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Sucking Life: The Principle of Hell in *Screwtape*

Kimberly Moore-Jumonville

Screwtape's training of Wormwood in the art of deception exposes the tempters' desire to consume "the other" completely into the self. This insatiable appetite to devour is revealed to be the ruling principle of Hell, where one must eat or be eaten. As competitors, Screwtape and Wormwood can never comprehend the reality of Heaven, which exists by the opposite principle. If the rule of Hell is to consume the other, the rule of Heaven is to serve and celebrate the other. In *The Screwtape Letters* C.S. Lewis succeeds in depicting the choice to succumb to appetite or submit to a service that is perfect freedom.

Sucking Life: The Principle of Hell in C.S. Lewis's Screwtape Letters

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The West has long validated (and we could say celebrated) the separate, autonomous self as the experiencing Subject. The fact that we are self-conscious indicates our separateness from the Other. In fact, we feel so separate that we become isolated in our self-consciousness, so separate that we have trouble establishing connection with other selves who remain external to us. This frustrating experience produces anxiety, a fundamental alienation that leaves us isolated and lonely. The Romantic poets of the nineteenth century record their experience of the subject/object dichotomy in descriptions of **desire for beauty, for experience of the past**, even desire to **enter** scenes of “perilous seas or faerie lands forlorn” (Keats’s *Ode to a Nightingale*), or lose themselves “In Xanadu [where] Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree[d]” (Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan*) (C.S. Lewis, *Afterword to the Third Edition of The Pilgrim’s Regress* 202-203). The Romantics’ goal is to overcome alienation in an aesthetic experience of beauty, grace, and power in the landscape. They understand that as Lewis describes it in *The Weight of Glory*, “we do not want merely to **see** beauty” . . . “we want something else which can hardly be put into words”; we “want to be **united** with the beauty we see, to **pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it**” (*Weight of Glory* 37). That union with the other is what we long for. Here is where the Romantics accurately picture our souls’ longing to overcome the separateness of our existence. However, as inviting as their visions seem, C.S. Lewis reminds us in both *The Pilgrim’s Regress* and *The Weight of Glory*, that the Romantics don’t get it quite right because the object of desire is misplaced. The **true** object of our desire isn’t the beauty, grace and power of nature; rather, it is the **Creator** of the beauty that beckons us into a relationship of complete union. It is that **being united with something outside ourselves**

that God made us for; this is a description of Paradise, “to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it” that is what we long for, **to take God in, to become one with him**. That is a picture of Heaven. And Hell understands this, for the **central principle of Hell is to consume the other**. To help us understand Heaven better, C.S Lewis depicts the opposite of heaven’s principle of ‘complete unity with the other’ in *The Screwtape Letters* where demons live by “sucking the will and freedom out of a weaker self into a stronger” (qtd. in Huttar 2). [Hands apart=separation; hands tog=unity; hand over fist=consuming other]

Lewis came upon this idea in a kind of experience few of us have any more, that curious thing called “listening to the radio.” On July 20, 1940, Lewis wrote his brother Warren, that he and a friend had recently heard **Hitler** speaking on the radio and he describes how easy it is to fall under the influence of a powerful speaker.

I don’t know if I’m weaker than other people; but it is a positive revelation to me how *while the speech lasts* it is impossible not to waver just a little. I should be useless as a schoolmaster or a policeman. Statements which I know to be untrue all but convince me, at any rate for the moment, if only the man says them unflinchingly. The same weakness is why I am a slow examiner: if a candidate with a bold, mature handwriting attributed *Paradise Lost* to Wordsworth, I shd. [sic] feel a tendency to go and look it up for fear he might be right after all.

(Lewis, Warren 355)

Nearly being persuaded by Hitler’s lie engenders Lewis’s idea for a book titled “As One Devil to Another” and would consist of letters from an elderly retired devil to a young devil who has just started work on his first “patient” (King 9). “The idea [wd.] *sic* be to give all the psychology of temptation from the other point of view” (Lewis, Warren 355). This scheme took shape as an

epistolary novel, a **series of letters** that provide one half of a dialogue which the reader is allowed to overhear. *Screwtape Letters* first appeared in a religious newspaper *The Guardian*, in 31 weekly installments, May 2—November 28, 1941 and established the Oxford literature professor's popularity particularly in America (Como 2). Incidentally, the fact that he wrote the novel during WWII meant that he could assume his readers were confronting the fleetingness of life and the reality of evil perpetrated on the weaker by the stronger. Staring the evils of war in the face must have spurred readers to take their spiritual lives seriously; Lewis as a spiritual guide certainly makes us feel he stands alongside us in the trenches.

The author of the Screwtape letters is a senior tempter instructing his nephew devil with compelling authority, (a little Hitler-esque), on the best methods for goading a human being to hell. The human in question is a young unmarried man who lives with his mother, gets engaged to a young woman, and experiences a conversion to Christianity. His guardian devil, Wormwood, also young and inexperienced, is given the task of reversing the conversion. Readers overhear from an insider's point of view, then, how a devil tries to fend off his charge's conversion and then how he tries to turn him back to Hell. A passage from Chapter 22 will offer us a candid glimpse of Screwtape's malevolent mind.

This passage captures Screwtape's mission to render all other beings as entrees on his infernal menu. In fact, the most consistent images for the demons' behavior are images of eating. The tempters regard their human patients (and each other) as food! The stronger wills are prowling, trying to consume the lesser wills (Walsh 32). When this ravening takes the form of an appetite for flesh, it becomes the lowest expression of human appetites. Wormwood, the master demon Screwtape's protégé, lives in constant fear of being eaten. If he doesn't participate in trying to gorge himself on the patient, then he himself will become the food of his

uncle Screwtape. This disequilibrium breeds threats and frantic plots for self-preservation throughout the ranks of Helldom. Screwtape threatens Wormwood repeatedly: “You must learn to pay for your own blunders,” (Chap. 4) . . . “I really see no reason why I should try to shield you from the consequences of your inefficiency” (Chap. 13) . . . “I note with great displeasure” (Chap. 20) . . . “If any present self-indulgence on your part leads to the ultimate loss of the prey, you will be left eternally thirsting for that draught of which you are now so much enjoying your first sip (Chap. 5) . And from that passage I just read, “not that that excuses you. I’ll settle with you presently. You have always hated me and been insolent when you dared!” (Chap. 22). In other words, nobody’s safe in Hell. Screwtape’s last letter to his nephew begins:

My dear Wormwood, my very dear Wormwood, my poppet, my pignie. How mistaken; now that all is lost you come whimpering to ask me whether the terms of affection in which I address you meant nothing from the beginning. Far from it! Rest assured, my love for you and your love for me are as like as two peas. I have always desired you, as you (pitiful fool) desired me. The difference is that I am the stronger. I think they will give you to me now; or a bit of you. Love you? Why, yes. As dainty a morsel as ever I grew fat on. (Chapter 31).

Lewis’s depiction of the devil here has a memorable literary antecedent in Dante’s *Inferno*. Dante places Satan far below the fire and brimstone in the deepest bowels of Hell. He is suspended rigid in a lake of ice because Satan has foregone the warmth of connection, the bond that should connect him to other created beings. Frozen in place, Satan is gnawing the shades of his human minions Judas, Brutus, and Cassius. The worst eternal torture the medieval mind could conceive is expressed in the consumption of human flesh. Later, the seventeenth-century Satan of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* practices the same grim battenning on human flesh when he

convinces the two monsters guarding the gates of Hell, Sin and Death, to let him out of the Underworld by promising them food in the form of human souls (King 14). Romantic poets of the Nineteenth Century, George Gordon, Lord Byron, and Percy Shelley, thought of Satan as the hero of *Paradise Lost*—they admired him because he was uncompromising in his **thirst** for power, in his **insatiable appetite for control**. These poets' admiration may suggest more about about them than it communicates about Milton's genius, for **what we admire is what we are on the road to becoming**. If we admire an expression of selfishness, exploitation, an inability to respect the autonomy of others (Foster 16), we may be on the road to becoming more hellish ourselves. Remember that evil is a parasite. Evil doesn't create anything; it only exists by consuming what is good. Lewis tells us in *Mere Christianity*, "the powers which enable [evil] to carry on are the powers given it by goodness" (50). Thus, **evil has to consume in order to thrive**. The devouring, then, is self-serving; it is a way of using the other to get what the self wants.

Sucking the life force out of another is in fact what it means to be in Hell. If Hell is consuming the other, then no one is safe and every being is threatened by every other. We may recognize competition as the principle organizing the worlds we inhabit, **worlds** in Lewis's words "**held together entirely by fear and greed**" . . . "[a] dog-eat-dog world[s]" where "everyone wishes everyone else's discrediting, demotion, and ruin; [where] everyone is an expert in the confidential report, the pretended alliance, the stab in the back" (*Preface to the Screwtape Letters 1961*). Screwtape himself describes how Hell is especially practiced in destroying the other:

The whole philosophy of Hell rests on recognition of the axiom that one thing is not another thing, and, specially, that one self is not another self. My good is my

good, and your good is yours. **What one gains another loses.** Even an inanimate object is what it is by excluding all other objects from the space it occupies; if it expands, it does so by thrusting other objects aside or by **absorbing** them. A self does the same. With **beasts** the absorption takes the form of eating; for us, it means the sucking of will and freedom out of a weaker self into a stronger. “To be” means “to be in competition.” (Chapter 18)

Screwtape’s next letter tells Wormwood that “**all selves are by their very nature in competition**” (Chapter 19). We experience this battle in situations where there aren’t enough **resources** to satisfy **everyone’s** needs or desires. So we **scramble** to make sure **we** get what **we** want, even when **our winning** may come at the expense of **others; we gain by making someone else lose.** Parker Palmer recognizes that if we **misperceive** the world as a place of **scarcity**, then **competition** becomes necessary for **survival.** However, if we see the world as a place of **abundance**, then **acts of generosity and community** not only become **possible** but **fruitful** as well (Palmer 125). If we believe scarcity, then we grasp. If we believe abundance, then we open the hand.

It is a truism now to say that our hedonistic culture admires consumption of resources. Advertising and television parade movie stars and athletes’ extravagant lifestyles before us—the grandest homes, the most sumptuous vacations, the most fabulous parties. Especially great parties with great food. Because we’re all hungry—eating is an effective metaphor for the hungry soul.

The hungers that drive us are not **bad** things. After all, God created everything good; therefore, all our appetites are intended to point us **to** God, not lead us **away** from him. They reveal God as the giver of good things. . I Timothy 4: 4 reminds us, “. . . for everything created

by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving.” The Danish film *Babette’s Feast* depicts a conservative Christian community hesitant to dwell on gastronomical pleasures for fear they will be tempted to **idolize** the **pleasure** itself. But Babette, a gourmet chef the community rescues from war-torn Paris, **prepares** the group a **sumptuous** feast and while they eat it they **sacramentally experience God’s grace** and actually **begin to forgive one another the resentments they have built up over the years**. These characters are almost shocked into the realization that grace can be revealed through the sensual, that appetite can take us to God instead of away from him; it reveals God as the giver of good things. And if we experience longings nothing on earth can fulfill, then we know we’re made for more. Screwtape doesn’t understand love or goodness (what is God up to? he fumes) but he does understand that if he can **twist desire** in human beings, he will succeed in affecting our **choices**: The only question **Screwtape** asks of any **human** deed is whether it leads the soul closer to God or further from him (Walsh 22). Lewis is showing us that each individual choice points our soul to its destination; Screwtape hopes to direct his victims on a downward spiral to keep them **from** seeing that appetite is for God because we’re made for him; we have an appetite that finds its full expression in our **desire** for God because we are made for him. Isaiah 55:1-3 invites us to a **spiritual banquet** described in **physical terms**, in terms of food:

Ho everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;

And you that have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,

And your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,

And delight yourself in rich food.

Such a physical description of experiencing God leads our souls into spiritual mysteries. God wants us to devour God, to be fed by himself. This is the mystery of the Incarnation described in John 6: 54: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.” This incarnate, enfleshed God validates appetite as a good intended for true nourishment. What is the difference between Screwtape’s fricasseeing Wormwood and our eating God? Nourishment of the deepest kind. The diabolical meal Screwtape makes of Wormwood is an inverted parody of the central Christian symbol of the relationship between human and divine, the sacred meal of Communion in which the Body and Blood of Christ becomes the food of the faithful (Patterson 47).

Screwtape never figures out what God is up to, what God wants to do for his creatures. You know what? We don’t get it either. We feel like we have to hold tight to something. But God is telling us to let go, to put our faith in his love. We can’t program it. We can’t demand it or say “Love me like this, God.” We can’t hold heaven hostage, as we hear in another of Lewis’s books, the *Great Divorce*. In this culture that encourages us to demand our rights, we expect to be able to control our fate as a matter of justice. Screwtape is trying to control someone else, trying to consume him. **What God wants to do for us is not eat us but let us eat him.** He wants to give us **himself**. Screwtape never figures out what God wants to do for his creatures: give them himself (Patterson 47). Screwtape complains,

All His talk about Love must be a disguise for something else—He must have some *real* motive for creating them and taking so much trouble about them. The reason one comes to talk as if He really **had** this impossible Love is **our utter failure to find that real motive.** (Chap. 19)

Hell simply cannot fathom selflessness. If the principle of Hell is the **consuming of the other**, the **principle of Heaven is to give the self in service to the other.** Rather than turn us into a **ruin of ourselves** as Screwtape would have it, God wants to nourish us into **life** and free us to become the self he hopes we will become. Again, Screwtape just doesn't get it. **"We want to suck in, He wants to give out"** (Chap. 19). **"To get the man's soul and give him nothing in return—that is what really gladdens Our Father's heart"** (Chap. 9).

The contrast between the Hellish way and the Heavenly way is more obvious than we sometimes imagine. Consider this: If the demon's greeting is **"Nice to eat you"** the Christian's greeting might be **"Nice to eat with you"** (Foster 7). What a difference a preposition makes! (Foster 15). Hmm. *Nice to eat with you.* Thomas Foster notes that "whenever characters in fiction eat or drink together, we have an act of communion . . . breaking bread is an act of sharing and peace" (8). If sharing a meal is communal in literature, it is true in real life too. After all, we don't usually invite our **enemies** to dinner—unless we're trying to get on someone's good side (Foster 8). We usually invite our friends. The obsequious business lunch is no secret in the business world; it is a great way to win someone over, to make someone amenable to an idea. By the way, students, inviting your professor to lunch is an effective way to get him or her to look favorably upon your final grade! (Just an aside at this time in the semester; or for those of you who need extra credit right now) But it is kind of personal to take food into our bodies, isn't it? We usually want to do it with someone we are comfortable with. Generally, eating with another is a way of saying, "I'm with you, I like you," I trust you, I feel a bond of community with you (Foster 8). Communing with friends over a meal is the **opposite** of self-absorption, of literally absorbing the other into the self. It's the difference between **"I really enjoyed that person"** and **"I really enjoyed that person."** Furthermore, a communal meal

practices freeing the other. It is a way of strengthening, of blessing the other. At its best it nurtures the other into true and complete selfhood (Patterson 47). You can probably recall memorable meals in the D.C. where you were invited into a deeper experience of your whole self, when you were known for who you are in a deep way. My husband, Robert, and I remember our college OT professor saying to us, “When my family is gathered around the table eating and drinking in **celebration together**, I hope **heaven’s not too much better than this.**”

Sharing such a meal is an experience of being complete, of finding our true home in God.

Hell can’t give us our true home. Hell can’t overcome subject/object dichotomy to give us our true home, our true oneness with God. Only Heaven can do that. Only love invites us into unity with the divine other who gives us our true self, complete in God.

Good Christian hospitality can serve as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet—as Communion does. I invite you to contemplate the Rublev icon of the Holy Trinity with me. It is a representation of the visit of the angels to Abraham and Sarah, but the angels here are traditionally regarded as the three members of the Trinity. Since we have been describing Hell, you might see in these holy beings that there is no unfilled desire or longing expressed. Instead, this is a picture of peace and rest. But not static rest. We can see the figures are not busy doing something, but they are **occupied**; with what exactly? Is it that they are engaged in being? Are we observing ***Being*** at rest? As in Beings at rest. They are **attentive** and they are **attending to each other**. One of the earliest verses of Genesis reads, “God rested on the 7th day.” God was not anxious. Everything he made was good; there was perfect harmony in the beginning. And when the end comes, it will be a return to the original wholeness, integration, being at rest. We think of God as busy, God as the cosmic postman—all these prayers must keep God busy, all the details he has to juggle. But God was at rest in the beginning, he is at rest now, and he invites us into his rest if we will let him. If there is stillness, there is also movement here, movement in the texture and color and shape: the colors and textures of the robes move around and upward; the eye is moving from the bottom of the foreground—the feet rest not on the ground but up on stools that lift us upward (both the eye and the spirit) to the table and the color of the table moves the eye upward to the halos, the rocks, the tree, the house. The robes almost flow in circles until there is a flowing of shapes and circles almost swirling in a dance. Each figure is also gently disposed, is gently inclining and deferring and submitting to the others in the circle. Such openness seems to invite participation in a sacred dance; the open place at the table invites us up into the sacred dance. It invites **us**; you have a seat at the table! Do you realize this? Each one of us! You have a

place at this table; God invites each of **us** into the presence of the holy, the sacred mystery. This is an infinite circle of infinite love. And it isn't exclusive, it's not a closed circle. It is an invitation for us to be with the Holy Trinity. If Hell is individuals trying to absorb others in endless competition, it leads to isolation, alienation, loneliness, and powerlessness. Screwtape finally admits to Wormwood, "**We** are empty and would be filled; **He** is full and flows over. Our war aim is a world in which Our Father Below has drawn all other beings into himself: the **Enemy** wants a world full of beings united to Him but still distinct. (Chap. 19) Heaven in contrast to Hell, leads us into community with others that affirms us and invites us into our true identity.

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