing from the beginning.” (Letter 31, page 171)

From all of the above examples, Wormwood’s thoughts and words are conveyed to reader through Screwtape and Wormwood is never heard from directly. Also, the reader gathers that Patient is reading materialistic items and that he is probably in his late teens or early twenties as this is the normal age range for being drafted into the army. The effect of the use of first person omniscient narration as used here is that it is Screwtape’s view point that creates how Wormwood, and indeed, the other characters and actions are experienced by the reader. Also, it is apparent that as first person narrator, Screwtape is a participant in the accounts he gives and he is actively involved as the trend unfolds.

Eristic Argument

The epistolary nature of this novel as a means of instruction is reinforced by the use of eristic argument. The instructions portray the modus operandi of the devil, relying considerably on ironies. Eristic argument is the “...skill and practice of debating especially in a manner involving subtle logic and specious argument.” Thus, a host of reasonings are observed however, the reasonings are based on either actually false or deceptively attractive premises. The excerpts below illustrate the eristic arguments designed to sway the believer (here typified by Patient) from his faith. The whole essence of the eristic arguments is to cause ignorance and misdirection:

“It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out. (Letter 4, page 16)

“We want the Church to be small not only that fewer men may know the Enemy but also that those who do may acquire the intensity...of a secret society or a clique” (Letter 7, page 33)

“...you must ask what use the Enemy wants to make of it, and then do the opposite...” (Letter 8, page 38)

“Everything has to be twisted before it is any use to us. Nothing is naturally on our side...” (Letter 22, page 118-119) (Italics provided by the author)

“...it will be quite impossible to remove spirituality from his life. Very well then; we must corrupt it. No doubt you have often practised transforming yourself into an angel of light as a parade-ground exercise. Now is the time to do it in the face of the Enemy.” (Letter 23, page 123) (Italics that of the author)

“But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy. It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing.” (Letter 12, page 61)

“Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one- the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.” (Letter 12, page 61)

The reasonings in the above examples are well articulated and are indeed attractive albeit deceptive. The well thought out instructions are for the devil to suggest and inculcate

into the minds of believers the opposite of conventional truths. The arguments also serve to mock or treat the conventional truths with scorn.

Perspective

Perspective is the situation whereby different characters, exhibit differences in interpreting the same situation. Most of the letters exhibit varying degrees of perspective in the sense that while Wormwood is excited or pleased with something, Screwtape immediately expresses his displeasure or dissatisfaction of the same thing. This device as used in this novel serves to show the conventional truths verse the devils falsehood. There are some instances where Wormwood and Screwtape perceive the same incident differently as shown in the example below.

Example 1:

“I note what you say about guiding your patient’s reading and taking care that he sees a good deal of his materialist friend. But are you not being a trifle naive? It sounds as if you supposed that argument was the best way to keep him out of the Enemy’s clutches... Jargon, not argument is your best ally in keeping him from the Church. Don’t waste your time trying to make him think that materialism is true! (Letter1, page 1-2)

From this example, while Wormwood pursues a course which he considers good, Screwtape thinks it is naive. Screwtape, informs readers about what Wormwood, thinks, namely, that materialism and argument are the ways to lead the patient astray. Screwtape’s perspective of this same situation is that it is not materialism in itself that will serve their purpose, but materialism that it confused to be strength and courage; and neither would argument be effective for their purpose, but rather, it is jargon that will serve their purpose.

Conclusion

Lewis has moved from the use of bare language form to embellished language form to convey the message contained in his novel. This is in sync with English for Specific Purposes (ESP) which tends to explain other uses of language than that contemplated by the scope of general English. The Screwtape Letters present a departure from the language and linguistic pattern that exist and are familiar in the religious discourse. In addition, it has helped to achieve the result of some degree of surprise because of the unexpectedness achieved from the devices used. The deviation causes readers to pause and think. This fact by itself is a huge success as it is tantamount to sober reflection of the religious teaching, thus stylistic devices has been used to raise consciousness. It is therefore recommended that stylistic devices be employed for purposes of raising consciousness in other discourse types.

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