

Mocking the Devil.
Persuasive Irony in C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*

Abstract: This paper presents a stylistic analysis of the language of C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* (1942), a sardonic work of epistolary fiction consisting of letters from one demon to another. The text exploits irony, neologisms, bureaucratese, and other salient linguistic features to elucidate the spiritual, psychological, and moral mechanisms of temptation. Stylistics, understood here as a linguistically informed approach to the study of literary texts, offers the necessary tools to explore the salient lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic choices made within the text to account for the construction of meaning. Furthermore, recent studies in style which have explored the persuasive and communicative functions of irony and satire (Leech, 2007; Fahnestock, 2011). Through both quantitative and qualitative analysis, this paper aims to account for the persuasive perlocutionary effect of the text's ironic tone, paying particular attention to the formal and functional features of irony as a persuasive practice within Lewis's unique work of apologetic fiction.

Keywords: *Stylistics, irony, persuasion, Screwtape Letters, pragmatylistics, apologetics*

1. Introduction

1.1 *Approaching The Screwtape Letters*

C. S. Lewis, perhaps best known for the children's fantasy series *The Chronicles of Narnia* and his popular works in Christian apologetics (*Mere Christianity*, *Miracles*, *The Problem of Pain*, etc.), was an eminent Oxbridge literary scholar, professor and public persona. Recent criticism has begun to reevaluate his literary production for its aesthetic values rather than focusing solely on the author and his religious beliefs:

An encouraging development in Lewis scholarship over the last two decades has been the tendency of critics to pay closer attention to his achievement as a literary artist.... More recent critics have made the case that Lewis' works should be valued for their literary excellence, and that his achievements as a writer are equal to that of other, more critically acclaimed, twentieth-century authors.²

The text under examination here is, in some ways, difficult to define as it straddles both of these perspectives. *The Screwtape Letters* (*SL*) is at once an ambitious, unique work of epistolary fiction and an enduring, persuasive apologetic text. The letters, of which Lewis – in keeping with the generic conventions – claims only to be the editor, are those of a senior demon, Undersecretary Screwtape, to his nephew, Junior Tempter Wormwood.

¹ This contribution, as in the case of Chiara Ghezzi's and Emma Pasquali's papers in the present issue, is part of the output of the Argo Research Centre's ongoing research project "La retorica del dare. Modalità argomentative nel discorso religioso tra Oriente e Occidente" (The Rhetoric of Giving: Argumentative Modes in Religious Discourse between East and West) coordinated by Bianca Del Villano and Chiara Ghidini.

² Gary L. Tandy, "The Stylistic Achievement of *Mere Christianity*", *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal*, 5.6 (2011), 127-152.

The letters originally appeared in *The Guardian*,³ commencing serially in May 1941. Due to their success in serial form, they were published as a bestselling book in 1942. Lewis himself commented on the critical and commercial success⁴ of the work in the preface to the 1961 edition and, in private correspondence, referred to it as his most popular work.⁵ Despite its serial publication, the composition itself should not be considered sporadic; Lewis composed all the letters before approaching the editor with his proposal and the work functions well as a unit.⁶

Given the premise of the work, that of a senior devil providing detailed instructions on the art and artifice of temptation, the most immediately salient feature of the text is its irony, which will be explored here in its function as a stylistic and rhetorical device. While *SL* may not strictly be considered a novel, it clearly establishes itself as a piece of epistolary fiction,⁷ a literary tradition which stretches from Ovid to Richardson and beyond. Only one side of the exchange is given, although the text provides frequent clues to the content of Wormwood's replies as Screwtape references his nephew's reports of minor successes and major failures in the attempt to secure the eternal damnation of the human patient's soul. There is a narrative thrust to the work, revealed in Screwtape's admonishments of his nephew's work on the patient over thirty-one letters. We know little of the patient himself; his name is never revealed, and his occupation is merely hinted at.⁸ He lives, less than peacefully, with his mother (see letters 3, 4, and 17). During the course of the correspondence, he falls in love with a Christian woman (see letters 23, 24 and 25). However, the principal complication to the narrative comes in the second letter, in which it is revealed that the patient has converted to Christianity and begun to attend church. Wormwood's purpose is to distract him from the spiritual realm using various tactics recommended by his "affectionate uncle"; he will even briefly seem to have succeeded. However, the recent convert eventually and definitively slips from the junior tempter's clutches, dying suddenly in a selfless attempt to help others during an air raid. The Second World War ('European war' or 'War' in the text) is the ever-present backdrop and a topic upon which Screwtape pontificates, among others, such as politics, religion, relationships, etc.

1.2 Research questions and methodology

The primary research questions of this study are the following: How does *SL* function, both as literature and as apologetic argument? What persuasive strategies are used, and how are they linguistically encoded and decoded? What might the effect of such linguistic choices be on the reader? Why is irony employed in the text and what is the outcome of such a stylistic choice?

My research here draws on the theoretical frameworks of stylistic analysis of prose fiction, pragmatics, corpus linguistics, and rhetoric studies to best answer these questions.

Stylistics is a branch of linguistic inquiry concerned with style, as the name suggests. By "style", we mean the linguistic choices within a text that work together to produce its meaning. Stylistics can be understood as a linguistically informed approach to the study of (often literary) texts. The particular

³ An Anglican periodical which went out of print in 1951, not to be confused with the major UK newspaper *The Guardian* which retained the title *The Manchester Guardian* until 1959. See Paul McCusker, "Annotations", in *The Screwtape Letters and Screwtape Proposes a Toast: Annotated Edition* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), xxix.

⁴ The first impression quickly sold out, the text was reprinted again eight times that year and released in the US the following year. The reviews were generally enthusiastic; for a summary see McCusker, "Annotations".

⁵ Clive Staples Lewis, *Lettere ai bambini. Il magico mondo di Narnia nella corrispondenza con i giovani lettori*, trans. by Carlo M. Bajetta (Milano: San Paolo, 2009), 132.

⁶ See McCusker "Annotations", xix-xx; Charles A. Huttar, "The Screwtape Letters as Epistolary Fiction", *Journal of Inklings Studies*, 6.1 (2016), 87-125.

⁷ For more on genre and generic conventions adhered to within the text, see Huttar, "The Screwtape Letters as Epistolary Fiction".

⁸ "defence work", see Clive Staples Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters and Screwtape Proposes a Toast: Annotated Edition* [1942], ed. by Paul McCusker (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 146.

approach that this research will follow – stylistic analysis of prose fiction – is elucidated by Leech and Short.⁹ Stylistics, through applying linguistic methodologies to literary texts, offers the necessary tools to explore the salient lexical, syntactic and pragmatic choices made within a text in order to account for the construction of meaning. Lexis is concerned with word choice, etymology and word formation. Syntax is concerned with the grammatical construction of phrases and sentences. Pragmatics is concerned with the context, the speakers and the interactional nature of meaning-making. A thorough stylistic analysis will look at each of these language levels to understand how a text functions.

A key notion in the field of stylistics is defamiliarization or linguistic foregrounding. Leech defines it as follows, “formally, foregrounding is a deviation, or departure, from what is expected in the linguistic code or the social code expressed through language; functionally, it is a special effect or significance conveyed by that departure”.¹⁰ Essentially, this means that foregrounding, caused by something unusual (deviation) or by repetition (parallelism) makes some aspect of the text stand out (salience). Rhyme or alliteration, for example, are phonological parallelism. Foregrounding can occur on any linguistic level – phonological, lexical, syntactical, etc.

Irony is an area of great interest in linguistics. In terms of the stylistic analysis of prose, Leech and Short have outlined that “for fictional purposes irony can be defined as a double significance which arises from the contrast in values associated with two different points of view”.¹¹ Thus, quite simply, there is a clash between the point of view of the author (or the implied author) and that of the narrator. Recent pragmatic research includes more complex and nuanced theories and models of irony, neo-Gricean concepts include opposition and pretence, while post-Griceans favour the notion of echoic mention.¹² Attardo posits “inappropriate relevance” as the litmus test for irony.¹³ Bertuccelli argues for a nuanced view of irony as a set of complex attitudes.¹⁴ Dynel notes that irony is a form of *overt* untruthfulness that must be recognised by the interlocutor for successful uptake.¹⁵ Jeffries, who also provides a concise summary of various theories of irony, proposes a model incorporating the intricacies of dramatic, situational and textual irony.¹⁶ Essentially, as put forth by Garmendia, “what unites all cases of irony is that the speaker puts forward content that clashes with what she actually intends to communicate, and she does so overtly – meaning that the speaker intends the hearer to recognize both the clash and the intention to make it recognizable”.¹⁷ These notions of opposition (clashing), intentionality and recognition (uptake) will be vital to understanding the aesthetic and pragmatic functions of Lewis's irony in *SL*.

The qualitative, stylistic analysis reported here is supported by the tools of corpus linguistics. Corpus stylistics uses computer tools designed to study large quantities of language data. The quantitative investigation, carried out with the #Lancsbox 6.0 software,¹⁸ orients and guides the subsequent

⁹ Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short, *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*, Second edition (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007).

¹⁰ Geoffrey Leech, “Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis, Stylistics and ‘The Celebrated Letter’”, in *Language in Literature: Style and Foregrounding* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008), 86-103.

¹¹ Leech and Short, *Style in Fiction*, 223.

¹² For a comprehensive discussion, see: Manuel Jobert and Sandrine Sorlin, *The Pragmatics of Irony and Banter* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2018); Joana Garmendia, *Irony* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2018).

¹³ Salvatore Attardo, “Irony as relevant inappropriateness”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 32.6 (2000), 793-826.

¹⁴ Marcella Bertuccelli, “Irony as a Complex Attitude”, *Lingue e Linguaggi*, 26 (July 2018), 59-80.

¹⁵ Marta Dynel, *Irony, Deception and Humour: Seeking the Truth about Overt and Covert Untruthfulness* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2018).

¹⁶ Jeffries, Lesley, “Irony in a Theory of Textual Meaning”, in Manuel Jobert and Sandrine Sorlin, eds., *The Pragmatics of Irony and Banter* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2018), 23-39.

¹⁷ Garmendia, *Irony*, 120.

¹⁸ Vaclav Brezina et al., “#LancsBox [Software]” (2020), www.corpora.lancs.ac.uk/lancsbox.

qualitative analysis of text samples. Using the Harper Collins e-book edition,¹⁹ the text of *SL*, was loaded into the programme as a small corpus consisting of just over 30,000 tokens. The corpus was organised in 33 files (31 letters, the author’s preface to the original 1942 edition and the epigraph). The Lancaster-Oslo-Bergen corpus (LOB) was used as a reference corpus, due to its ready availability within LancsBox. It was compiled in the 1970s as a British counterpart to the earlier Brown corpus, which has a similar structure but is made up of texts produced in North America. The texts used were all produced in 1961 – 20 years after the first publication of *SL*, the same year as the best-selling 1961 edition. LOB was, therefore, deemed useful for extracting comparative data, such as key words and key n-grams, due to both its availability within the #Lancsbox software and its temporal and geographical proximity to the best-selling 1961 edition of *SL*.

As Table 1, below, shows, the LOBcorpus is a 1 million-word corpus; it is composed of 15 subsets, ranging from press and reviews to religious discourse and genres of fiction.

Name	Language	Texts	Tokens	Additional information
LOB	English	15	1,007,677	Types: 48,349 Lemmas: 43,920
<i>SL</i>	English	33	30,822	Types: 4,596 Lemmas: 4,083

Table 1. Corpora used within the study

A number of preliminary searches were carried out using the Key Words in Context (KWIC), Whelk, and N-grams tools of the #LancsBox 6.0 software.²⁰ These tools gather and present quantitative information about patterns within the texts (collocations, most frequent and most meaningful tokens, and distribution of tokens across the corpus). The quantitative and comparative data obtained through these tools aided the selection of salient textual examples for in-depth, manual qualitative analysis.

Furthermore, the analysis draws on studies in pragmatics and rhetoric in order to understand the persuasive illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects of the text.²¹ The perlocutionary act is that of bringing about an effect (such as persuasion), it is distinguished from the locutionary act (the act of saying) and the illocutionary act (what is being done by saying).²²

2. Mocking the Devil: Discourse Architecture and Irony

Epistolary fiction inherently constitutes a multi-layered discourse architecture. In the case of *SL* the preface, for example, is written in the voice of the ‘author’ and signed by him, yet it is not merely a neutral paratextual element, it participates in the fiction of the ‘found manuscript’ (“I have no intention of explaining how the correspondence which I now offer to the public fell into my hands”).²³ The reader is not expected to believe this premise to the text, but there is a sort of *implied* reader that should.²⁴ The

¹⁹ Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*.

²⁰ Brezina et al., “#LancsBox [Software]”.

²¹ Jeanne Fahnestock, *Rhetorical Style: The Uses of Language in Persuasion*. (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2011); Randy Allen Harris and Jean Fahnestock, eds, *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Persuasion* (Oxon: Routledge, 2022); Leech, “Stylistics and ‘The Celebrated Letter’”.

²² J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1962).

²³ Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, IX.

²⁴ Leech and Short, *Style in Fiction*, 206-18.

letters themselves are written from the perspective of Screwtape and addressed to Wormwood; thus, in its simplest form, not accounting for Screwtape’s reports of third-party information, the discourse architecture of the text consists of three main layers, which can be represented as in Fig. 1.

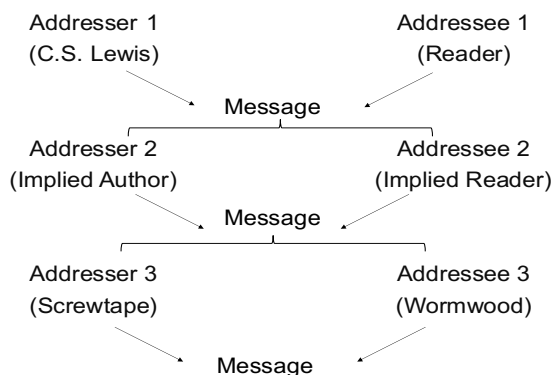


Figure 1. Discourse architecture of *The Screwtape Letters*

Fahnestock, in the context of persuasive discourse, notes the participation framework necessary for the success of irony:

Narrowly defined, irony makes a claim by saying the opposite, with the further stipulation that the *speaker uses this mode intentionally and expects the hearer to recognise it*. Hence the primary effect of irony is communicating to a hearer that the speaker does not mean what he/she is saying but intends the opposite meaning.²⁵

These notions are useful for understanding the function of irony within *SL*. This overtness, or intentionality, is evident within the Preface, in which the author primes the reader for the ensuing ideological clash:

A. *From Preface*²⁶

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 angle. I have made no attempt to identify any of the human beings mentioned in the letters; but I think it very unlikely that the portraits, say, of Fr Spike or the patient’s mother, are wholly just. There is wishful thinking in Hell as well as on Earth.

The premise makes the first-person narrator’s unreliability explicit, preparing the reader for the ensuing clash between the author’s reputation as a public figure in Christianity and the narrative voice which vehemently argues against Christianity. The preface, therefore, serves to invite the reader to assume an attitude of complicity with the author and reader, an attitude in which the reader recognises the clash between what is said and what is being conveyed and, furthermore, acknowledges that the author intends them to recognise such a clash, circumstances which are essential for successful irony. Of course, being ironic is a risky strategy, there is always the chance that the audience will not understand. Indeed, there are amusing anecdotes of the ironic and satirical functions of the text misfiring; in his preface to the

²⁵ Fahnestock, *Rhetorical Style*, 111, emphasis added.

²⁶ Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, ix.

1961 edition, Lewis recalls a clergyman who withdrew his subscription to *The Guardian* because he found the letters “not only erroneous but positively diabolical”.²⁷ However, the preferred response by the implied reader, having been duly prepared by the preface and alert to the pervasive textual clues, would be to engage successfully with the ironic discourse.

With the exception of the Preface (and some very brief pseudo-paratextual inserts, see extract C) the narrative and discursal point of view throughout the text is solely that of Screwtape, an exaggeratedly unreliable narrator. In his letters, Screwtape disapproves of virtues and animatedly praises vices; his infernal perspective is an inversion of standard values. The following violent disapproval of the patient's love interest provides an example:

B. From *Letter 22*²⁸

I have looked up this girl's dossier and am horrified at what I find. Not only a Christian but such a Christian—a vile, sneaking, simpering, demure, monosyllabic, mouselike, watery, insignificant, virginal, bread-and-butter miss. The little brute. She makes me vomit. She stinks and scalds through the very pages of the dossier. It drives me mad, the way the world has worsened. We'd have had her to the arena in the old days. That's what her sort is made for. Not that she'd do much good there, either. A twofaced little cheat (I know the sort) who looks as if she'd faint at the sight of blood and then dies with a smile. A cheat every way. Looks as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth and yet has a satirical wit. The sort of creature who'd find ME funny! Filthy insipid little prude—and yet ready to fall into this booby's arms like any other breeding animal.

Examining extract B, it is possible to understand the use of irony within the text. The description of the unnamed woman is immediately recognisable as Screwtape's typically twisted view of virtue. The second sentence contains a striking string of 11 consecutive adjectives. This breathless tirade is starkly contrasted with the following two sentences, of 3 and 4 words, respectively. Thus, defamiliarization is brought about on a syntactic level through the pouncing rhythm of the sentence structure and lexically, through the use of exaggerated, negatively charged language (brute, cheat, filthy, prude, vile, etc.). These stylistic devices effectively convey Screwtape's enraged state. The hyperbolic nature of the invective underscores the contrast between the attitude expressed by the narrator and the implied author's attitude. Garmendia notes the importance of exaggeration as a cue, or clue, for recognising irony:

The speaker, as she wants the hearer to correctly understand her utterance, wants him to recognise the discordance. One way to make that discordance clear is to exaggerate it; that is, the speaker can exaggerate the clash between what she is apparently saying and what she really intends to communicate. The largest discordance will be that found between two opposite contents. Thus [hyperbole] can be considered a clue in irony, a clue that ironic speakers may and often do use to help hearers recognise the underlying clash.²⁹

Thus, through the successful uptake of the discordance, the visceral, emotional response expressed by Screwtape serves to trigger an opposite response in the preferred reader. Furthermore, the incongruity of some statements may heighten this response by emphasising Screwtape's unreliability as a narrator. For instance, the woman's imagined courage in the face of martyrdom (“then dies with a smile”) seems incompatible with the notion that she may be a “sneaking, demure, monosyllabic, mouselike, watery, insignificant, virginal, bread-and-butter miss.” Indeed, Screwtape's exaggerated reaction hardly lends credence to his claim that she is “insignificant”. Thus, within the discourse architecture of the text, the implied author is being ironic, and the preferred reader is expected to grasp the significance of such uses

²⁷ Lewis, 2013, xxix.

²⁸ Ibid., 117-18.

²⁹ Garmendia, *Irony*, 115-116.

of tone and perspective. This “assumed communion between author and reader”³⁰ and its satirical function is brought into focus in extract B, above. Satire is understood here, according to the linguistic model proposed by Simpson, as a discursive practice activated through irony.³¹ As Screwtape fervently deplores the woman, he mentions her “satirical wit”. He is aghast to think that she would “find [him] funny” – of course, the kind of people who find the humourless demon funny are the very readers who engage with Lewis’s satirical discourse as such. Thus, the readers who are amused by Screwtape’s exaggerated outburst and engage with the satirical and ironic tone of the text may find themselves aligned with the attitudinal position of the Christian woman (in finding the demon’s rage amusing). Lewis, therefore, through irony and satire, invites readers to assume a positive attitude towards the values and virtues (social justice within the Church, humility, courage and self-sacrifice) which the narrator derides in the character of the Christian woman.

3. Letters from Hell: Epistolary Features

The epistolary aspects of the text are immediately salient upon reading the text. This was confirmed by the preliminary corpus analysis of keywords and n-grams,³² which demonstrated the recurrence of salient epistolary features. Each letter opens with the customary “My dear Wormwood” and closes dutifully with “Your affectionate uncle Screwtape”, creating a predictable and familiar syntactic and graphological³³ pattern (parallelism) within the text. Any deviation from this sustained repetition of the formulaic opening and closing address produces a defamiliarizing effect, as is the case in the following examples:

C. From *Letter 22*³⁴

[Here the MS breaks off and is resumed in a different hand.]

In the heat of composition I find that I have inadvertently allowed myself to assume the form of a large centipede. I am accordingly dictating the rest to my secretary. Now that the transformation is complete I recognise it as a periodical phenomenon.... In my present form I feel even more anxious to see you, to unite you to myself in an indissoluble embrace,

(Signed) Toadpipe

For his Abysmal Sublimity Under Secretary Screwtape, TE, BS, etc.

D. From *Letter 31*³⁵

My dear, my very dear, Wormwood, my poppet, my pignie.... Meanwhile, I have you to settle with. Most truly do I sign myself

Your increasingly and ravenously affectionate uncle
Screwtape

These two extracts contain three significant departures from the previously established collocation pattern. They occur in the twenty-second and thirty-first (last) letters, by which time the standard co-

³⁰ Leech and Short, *Style in Fiction*, 229.

³¹ Paul Simpson, *On the Discourse of Satire: Towards a Stylistic Model of Satirical Humour* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2003).

³² See Table 1A in the Appendix.

³³ The 2013 edition used for this study, and other editions consulted, separate the address and signature from the body of the letter with a line break, reproducing the standard visual cue for ‘letter’ within the text. I have not been able to consult either the editions released in *The Guardian* or the first editions to explore such graphological stylistic choices further.

³⁴ Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 120-21.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 171-75.

occurrence of “My dear Wormwood” (PP\$, JJ, NP)³⁶ and “Your affectionate uncle Screwtape” (PP\$, JJ, NN, NP) have formed a rigid, internal textual norm (syntactic parallelism). The first example (C) shows an alternative sign-off, premised by the epistolarian’s shapeshifting into a large centipede, as explained in the extract. The use of obscure bureaucratic terminology and officious-sounding titles underscore the text’s Kafkaesque view of Hell as a sort of dull, overly complicated ministerial administration, which will be further examined in detail. Notably, the deviation also gives rise to an instance of foreshadowing, Screwtape’s ominous salutation, “in my present form I feel even more *anxious* to see you, to *unite you to myself in an indissoluble embrace*”, is suggestive of Wormwood’s ultimate fate – as fodder for senior demons due to his failure to wrestle his patient’s soul to damnation. The junior demon’s end is most explicit in Letter 30: “At any rate, you will soon find that the justice of Hell is purely realistic, and concerned only with results. Bring us back food, or be food yourself”.³⁷ This foreboding sentiment serves to modify the meaning of the standard “Your affectionate uncle” until, in the next and final letter (D), the nature of Screwtape’s affection is clarified in his gleefully greedy salutation: “Your *increasingly and ravenously affectionate* uncle.” The standard form (PP\$, JJ, NN, NP), hitherto used in twenty-nine of the preceding thirty letters, is thus altered and expanded (PP\$, RB, CC, RB, JJ, NN, NP). The adverbs, inserted into the familiar structure, modify the precise quality of ‘affection’ that Screwtape has meant all along. The incipit to the final letter (D) is also varied, the standard (PP\$, JJ, NP), unaltered in all thirty preceding letters, is changed (PP\$, JJ, PP\$, RB, JJ, NP, PP\$, NN, PP\$, NN). The opening line repeats the PP\$ “my” four times, echoing the sense of absolute possession which comes with spiritual and physical domination (the subject of a long discourse in Letter 21). The alliterated terms of endearment “poppet” and “pigsnie” can both bear derogatory overtones.³⁸ Such lexical and syntactical deviations from the established pattern render these excerpts salient and underscore the “ravenous” quality of Screwtape’s so-called “affection”. Indeed, the sickly, overbearing salutation of the final letter reveals Screwtape’s selfish interest in Wormwood, signalling to the reader the full depravity of the narrator despite, or indeed because of, his continued claims of fondness.

4. The Administration of Evil

The Hell of *SL* is not that of medieval and early modern European literature (Dante, Milton, etc). In the place of the traditional sulphur-spewing volcanoes and flesh-eating monsters, there is a clean, orderly, bureaucratic world populated by respectable administrators and instructors. The devils are attributed titles and roles within a complex administrative system. Screwtape’s full title (“Abysmal Sublimity Under Secretary Screwtape, TE, BS, etc.”; see C above) reveals the complex inner workings of what will be referred to as the “Lowerarchy”³⁹, an amusing neologism which inverts the purely phonological “high-” element in “hierarchy”. Throughout the text, deictic elements orientate Hell as ‘below’ – Satan’s title is “Our Father Below”, and Screwtape refers to humans ending up “down here” – in keeping with the traditional Christian imagery of Hell. However, the complex bureaucratic nature of the underworld is striking in the text. There are law enforcement agencies (Infernal Police, Secret Police), institutions of higher education (Training College) and punitive centres for reform (House of Correction). Everything is organised into departments (research department, Intelligence Department) and offices (the record office, the office), complete with complex record-keeping systems (dossier). Thus, the text

³⁶ The list of abbreviations used is from Beatrice Santorini, “Part-of-Speech Tagging Guidelines for the Penn Treebank Project”, Third Revision (1991), Philadelphia: Department of Computer and Information Science, University of Pennsylvania, 8-9, and has been provided as an appendix. This is the same POS tagging used in LancesBox.

³⁷ Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 165.

³⁸ For etymology and notes on derogatory overtones, see *Oxford English Dictionary Online* ‘Pigsney, n.’ and ‘Poppet, n.’, www.oed.com.

³⁹ Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 206.

makes use of ‘bureaucratese’ – a particular lexical register which pertains principally to offices and government agencies. Within *SL*, this register shift – the choice to describe ‘infernal affairs’ with the language more commonly associated with ‘internal affairs’ – is a salient stylistic device. The pervasive use of officious-sounding, bureaucratic language posits Hell as a cold, calculating administrative machine. This is a chilling perspective considering the text’s composition during the cultural climate of the Second World War. Lewis later reflected on this connection with the immediate historical context of *SL* in the preface to the 1961 edition:

I live in the Managerial Age, in a world of ‘Admin’. The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid ‘dens of crime’ that Dickens loved to paint. It is not even done in concentration camps and labour camps. In those we see its final result. But it is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried, and minuted) in clean, carpeted and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voice. Hence naturally enough, my symbol for Hell is something like the bureaucracy of a police state or the offices of a thoroughly nasty business concern.⁴⁰

The representation of absolute evil as dull and administrative anticipates the moral and philosophical implications of Hannah Arendt’s observation of the “banality of evil” and the ensuing ethical and philosophical discussions which came to the fore in the aftermath of the Second World War.⁴¹ *SL*’s everyday, office-like hell is a frightening commentary on the human and mundane aspects of great evil. Indeed, in this instance Lewis’ linguistic choices do not demonise the demons but rather humanise them – a far more chilling perspective.

While the “Lowerarchy” is not immediately recognisable as the fire-and-brimstone setting of popular culture and the Western literary canon, the demon bureaucrats are nonetheless endowed with nasty names to underscore their true, ghastly identity. The text mainly refrains from naming the human characters (the patient, his mother, and his girlfriend remain unnamed, while the local cleric, Fr. Spike, is mentioned briefly by name), yet several demons are named throughout the text: Screwtape and Wormwood are, of course, the most frequently mentioned, being the writer and addressee of the letters. As the following table shows, all but “wormwood” (botanical, *Artemisia Absinthium*) and “toadpipe” (botanical, obsolete, one of various species of *Equisetum*) are coined by Lewis.

	Name	in <i>SL</i>	OED
NP1	Wormwood	37	Yes (n, botanical)
NP2	Screwtape	33	No
NP3	Glubose	6	No
NP4	Slubgob	3	No
NP5	Slumtrimpet	2	No
NP6	Scabtree	1	No
NP7	Toadpipe	1	Yes (n, botanical)
NP8	Triptweeze	1	No

Table 2. Names of the demons

⁴⁰ Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, xxxvii

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Revised and Enlarged Edition (New York: Viking Press, 1964).

Being neologisms, these names are, of course, not present in the LOB reference corpus,⁴² and except for the two botanical borrowings, most of them are not even present in the *Oxford English Dictionary*,⁴³ a helpful reference corpus for lexical studies. These unique occurrences reveal that they are examples of neologism – new words coined by Lewis to name the demons. They are primarily composite forms made of extant morphemes. NP3 is formed: NN + suffix (Glub – n, heap or troop; -ose – suffix, forming adjectives meaning abundant) while the other NPs are formed: NN + NN (Screwtape could also be considered VB + NN). The meanings of each morpheme are overwhelmingly repulsive (scab; slum; toad; tweeze; slub: n, thick sludgy mud; etc.). The sensation of disgust is potentially reinforced by their phonological composition with the repetition of phonemes and consonant clusters such as /w/ (wormwood, triptweeze), /sk/ (scabtree, screwtape), /sl/ (slubgob, slumtrimpet) and /tr/ (slumtrimpet, scabtree, triptweeze). These phonemes and consonant clusters are representative of the core stratum of the English language (Old English and Old Norse). As Fahnstock points out, “persuasive effects of ... word choice based on origins can be subtle”.⁴⁴ Yet, it would appear that these neologisms exploit the ‘baser’ phonological and graphological elements of the language, combined with the recognisably ignoble lexical elements, to reinforce negative associations and remind the reader of the malevolence of the characters. Thus, even if the demons are being discussed in apparently favourable terms by the narrator, their unpleasant names foreground the clash between the author’s and the narrator’s point of view – highlighting the irony underpinning the text. Thus, in coining these unique and evocative names, Lewis displays a playful lexical creativity that is functional to the ironic nature of the text.

5. The Trouble about Argument

The central topic of the letters is, of course, how to divert the patient’s attention from God (referred to in the text as “the Enemy”) and Christianity in order to eternally obtain his soul. Screwtape offers Wormwood advice on how best to persuade his human ‘patient’ that Christianity is nonsense. The Keyword comparison tool in #LancsBox shows which words are salient within the text compared to the reference corpus. Excluding the names of characters and epistolary terms of address, three main semantic areas were observed: religion (Christians, church, God, etc.), argumentation (argue, believe, think, etc) and morality (charity, virtue, chastity, etc.). A selection of the key terms regarding religion and persuasion were inputted as search terms using the Whelk tool in #LancsBox,⁴⁵ which displays the frequency and distribution of the given search terms. Thus, employing the Whelk tool, the search term “christian*” (i.e. Christianity, Christianised, etc.) appears 55 times in the text, with a relative frequency of 17.84 occurrences per 10,000 tokens.⁴⁶ The frequency and relative frequency of the selected search terms pertaining to religion are displayed in Table 3, below. The subset D of the LOB corpus contains “religious” texts and is, unsurprisingly, topically more similar to *SL* than the reference corpus as a whole. For example, within the subset D (religion) of the LOB corpus, there are 30 references to the linguistic variable “christian*” (relative frequency of 8.75 per 10,000 tokens). In contrast, within the entirety of the LOB corpus, the search term appeared only 126 times (relative frequency 1.25).⁴⁷ The search term

⁴² With the exception of “wormwood”, found in the text grouping “G” (Belles lettres and biography) with a relative frequency of 0.26 per 10,000 words, as a reference to the plant.

⁴³ Oxford English Dictionary Online, www.oed.com.

⁴⁴ Fahnstock, *Rhetorical Style*, 35.

⁴⁵ Brezina et al., “#LancsBox [Software]”.

⁴⁶ Such terms are distributed most heavily in letters 25, 23, 24.

⁴⁷ The statistical analysis produced via #LancsBox 6.0 (Brezina et al., “#LancsBox [Software]”) is as follows: The t-test ($t(32.63) = -2.66$, $p = 0.012$) revealed a statistically significant difference between the corpora with regard to the linguistic variable

“god” revealed a similar relative frequency within both texts. Still, it is important to note that from *Screwtape*’s perspective, the topic “God” is also referred to with the title “the Enemy”, which occurs much more frequently in *SL* than the search term “god” in the reference corpus. The results are shown in Table 3 below.

Variable	Occurs in SL	Relative Freq per 10k	Occurs in LOB	Relative Freq per 10k
Christian*	55	17.84	126	1.25 (8.75 in subset D)
Enemy	110	35.69	36	0.36 (0.87 in subset D)
God	7	2.27	296	2.94 (36.19 in subset D)
Church	19	6.16	333	3.30 (40.8 in subset D)
Religion	13	4.22	62	0.62 (5.25 in subset D)

Table 3. Topic of religion across the corpora

Not only is religion as the topic of discussion lexically salient within the text, but I argue here that the metalanguage of argumentation is also foregrounded as part of the overall rhetorical strategy. Linguistic variables relevant to the topic of persuasion occur more frequently within the text than within the reference corpus, as shown in Table 4 below.

Variable	Occurs in SL	Relative Freq per 10k	Occurs in LOB	Relative Freq per 10k
Argu*	11	3.56	221	2.19
Belie*	40	12.97	429	4.26
Convinc*	4	1.298	87	0.86
Encourag*	24	7.79	131	1.30
Induc*	7	2.27	7	0.07
Persua*	11	3.56	56	0.56
Think VB*	80	25.96	1,181	11.72

Table 4. Topic of persuasion across the corpora

Thus, the semantic field of argumentation is brought into focus through the lexical choices within the text. However, the most significant linguistic constructions concerning the concept of persuasion which emerged in the analysis are the syntactical co-occurrences of key elements such as “make PP VB” (i.e. “make him think” or “make her believe”) and “made to VB” (i.e. “made to feel” or “made to think”). Table 5, below, displays how these syntactical structures are much more frequent in *SL*. Not only are they more frequently used in *SL* but they also primarily occur with perceiving and feeling verbs regarding mental processes in general, and specifically, the topic of persuasion. Meanwhile, in LOB, they have a much wider range of use concerning various topics.⁴⁸

Variable	Occurs in SL	Relative Freq per 10k	Occurs in LOB	Relative Freq per 10k
Make PP VB	17	5.55	42	0.42
Made to VB	12	3.89	48	0.48

Table 5. Salient syntactical co-occurrences

The effect of such linguistic patterns can be observed in the following extract.

christian*. The t-test compares the mean values of the linguistic variable in two corpora and takes into consideration the internal variation in each group expressed as variance.

⁴⁸ See tables 2A-5A, provided in the appendix, for a selection of collocates.

E. From *Letter 1*

Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church. Don't waste time trying to make him think that materialism is true! Make him think it is strong, or stark, or courageous—that it is the philosophy of the future. That's the sort of thing he cares about.

The trouble about argument is that it moves the whole struggle on to the Enemy's own ground. He can argue too; whereas in really practical propaganda of the kind I am suggesting He has been shown for centuries to be greatly the inferior of Our Father Below. By the very act of arguing, you awake the patient's reason; and once it is awake, who can foresee the result? Even if a particular train of thought can be twisted so as to end in our favour, you will find that you have been strengthening in your patient the fatal habit of attending to universal issues and withdrawing his attention from the stream of immediate sense experiences. Your business is to fix his attention on the stream. Teach him to call it 'real life' and don't let him ask what he means by 'real'.

Screwtape's instructions are outlined explicitly in this introductory letter. He employs a series of representative speech acts,⁴⁹ which describe the state of affairs, interspersed with directives in which he coaches Wormwood in the tactics he should utilize ("don't waste time", "make him think", "teach him", etc.). The use of negation in the first lines complicates the layered discourse architecture of the text and its ironic positioning ("jargon, *not* argument...", "*don't* waste time trying to make him think that materialism is true"). It may even function here as a cue for the ironic tone of the text; Screwtape's very insistence on *not* using rational, thoughtful argumentation undermines his position. By his own admission, there is a danger in using logical argument because the other side can engage in the debate. The lexicon of argument and persuasion is prevalent in this extract ("jargon", "argument", "true", "philosophy", "propaganda", "reason", etc.). Such topical foregrounding of the language of persuasion highlights Screwtape's evasive strategy and may even trigger that "fatal habit of attending to universal issues" in the reader. By foregrounding the demon's distraction tactics, readers are challenged to consider the daily distractions which allay them and keep them from deeply considering matters of faith and religion. In this way, the reader is made to identify with the patient as the victim of such warped thinking. Extract E shows how the text as a whole aims to subvert the common 20th-century idea of 'religion as irrational' and brings the rational defence of religious faith to the fore ("He can argue too", "By the very act of arguing, you awake the patient's reason; and once it is awake, who can foresee the result").

The common structures shown in Table 5 are part of this overall strategy of subversion within the text. In extract E, above, Screwtape instructs Wormwood to "make [the patient] think" that materialism is "strong, stark or courageous". Such syntactical structures (make him think, make them believe, etc) place the patient (character) in the role of linguistic patient, the 'object' of the process rather than the agent. Thus, the syntactic construction, which occurs throughout the text in this form, highlights the manipulation of the patient's thoughts by rendering the seemingly subtle forms of persuasion explicit. By instructing Wormwood in the art of manipulation, Screwtape reveals the mechanisms of his persuasion to the reader. The processes of persuasion and its effects are foregrounded both lexically and syntactically; thus, the reader is led, paradoxically, to guard themselves against similar thought patterns and to be wary of manipulation.

Furthermore, Screwtape's resistance to "argument" and advice to use "jargon" and "practical propaganda" serve as a satirical tool to subvert the common assumption that religious beliefs are diametrically opposed to rational thinking. Lewis's apologetic works defended Christianity as a rational,

⁴⁹ John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1975). Searle's classification of speech acts expands on Austin's Speech Act Theory. 'Representatives' describe the state of the world; 'directives' include instructions, commands, requests, etc.

thinking faith. His strategy here is to use irony to undermine the voice of Screwtape and consequently cause the reader to question their assumptions with regard to faith and reason.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of extracts from the text has outlined the primary phonological, syntactical and lexical elements contributing to the production of meaning within the text. *SL* has been shown to utilise the complex, layered, discourse architecture of epistolary fiction as an instrument in the creation and maintenance of its ironic tone. Screwtape's devilish opinions and advice are intended to disgust and distance the reader from his point of view, embracing, instead the author's perspective. The unreliable, and entirely unagreeable, narrator "unwittingly" exposes the weak points of his arguments against Christianity, undermining the atheist, agnostic and apathetic standpoints most common to 20th century intellectuals. Thus, *SL*, constitutes not only a witty experimentation with the genre of epistolary fiction but also an enduring work of Christian apologetics.

The text's principal rhetorical strategy of irony is signalled within the preface and continually underlined through supporting stylistic devices such as neologisms, bureaucratese and the foregrounding of the topics of persuasion and argumentation. The aim of the text is further made explicit in its epigraph, composed of two quotations. The first, attributed to Luther is as follows: "the best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to texts of Scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn"; the same sentiment is echoed in the second, "the devil ... the prowde spirite ... cannot endure to be mocked", from Thomas More.⁵⁰ Thus, *SL* immediately posits itself as an attempt to jeer and mock the devil as a strategy of resisting temptation and as an argument against common objections to faith. Over the past 80 years, *SL* has enjoyed a wide and varied readership and almost innumerable reprints and translations. Its winsome, sardonic tone continues to entertain and engage readers from a wide spectrum of beliefs and non-beliefs. While it was beyond the scope of the present paper, I believe an empirical study of reader responses and the perception of the persuasive techniques employed could provide valuable insights into the reader uptake of and engagement with irony in the text.

In terms of rhetoric, *SL* can be understood to appeal to ethos, pathos and logos. The appeal to ethos, understood as the construction of the speaker's character within the text,⁵¹ is engaged through Screwtape's questionable character and convictions throughout the text. The reader's rejection of Screwtape's distorted perspective and manipulative discourse is part of both the humour and the persuasive force of the text, devices which are inextricably linked here. Of course, in rejecting and ridiculing Screwtape, the reader finds themselves aligned with the opinions of the author, the public defender of 20th Century Christianity, C.S. Lewis. The appeal to pathos, or how a text manages the attitudes and emotions of its audience,⁵² is also linked to the use of irony. The reader's disgust and indignation are ignited throughout the text, particularly due to the sensation of 'seeing through' Screwtape's vapid, yet profuse, claims of affection to his nephew. The appeal to logos, how the content is selected to serve the rhetor's purpose,⁵³ engages with the credibility or acceptability of a claim. Here, the subversive nature of the text is most evident. Lewis does not appeal to logos through convincing, intellectually stimulating and provable arguments for faith and Christianity; instead, through the persona of Screwtape, he assumes these as given and presents the possible means of convincing someone otherwise. Thus, through fallacious argumentation and the evident intellectual dishonesty of the speaker

⁵⁰ Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 11.

⁵¹ Harris and Fahnestock, *Language and Persuasion*, 11.

⁵² Ibid, 12.

⁵³ Ibid, 13.

(which also appeals to the ethos), the arguments against Christianity and Christian living are cleverly undermined, leading the reader to ridicule the weak, circular arguments as such.

Therefore, the stylistic analysis of *SL* has revealed how the formal aspects of the language of the text are functional to its persuasive perlocutionary effect on the reader. The text uses stylistic and rhetorical devices in order to both entertain and persuade the reader. Overall, the strategic choice to use irony contributes significantly to *SL*'s winsome, witty and persuasive nature – indeed, without it, the text would presumably be merely a dull moral treatise.

In presenting some of the creative, clever, and humorous aspects of a somewhat neglected work of epistolary fiction, I hope to contribute to the critical revaluation of the literary value of Lewis' works.⁵⁴ Further linguistic analysis of Lewis's oeuvre is required to understand how *SL* fits into the author's overall style of argumentation.

⁵⁴ See Tandy, 'The Stylistic Achievement of Mere Christianity', 127.

Appendix 1

3 n-grams	Frequency <i>SL</i>	Dispersion <i>SL</i>	Frequency LOB	Dispersion LOB	Statistic (simple maths)
my dear wormwood	30	0,32	0	0,00	10,75
affectionate uncle screwtape	30	0,32	0	0,00	10,75
your affectionate uncle	29	0,38	0	0,00	10,43
that he is	17	1,20	28	1,31	5,11
dear wormwood i	12	1,33	0	0,00	4,90
in his mind	10	1,93	9	1,65	3,90
that the enemy	9	2,03	1	3,74	3,89
is to keep	9	1,84	2	2,57	3,85
the sort of	11	1,92	27	1,28	3,61
be made to	10	2,09	18	1,37	3,61

Table 1A. Key n-grams in *SL* (using LOB as a reference corpus)

Table 1A, above, shows the ten most statistically relevant key three-word n-grams in *SL*. The data was extracted using the N-grams tool in #LancsBox 6.0.⁵⁵ LOB was used as a reference corpus in order to extract the statistical relevance of the relative frequencies across the corpora.

Tables 2A-5A were randomly extracted using the Wizard tool in #LancsBox 6.0.⁵⁶

Filename	Left	Node	Right
Letter28.txt	them to earth is to	make them believe	that earth can be turned
Letter29.txt	is no good trying to	make him brave.	Our research department has not
Letter9.txt	type your job is to	make him acquiesce	in the present low temperature
Letter15.txt	them think about it we	make them think	of unrealities. In a word,

Table 2A. A random set of concordance lines for “make PP VB” in *SL*.

The search term “make PP VB” occurs 17 times (5,516 per 10k) in *SL* in 13 out of 33 texts. Table 2A, above, displays a random sample of 5 concordance lines, showing the most immediate contexts in which the search term is used.

Filename	Left	Node	Right
Letter12.txt	Christian he can still be	made to think	of himself as one who
Letter18.txt	the family, humans can be	made to infer	the false belief that the
Letter12.txt	Enemy; but he must be	made to imagine	that all the choices which
Letter26.txt	which the humans can be	made to mistake	for the results of charity.
Letter17.txt	vanity. They ought to be	made to think	themselves very knowing about food,

Table 3A. A random set of concordance lines for “made to VB” in *SL*.

⁵⁵ Brezina et al., “#LancsBox [Software]”.

⁵⁶ Brezina et al., “#LancsBox [Software]”.

The search term “made to VB” occurs 12 times (3,893 per 10k) in *SL* in 8 out of 33 texts. Table 3A, above, displays a random sample of 5 concordance lines, showing the most immediate contexts in which the search term is used

Filename	Left	Node	Right
A Press_report.txt	at the Dorchester Hotel to	make us drink	Harp on a national scale.
L Fiction_myst.txt	here is your chance to	make him pay	back!" Madam interrupted. " Now go
C Press_review.txt	told us" Now I will	make you hear	one bell— just one bell,
H Misc_non_fict.txt	on to tight jobs to	make them pay.	The workers claimed that this
N Adventure.txt	with laughter. " I'm going to	make you lick	that card clean," said Durieux.

Table 4A. A random set of concordance lines for “make PP VB” in *LOB*

The search term “make PP VB” occurs 42 times (0,417 per 10k) in *LOB* in 13 out of 15 texts. Table 4A, above, displays a random sample of 5 concordance lines, showing the most immediate contexts in which the search term is used.

Filename	Left	Node	Right
H Misc_non_fict.txt	a site, plans have been	made to build	a Home for thirty children
E_Skills.txt	time ago an effort was	made to sell	more yoghurt in greater Copenhagen,
G Belle_lett_biogr.txt	and no attempt has been	made to supply	the chorus parts of the
H_Misc_non_fict.txt	fire refers to the arrangements	made to implement	the new provisions of the
J Acad_writing.txt	3 an attempt has been	made to indicate	the extent of the assumed

Table 5A. A random set of concordance lines for “made to VERB” in *LOB*

The search term “made to VB” occurs 48 times (0,476 per 10k) in *LOB* in 12 out of 15 texts. Table 5A displays a random sample of 5 concordance lines, showing the most immediate contexts in which the search term is used.

Appendix 2 - List of tags with corresponding parts of speech

For ease of reference, the present text employs the same tagset as #LancsBox in its automated tagging process. The reference documentation is from Santorini⁵⁷ and provides the following list of abbreviations:

1. CC Coordinating conjunction
2. CD Cardinal number
3. DT Determiner
4. EX Existential there
5. FW Foreign word
6. IN Preposition or subordinating conjunction
7. JJ Adjective
8. JJR Adjective, comparative
9. JJS Adjective, superlative
10. LS List item marker
11. MD Modal

⁵⁷ Santorini, ‘Part-of-Speech Tagging’, 8–9.

12. NN Noun, singular or mass
13. NNS Noun, plural
14. NP Proper noun, singular
15. NPS Proper noun, plural
16. PDT Predeterminer
17. POS Possessive ending
18. PP Personal pronoun
19. PP\$ Possessive pronoun
20. RB Adverb
21. RBR Adverb, comparative
22. RBS Adverb, superlative
23. RP Particle
24. SYM Symbol
25. TO to
26. UH Interjection
27. VB Verb, base form
28. VBD Verb, past tense
29. VBG Verb, gerund or present participle
30. VBN Verb, past participle
31. VBP Verb, non-3rd person singular present
32. VBZ Verb, 3rd person singular present
33. WDT Wh-determiner
34. WP Wh-pronoun
35. WP\$ Possessive wh-pronoun
36. WRB Wh-adverb