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The Tao of Screwtape:
Sender/receiver pairs and objective values in C.S. Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters*.

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Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to identify the various sender/receiver pairs from C.S. Lewis’s novel The Screwtape Letters and, once identified, to examine these pairs within the context of the concept of a doctrine of universal values which is expressed in Lewis’s The Abolition of Man. For the sake of clarity and simplicity the essay begins with a definition of terms and concepts that will be used throughout, including basic terms used when discussing a communicative act: sender, receiver and message. I then explain the essay’s central concept which is taken from another one of Lewis’s works The Abolition of Man regarding a doctrine of objective value. The idea that a set of universal values exists is often central to secular writing and C.S. Lewis, a Christian apologist, makes it clear that he believes that there exists an ethical way of living that is common to all men, Christian and non-Christian alike. He dubs this set of basic morals the Tao.

The various senders from The Screwtape Letters are then identified, beginning with the central character of Screwtape and moving in concentric circles outwards through Wormwood, the Enemy and his angels and ending with the reader/writer allegory wherein the sender is identified as the writer, Lewis. Textual evidence is given in each scenario to reveal whether these senders are aware of a doctrine of moral values and whether, in accordance to Lewis’s explanation of what he calls speaking from within the Tao, the various senders speak and act in order to teach that set of values to others.
Introduction

It can be said that the act of writing implies a reader as surely as the act of speaking implies a listener. The instant that pen is put to paper a dynamic relationship is formed along with inevitable and inherent questions about what is being written, for whom and why. And so, when the demon Screwtape, main character of notable author, academic, educator and theologian C.S. Lewis’s novel *The Screwtape Letters*, declares that “Only the learned read old books and we have now so dealt with the learned that they are of all men the least likely to acquire wisdom by doing so”1 (150) it begs the question: What is really being said, to whom and why?

Questions about interpreting what is really being said are invariably complicated. The communication of ideas whether spoken, written or otherwise, is an infinitely complex process. However, according to the well known Shannon & Weaver communication model, all acts of communication contain the same basic building blocks; the message, the sender and the receiver (Doty).

As Screwtape's snide observation regarding the wisdom—or lack thereof—found in old books makes clear, the sender’s intended message may not be the message received. Lewis discusses the importance of intention when communicating ideas in his book of essays entitled *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis’s highly acclaimed collection of apologist essays published written one year after *The Screwtape Letters*. In *The Abolition of Man* Lewis describes a consciously examined awareness of intention that is “based on a doctrine of objective value” (Lewis, *Abolition*18), an awareness he calls speaking from within the Tao. It is from the perspective of this concept of universal values that I will approach the reading of *The Screwtape Letters*, interpreting the text according to ideas Lewis would eventually forward in detail in *The Abolition of Man*.

This essay will identify and compare the various sender / receiver relationships of *The Screwtape Letters*, both narrative and allegorical, and examine these relationships within the context of Lewis’s concept of universal morality and then discern, through textual evidence, both the sender’s awareness of a set of objective values as well as their relative position to what Lewis refers to as the Tao.

1 All citations in the text are to Clive S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (San Francisco: Harper, 2000) unless otherwise stated.
The epistolary style of The Screwtape Letters clearly identifies the sender/receiver pair that lies at the centre of the novel as the demon Screwtape, the writer of the letters, and his nephew Wormwood, whereas the more peripheral sender / receiver pairs of the narrative are revealed through the discussions and debates that arise between the central pair. These various pairs will be also be interpreted as allegorical of the writer/reader relationship whereas the fictional author of the letters, Screwtape, could be read to represent the actual author Lewis, for example, and approached from the same perspective based on Lewis's concept of the Tao.

Definition of terminology and central concepts
For the purpose of this essay I will be using a simplified version of the Shannon & Weaver model of communication in order to break down the communication act into its most basic elements. It is also helpful to apply a model that can supply terminology for the discussion; in this case the simplified communication model expresses the basic elements of communication as message, sender and receiver. The act of writing, as alluded to in the introduction, contains another essential central element which the Shannon & Weaver model overlooks, namely motive– or the why. However, I have chosen this communication model, like Lewis’s choice of the term Tao to represent all manifestations of the concept of a universal doctrine of values, primarily for its brevity and simplicity. I will be discussing a variety of different types of communication in The Screwtape Letters that transfer ideas (message) from one party (sender) to another (receiver). The different types of communication mediums or what Shannon & Weaver refer to as channels that will be discussed in reference to The Screwtape Letters include but are not limited to letters, direct overt advice, instruction and orders, and more subtle moral lessons discussed within the framework of the allegorical mode. The discussion will however, focus on a simplified version of the standard communication model and refer more often than not to the message within these channels. The context in which these sender / receiver acts will be considered is Lewis’s concept of “speaking from the Tao” which he expresses in the first part of The Abolition of Man. The Abolition of Man contains, among other things, Lewis's Christian apologetic argument regarding the existence of a set of universal moral values or the idea that there is Good and there is Bad, and discusses the significance of learning to recognize these universal values and the consequences of failing to do so. The concept of a universal value system is central to Lewis's argument in The Abolition of Man wherein it
is identified as a common element of many of mankind’s philosophical, ethical and religious perspectives. Lewis claims all manifestations of the Tao share “the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false[...]” (Lewis, Abolition 18), and argues the importance of not only recognizing this set of values but also perpetuating the knowledge of it in mankind by speaking from within the Tao. The Tao is the term Lewis uses for the set of universal values and “the sole source of all value judgments” (Lewis, Abolition 42). Lewis uses the Chinese word Tao—which can be translated as nature, the way or the road—for brevity when discussing “this conception in all its forms, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian and Oriental alike” (Lewis, Abolition 18). Speaking from the Tao then, according to Lewis, is “the way which every man should tread” once they have understood that this set of universal values common to all men exists (Lewis, Abolition 18).

The demon Screwtape himself acknowledges the existence of a set of universal human values when he declares that: “All great moralists are sent by the Enemy [God] not to inform men but to remind them, to restate the primeval moral platitudes against our [Hell’s agents] continual concealment of them” (125). In speaking thus, Screwtape also reveals an essential feature of this concept—that though these values are universal they are not necessarily a naturally occurring set of beliefs in all men. It is the responsibility of those “sent by the Enemy” who are aware of the “primeval moral platitudes” to serve the role of educators and remind others of the set of objective moral values that Lewis argues exists because, as he explains by paraphrasing Plato’s dialogue Laws, people “must be trained to feel pleasure, liking, disgust and hatred at those things which are pleasant, likable, disgusting and hateful” (Lewis, Abolition 16). The responsibility of those who stand and speak from within the Tao as in opposition to that of Hell’s agents, is to reveal, rather than conceal, the “primeval moral platitudes” to others and to “train in the pupil those responses which are themselves appropriate” (Lewis, Abolition 21). The objective then when examining the various sender / receiver circumstances of The Screwtape Letters will be to discover textual evidence of an awareness of and relative position to what Lewis describes as the Tao.

Argument I- Screwtape’s position relative to the Tao as mentor.
Within the narrative of The Screwtape Letters there are several sets of sender/receiver pairs which consist of different combinations of the earthly and ethereal creatures who
inhabit the novel. First and foremost is the central pair of the novel; the demon Screwtape and his nephew Wormwood. The communicative channel of the central pair is a series of thirty-one letters supposedly written by Screwtape, a senior demon in Hell, to his nephew Wormwood, advising the younger demon on how to tempt his first human “patient” onto a path into Hell. In order to examine the sender / receiver relationship of Screwtape and Wormwood within the context of Lewis's concept of the Tao two considerations must be made. Firstly, that the fundamentals of Hell are in direct opposition to those of Heaven which means that in order to recognize where the demon Screwtape is positioned relative to a value system, the fundamental aspects of the alternative system need to be identified. And second, that within the framework of the channel wherein Screwtape and Wormwood communicate lie two different sets or groups of messages which can be examined separately for their relative position to the Tao.

In the Hell of The Screwtape Letters there exists an inversion of norms, morals, ideas and most importantly those concepts identified as the Tao as explained in The Abolition of Man. To paraphrase Milton, the roof fretted with gold of Screwtape’s office in Hell is the gilded floor upon which Heaven stands. The basic inversion or corruption of norms is first seen in the language of Lewis’s descriptions of Hell’s society as Screwtape’s advice to Wormwood is meant to help him move “deeper down in the Lowerarchy” (106), not up the hierarchy, in service of “Our Father Below”, not above (22). This fundamental opposition is further evident in Screwtape’s basic understanding of the universe. Take for example the very foundation of the society in which he lives or the genesis of Hell itself. According to common knowledge in Hell and as explained in letter XIX to Wormwood, the foundation of Hell was a result of Our Father (Satan) leaving Heaven of his own volition to an “infinite distance” from God because the Enemy’s (God’s) blatant refusal to explain the secret behind His love for man. This corruption of the story of Satan’s expulsion from Heaven contains within it a further example of demonhood’s inverted value doctrine. At the centre of Hell’s creation story lies one of Hell’s basic truths: “He [God] cannot love: nobody can: it doesn’t make sense” (101). This directly contradicts “love thy neighbour as thyself” which, as Lewis explains in detail in the chapters on Forgiveness and Charity of his book Mere Christianity, is one of the tenants central to the value system based on a universal morality forwarded in The Abolition of Man. The contradiction between these two value systems, that of the Tao as explained in
The Abolition of Man and those upon which Hell is based, are clearly explained by Screwtape himself as he advises Wormwood regarding the underlying issues needed to confound a human with the cleverly Hell spawned version of “being in love”. The fundamental difference between the philosophy of Hell and that of Heaven, as Screwtape explains, is that “the whole philosophy of Hell rests on recognition of the axiom that one thing is not another thing, and, specifically oneself is not another self” while according to the philosophy of Heaven “[t]hings are to be many, yet somehow also one. The good of oneself is to be the good of another”(94). While Screwtape acknowledges that “primeval moral platitudes” exist for man, he makes it known that the Enemy's philosophy on which these platitudes are based “is nothing more than one continued attempt to evade this very obvious truth” of Hell’s axiom and that “to be” according to the philosophy of Hell “means to be in competition” (94). In order to identify Screwtape’s relative position to the Tao when acting as sender it is important to note that his Tao is not that identified in The Abolition of Man but its opposite, a set of diabolic values I will refer to as the Tao of Hell.

We do well to observe, furthermore, that the thirty one letters Screwtape sends to Wormwood, rather than having a single purpose, contain two distinct groups or sets of messages that need to be examined separately for their relative position to the Tao of Hell. Screwtape recognises his dual role in their relationship when he comments: “That is not the sort of thing that a nephew should write his uncle—nor a junior tempter to the under-secretary of a department” (15). These two sets of messages can be divided between Screwstape’s efforts in mentoring Wormwood about the art of temptation at the channel’s centre and the peripheral comments and discussions that are included in the letters that have little or nothing to do with the eventual fate of Wormwood’s human patient.

The motivation behind the first of these two sets of messages, that of a teacher’s responsibility to his pupil, is a central theme of the first part of Lewis’s Abolition of Man wherein he argues the need of institutionalized education to be in according to the Tao. Lewis makes a distinction between two different approaches to education, the old and the new, by stating that:

The old dealt with its pupils as grown birds deal with young birds when they teach them to fly; the new deals with them more as the poultry dealer
deals with young birds--making them thus or thus for purposes of which the
birds know nothing. (Lewis, Abolition 23)

This metaphor describes a shift in education away from the Tao and towards a system
which has as its goal “to train children to work ’not freely and intelligently but for the
sake of the work earned’” (Chomsky, 47) rather than “transmitting manhood to men”
(Lewis, Abolition 23), a shift still being discussed by educators today. In The Screwtape
Letters Lewis approaches this issue, so important to the concepts advanced in The
Abolition of Man, from the vantage point that Hell is in fundamental opposition to
Heaven. The result is an education whose sole purpose is production of fodder through
the corruption of a human soul, the student’s learn the cost of failure to or as Screwtape
so eloquently puts it, “Bring us back food, or be food yourself” (165). In Hell the
educational system is the axiom “to be means to be in competition” in praxis (94).

**Argument II- Screwtape’s position relative to the Tao as uncle.**

Ultimately, Screwtape fails as Wormwood’s mentor as his advice does not lead to the
successful corruption of a human soul. As mentor and advisor to the newly graduated
tempter Wormwood, Screwtape’s responsibility is the manifestation of the second part
of Lewis’s metaphor of the bird, to emphasise only production by teaching the young
demon how to supply souls for consumption but to conceal from him the truth behind
why he is doing so. Screwtape’s basic approach to How to corrupt a human soul is
presented in the first letter as he explains that the corruption of a human soul is not an
argument, there are no demon apologetics at work to convince humans logically.
Screwtape makes it clear that “you [tempters] are there to fuddle him” (4) and that “our
best work is done by keeping things out [of their minds]” (16). Screwtape is truly a
proficient “fuddler”, teaching Wormwood about such seemingly self contradictory
concepts as “the gluttony of Delicacy, not gluttony of Excess” (87), the Generous Conflict
Illusion (143), “to make men use Christianity as a means [...] to social advancement”
(126) and the use of “jargon, not reason” (46) to cause the patient to “believe this, not
because it is true, but for some other reason”(127). Though Screwtape provides prolific
advice on how to corrupt a human soul, it is clear that young Wormwood is not to know
more than he needs to as his questions about rules are met with the answer “I wonder
you should ask [...] That question, at least for the present phase of the struggle, has been
answered by High Command” (31). Screwtape is obviously a good choice for
Wormwood’s advisor seeing as through the course of his career Screwtape has sunk
through the lowerarchy to achieve the rank of Abysmal Sublimity Under Secretary (121) indicating that he is an experienced tempter. Contradiction is part of Screwtape’s *modus operandi*, not only in his message about how to tempt human souls but also as sender in this set of messages. Within the group of messages that contain advice regarding the human patient, Screwtape is constantly self-contradictory. Letter VII counsels that “all extremes [...] are to be encouraged” (32) while letter IX encourages Wormwood to “talk to him about ’moderation in all things’” (46). Another example of the contradictions within Screwtape’s mentoring of Wormwood is the reprisal “[f]rom the way some of you fiends talk, anyone would suppose it was your job to *teach!*” that appears in the very first letter, moments after Screwtape has advised to “[t]each him to call it real life and don’t let him ask what he means by real”. Just as the structure of the education system in Hell is the praxis of the Tao of Hell so is Screwtape the personification (or demonification) of his own teachings. Wormwood fails to tempt his patient to Hell but given the very nature of the education in Hell upon which the sender / receiver relationship of mentor/pupil is built, Screwtape’s letters reveal that Screwtape is not only aware of Hell’s value doctrine but speaks and acts, at least in the role of mentor, with an understanding of Hell’s axiom *to be ‘means’ to be in competition*, even with your own pupil and nephew.

According to Lewis’s concept of speaking from the Tao the responsibility of man is to recognize a universal morality and then transmit “manhood to men” (Lewis, *Abolition 22*) by speaking in accordance to that knowledge. I have argued that the Hell of *The Screwtape Letters* is based upon an inversion of those morals and that it therefore has its own amoral doctrine or Tao. This being said, the amoral responsibility of a demon would be to transfer demonhood to demons according to the Tao of Hell. Even while failing his student, Screwtape, as a mentor, manages to express an awareness of the Tao of Hell and to speak and act from within that diabolical value system in order to propagate that system. As an individual however Screwtape reveals his awareness of the Tao of Hell but speaks from outside of it. The content of Screwtape's letters without any practical value for Wormwood as tempter will be considered part of the secondary message of the central sender / receiver relationship of the novel and it is this group of messages that show Screwtape to deviate from the Tao of Hell. Throughout his letters, aside from advising Wormwood on the corruption of the human soul, Screwtape takes it upon himself to comment on and criticize Wormwood’s behaviour, recount the history of the
fall of Satan, comment on other demons, recount anecdotes from his life and explain the injustice of the Enemy. The peripheral content or messages of the letters serve as examples for Wormwood of what it is to be a demon; they are lessons in demonhood rather than in the art of temptation. Screwtape’s efforts in the area of Wormwood’s amoral guidance are particularly relevant when considering Screwtape’s position relative to the Tao of Hell. The letters contain Screwtape’s critical views on his nephews general behaviour such as “do remember, Wormwood, duty before pleasure” (22), “I sometimes wonder if you think you have been sent into the world for your own amusement” and “you must learn to pay for your own blunders” (15). Comments such as these indicate Screwtape’s interest in the younger demon’s overall development, not merely as a tempter, but as an individual. Furthermore, Screwtape’s remarks in letter XIX that “I [Screwtape] have been thinking very hard about the question in your [Wormwood’s] last letter. If, as I have clearly shown, all selves are by their very nature in competition, and therefore the Enemy’s idea of Love is a contradiction in terms”, is an apparent reference to an ongoing philosophical discourse indicating that Screwtape advises Wormwood not only on how to tempt the human soul but also in the logic and morals of Hell and demonhood(99). The Tao of Hell is based on the understanding that “what one gains another loses” and all diabolical thoughts and actions should be based on that truth, which, according to this understanding, is why disinterested love cannot exist as the Enemy’s philosophy proposes. Consider Screwtape’s exclamation of love for Wormwood: “Love you? Why yes. As dainty a morsel as ever I grew fat on” (171). This perfectly reflects the essence of what love is when speaking from the Tao of Hell.
Screwtape’s interaction with Wormwood wherein he is transmitting demonhood to the young demon, however, does not. Screwtape steps outside the Tao of Hell when he engages in philosophical discourse with Wormwood and reveals “some truth about God’s love that is considered heresy in Hell” (McCormack), namely that “He [God] really loves the hairless bipeds” (72). Given that this statement is eventually reported to the Secret Police by Wormwood, it shows that Screwtape’s attempt at diabolical moral guidance has in fact caused the young demon to contemplate thoughts contradictory to basic axioms of Hell. When considering the sender / receiver relationship of the peripheral message and Screwtape’s clear intention to be Wormwood’s moral, as well as professional, advisor it is evident that though he is aware of the Tao of Hell he inevitably speaks from outside of it. Both sets of messages that make up the central sender /
receiver relationship of *The Screwtape Letters* narrative end in failure. Whether speaking as professional mentor Under Secretary Screwtape from within the *Tao of Hell*, or as Affectionate Uncle Screwtape from outside the Tao of Hell, both sets of messages yield negative result. It could be argued in fact that Screwtape’s ultimate failure both as Wormwood’s professional mentor and moral advisor, is exemplified in the mere existence of *The Screwtape Letters*. That the human reader is holding in his or her hands proof positive of the existence of demons, which High Command expressly forbids, and is also learning the secrets behind the Tempters corruption of man, undermines Screwtape’s teachings as both Professional Tempter and advisor of diabolical amorality.

**Argument III-peripheral senders and their positions relative to the Tao.**

The secondary content of Screwtape’s letters discussed above identifies a number of peripheral sender / receiver pairs. It is understood that the epistolary style of *The Screwtape Letters* is such that these messages are presented to the reader only through Screwtape’s reactions to them, this dynamic corrupts interpretation, especially since, as the preface warns, “not everything Screwtape says should be assumed to be true even from his own angle”. The need to recognize that these are Screwtape’s versions of other senders’ messages is an important element when considering the role of writer as sender and reader as receiver which will be discussed later.

Screwtape’s letters generally begin with a reaction to Wormwood’s previous message or correspondence, whether to one of his reports dealing with the temptation of his human patient or to his actions or comments as younger demon growing to demonhood. It is from these responses that Wormwood can be identified as sender and his awareness of and relative position to the Tao can then be extrapolated. As a demon, Wormwood’s doctrine of values is the same as that of Screwtape, that is to say he speaks from within or from outside of a Tao of Hell based on the axiom “to be means to be in competition”. It is evident from Screwtape’s response to Wormwood’s letters—such as “You may have spared the comment that my advice [...] ’proved singularly unfortunate’", and “You have always hated me and been insolent when you dared” (119)—that even as a junior tempter and nephew, Wormwood’s letters to Screwtape demonstrate Hell’s basic axiom of competition. It is his actions, however, that show his position within the Tao of Hell. In letter XXII Screwtape is driven into such a rage about “that little misunderstanding with the Secret Police which [Wormwood] tried to raise about some unguarded expression in
one of [his] letters” (117), that he transforms into a giant centipede. The diabolical value system of Hell is such that reporting one’s own uncle to the secret police for heresy could be interpreted, as it is by Screwtape, as an attempt to “secure my good offices” (117). Through Screwtape’s reactions, it is clear that Wormwood’s comments and actions, those that are revealed to the reader through Screwtape’s letters at least, are aware of and based soundly within the cut-throat Tao of Hell.

The Enemy and his agents also appear in the role of sender throughout Screwtape’s letters. It must be pointed out, however, that the philosophy of the Enemy, when considering Lewis’s concept of universal morality, is in fact its source, that is to say universal morality comes from God who even sends moralists—such as Lewis—to remind mankind of these morals. It is through Screwtape’s inability to understand their philosophy based on unconditional Love and the Enemy’s attempts at openness about that Love, that we see their relative position to the Tao. At the centre of the Enemy’s philosophy is, as Screwtape understands it, “this impossibility He calls love” (94).

Screwtape’s letters reveal that he is very clear on what the enemy wants for mankind, lamenting that “it is His [God’s] long term policy I fear, to restore to them a new kind of self-love—a charity and gratitude for all selves” (71), even when he cannot understand “Why that creative act leaves room for their free will [which] is the problem of problems, the secret behind the Enemy’s nonsense about ‘Love’” (150). In The Abolition of Man, as well as in his other apologetic writings, Lewis makes it clear that even though the universal morality he describes is as a natural part of man’s make up as his thirst for water (Lewis, Christianity), and that the ability to like and dislike what one ought is the result of education, it does not occur automatically just because there is an intrinsic knowledge of it. It is this element of the concept of the Tao that most confuses Screwtape as well as most clearly indicates that the Enemy speaks from within the Tao, the fact that God, the creator and source of the Tao, leaves mankind the choice. And though, “God cannot give us happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there [...] there is no such thing [as peace apart from God]” (Lewis, Christianity 54), mankind, as well as the fallen demons, have to learn this on their own. This aspect of the Enemy’s philosophy leads to Screwtape’s accusations that God is unfair (23), a hedonist at heart (118) because He “always gives back with His right hand what He takes away with the left” (72). Evidence of this “hedonism” is seen as Screwtape explains to Wormwood that “[m]embers of His faction have frequently admitted that if we ever came to understand
what He means by love, the war would be over and we should re-enter Heaven” and God himself tells Satan that “I wish with all my heart that you did [understand Love]”(101). Screwtape’s comments regarding the Enemy in The Screwtape Letters show they hold the door to Heaven open to both mankind as well as the fallen demons but, as Jeffrey Folks concludes regarding Lewis’s work on the nature of love entitled Four Loves, “Without knowledge of the foundation of love, the agonized sufferer is open to the worst sorts of misunderstanding.” Though Screwtape and man may recognise that the “impossibility He calls love[…] can be detected under all He does and even all He is” (94), as Lewis writes in The Abolition of Man” To the corrupt man [the principles of Ethics] will never be visible at all and he can make no progress in that science [Ethics]” (Lewis, Abolition 16). In his descriptions of their actions and through his inability to comprehend their philosophy, Screwtape’s letters show, not surprisingly, that the Enemy and his agents’ actions are based in the belief in universal values and with clear intention of spreading knowledge of those values to others.

**Argument IV- allegory of the reader/ the writer as sender.**

Through the preface to “Screwtape Proposes a Toast”, Lewis reflects on the process of writing from the perspective of a demon, admitting that “It almost smothered me before I was done. It would have smothered my readers if I had prolonged it”. This observation implies the final sender / receiver relationship I would like to examine within the context of Lewis’s belief in a doctrine of objective value, the relationship that lies outside The Screwtape Letters’ narrative, that of the reader/writer allegory. Within the reader/writer allegory the writer assumes the role of sender while the reader is classified as receiver. Stepping outside of the narrative to identify the author’s role as sender is problematic, in part due to the simple communication model employed and in part due to the complicated role Lewis played to his readership.

Lewis is often celebrated as one of the most influential Christian writers of the twentieth century and, as atheist turned Christian apologist, his works play a very particular role as a Christian voice. Lewis was famous in his own time for his philosophical defence of the Christian faith so much so that his efforts in Christian apologetics lead to his appearance on the cover of Time magazine in 1947 under the caption “Oxford’s C.S. Lewis. His heresy: Christianity”. Lewis helped popularize the notion of using logic to support faith (Lindsley). As Amanda Jones discusses in her article The Narnia Schism much of Lewis’s writings have strong secular themes and Christian subtext, which would
strongly influence and define his role as sender. To put *The Screwtape Letters* into context, the novel was written in 1942 while Lewis was touring the world broadcasting talks such as “The Case for Christianity” over the radio and postulating ideas on which later books would be based. The impact of Lewis and *The Screwtape Letters* on the popularization of Christian discourse is best expressed by Owen Barfield when he recalls in *Light on C.S. Lewis* that “[h]ere at last was a religious book, indeed specifically a Christian book, written with such sophistication and elegance that one need not apologize for leaving it out on the coffee table” (109). The role Lewis played as sender to his readers was rich with an important element missing from the sender/receiver communications model employed in this essay, that of intention. Considering whether the sender, in this case the writer Lewis, is aware of the universal morality or objective doctrine of values identified in *The Abolition of Man* is paramount to asking the same question of the Enemy in the narrative; he is its source. A bold, one might say heretic, comparison can then be drawn between the different sources of the Tao; in the narrative God; outside the text Lewis. However Lewis distances himself from such a comparison when, in the foreword to a short sequel essay called “Screwtape proposes a toast”, he reveals that:

Screwtape’s advice to Wormwood should have been balanced by arch angelical advice to the patient’s guardian angel. Without this the picture of human life is lopsided. Even if a man—and he would have to be a far better man than I—could scale the spiritual heights required what ‘answerable style’ could he use? For the style would really be part of the content.²

Lewis’s question of what style would be appropriate to express the arch angelical perspective reveals the importance of the style of these letters to the message. The one sided and fragmented epistolary form of *The Screwtape Letters*, beginning *in medias res*, where even the “diabolical method of dating seems to bear no relation to terrestrial time”(x) is the form of Screwtape himself and he is the personification of it. Lewis acknowledges that he too is fragmented and though aware of the Tao he, as an imperfect and corruptible man, can only speak with a limited understanding of it.

The existence of *The Screwtape Letters* and the existence of Screwtape himself are presented through the narrative as real which prompts the question; Why? It is as

² “Screwtape proposes a toast” was published as an addendum to *The Screwtape Letters* and is included after the main text in the edition found in the source list.
himself that Lewis reveals Screwtape to the reader by signing the preface with his real name though “having no intention of explaining how” he acquired the letters (ix). This speaks to the author’s intention. Why reveal the demons? The final revelation of the demon Wormwood to his human patient in the narrative is one part of a whole message. Upon his own death, the human patient experiences something profound, a revelation that Screwtape understood all too well explaining that “[a]s he [the human] saw you [the demon], he also saw Them [God].” The existence of the Screwtape letters is only half of a message, the half that Lewis as a man felt capable of writing, whereas the other half he could only express by showing its opposite. The epistolary form of *The Screwtape Letters* insinuates a second half to the message as Screwtape himself insinuates the opposite of his dark logic. In order to reveal the logic of Heaven to the *reader*, the *sender*, Lewis, openly and explicitly shows the dark logic humans are capable of which speaks directly to the concept of speaking openly of inherent doctrine of value. Lewis, in his role of the creator, represents the source of the Tao and acts, through revealing the darkness in order to show the light, with clear intention of spreading knowledge of universal values to others.

**Conclusion**

The process of examining the various communicative pairs of Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters* for their relation to the author’s notion of a universal morality began with a simplification of those relationships through identifying their most basic elements: *sender, receiver & message*. The act of interpreting these elements through this basic communications model, however, is anything but simple. The idea of a doctrine of objective value or Tao, so central to Lewis’s apologetic writing, is also central to *The Screwtape Letters* but the manifestations of this concept vary. *The Screwtape Letters* is thus a lesson as well as a warning, that even as Lewis himself can twist his mind to spew forth the logic of Hell so can we the reader, even when shown the face of our demons, wander from the path. If one reconsiders the old demons declaration that “Only the learned read old books and we [Hell’s agents] have now so dealt with the learned that they are of all men the least likely to acquire wisdom by doing so” (150) and reads *The Screwtape Letters* with this warning in mind, it can be understood as a message sent by the writer to the reader addressing the problems inherent in interpretation, where the
act of trying to find out the why of a message can twist one's own understanding in many directions. As I have found, even in an attempt to simplify an approach can instead conceal its important elements. Lewis spent much of his career expounding the theories behind his beliefs and with an awareness of those beliefs it makes it possible to bend the message of his text to conform to those theories. That I think is the point, that when we are trying to bend a message to fit a concept the message inevitably changes. As the demon Screwtape struggles to interpret and understand the message of the Enemy so does Lewis struggle to interpret and understand the message of God, which in turn is becomes our—the readers’—struggle to interpret and understand the message of The Screwtape Letters.


http://web.mst.edu/~gdoty/classes/concepts-practices/models.html

<http://muse.jhu.edu.bibproxy.kau.se:2048/journals/southern_literary_journal/v035/35.2folks.html>.


--- Though not directly cited, Lewis’s *Surprised by Joy* was drawn upon in order to understand Lewis’s position as apologetic and as such is included as a source.