

**THE EPISTLE NARRATOR: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF C. S. LEWIS' THE
SCREWTAPE LETTERS**

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Abstract

Every narrative has a narrator or narrators who tells/tell the story. He is different from the flesh-and blood person or the actual author because the narrator can have opinions that are not essentially the author's. He is also not the implied author, the author who emerges through the story as opposed to the actual author. The narrator is the voice of the narrative who establishes a communicative contact with the narratee, who manages the entire narration by deciding what is to be told or not to be told and how to be told. This paper attempts to analyse the narrator, Screwtape based on his style of narration in The Screwtape Letters by C. S. Lewis, who is famous for his fantastic novels, The Chronicles of Narnia.

Every human born into this world is gifted with this “narrative intelligence” (Blair 87). This is a term coined by David Blair and Tom Meyer to capture the human ability to organize experiences into narrative form. Similarly, Paul Cobley tells that stories are very ‘basic’ ways of thinking about the world. Human knowledge itself is based on stories. We eventually order the events of our world and find meaning in them by assimilating them to more or less familiar narratives. The human brain consists of cognitive machinery necessary to

understand, remember and tell stories. People tell about life, their mental spaces, about dreams or about others; people read stories when they watch television, listen to others' gossips or observe people around them. Humans have the tendency to 'storify' everything. In every culture stories have been told and written to entertain, educate, to preserve culture and to teach moral values. Looking closely, the natural nerve of storytelling and story-listening or story-reading is far from simple. Even the most 'simple' of stories is embedded in a network of relations that are sometimes astounding in their complexity.

The complexity of stories can be realized more clearly when noticed in their sophisticated forms like myths, fairy tales and moral stories, oral and later written. The small, delicate tree ('short' stories) grew into a giant tree that shades an entire yard in the form of novel. The word 'novel' came from the Latin word *novellus* meaning 'new'. It is hard to define what a novel is with hard and fast rules and formulas as W. Somerset Maugham puts it, "There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are" (Daigh 7). It can be vaguely defined as a long fictional story of more than 50,000 words, which uses all the elements of storytelling: plot, character, setting, theme and point of view. How a storyteller uses his narrative intelligence to tell his story in a peculiar way is still a mystery.

It is obvious that the author, while weaving his/her story, selects some events and omits others, sequences them in a peculiar order, selects a mode whether showing or telling to narrate the events, fixes them in specific perspective, space and time, and re-presents a world to the reader in the form of story. That is how stories are born. Why does he write? A story is born out of imagination or an impressive realistic incident. He writes because of a dire need or fiery urge moral or materialistic, or because he simply wants to share. Whatever the reason that made him/her write, the world needs stories.

Here is a great 'story teller'. Clive Staples Lewis, a novelist, poet, great intellect, medievalist, literary critic, essayist, lay theologian and Christian apologist, was born in November 22, 1963 in Belfast, Northern Ireland. From childhood he found great pleasure in books. Even at the age of twelve, he with his brother Warren wrote *Boxen* a novel of imaginary world of anthropomorphic animals. He was engrossed with Norse mythology and sagas, Greek legends and literature, and Irish myths.

He was an ardent atheist until the age of thirty one. He calls himself, "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England." From this point his imagination mingled his Christian beliefs and doubts with the myths he favoured. He had the gift "combine story, imagination, metaphor and reason; the rhetorical skill to order his ideas clearly and persuasively; precision with words; and the empathy to understand people's deepest struggles, questions and doubts" (Linsley 16). His stories are filled with moral imagination where the Christian principles and beliefs came alive through the stories. His stories helped people believe in the Supernatural. Almost all his fictional works – *The Pilgrim's Regress*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Space*

Trilogy, *The Great Divorce*, *The Screwtape Letters* and *Till We have Faces* – reflect his conviction.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, after the arrival of the children into Narnia, there is a discussion about Aslan, the Great Lion (the Jesus-like figure).

Susan asks, “Is he quite safe?” “Safe? Said Mr. Beaver, “... ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good.”

Eventually Aslan appears and the battle between good and evil begins in earnest. As the story unfolds, Aslan shows up when and where he will. He does not appear often, almost never on demand, and always on his own discretion. And he does not have to be visible in order for his power to be felt” (Lewis).

Indeed, C. S. Lewis pictures the existence of God even though He is neither always seen nor His presence always felt. The belief in the existence of God obviously implied the existence of evil. Another of his work, *The Screwtape Letters* depicts the involvement of devil in aiding men astray from the Father Above.

The Screwtape Letters is an epistolary novel with a series of thirty one letters written by Screwtape, a Senior devil and an administrator in the Hell Lowerarchy to Wormwood, a junior devil as well as his nephew. In these series of letters Screwtape mentors Wormwood giving him detailed advice on how to tempt the ‘Patient’ (whose name we aren’t disclosed) with subtle means. The letters primarily deal with Christian theological issues. *The Screwtape Letters*, published first on February 1942, is satirical where C. S. Lewis had to make ‘bad’ things good and ‘good’ bad. The author shared in 1963 that *The Screwtape Letters* are “dry and gritty going. At the time, I was thinking of objections to the Christian life and decided to put them in the form ‘That’s what the devil would say’”. But the writing process was highly fatiguing.

The story is that of the so-called ‘patient’ whether he deteriorates or progresses towards damnation. The main line story would focus on the ‘patient’. But the story doesn’t flow from his point of view. The Junior devil, Wormwood is in-charge of the patient. He is the one who attempts to tempt the patient in every step towards their Father’s abode – Hell. But the story neither does follow his perspective. The only narrator is Screwtape.

“I note what you say about guiding your patient’s reading and taking care that he sees a good deal of his materialist friend. But are you being trifle naive? It sounds as if you supposed that argument was the way to keep him out of the Enemy’s clutches” (Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* 1) - Screwtape thus begins his first letter to Wormwood. The onset of the letter, ‘I note that you say...’ implies that Wormwood had written a letter prior to this reply from Screwtape, but the author with his immense liberty chooses to give us only the letters of reply by Screwtape. With Screwtape’s letters, readers are left to imagine what Wormwood would have written and what happened to the patient. With these hints about Wormwood and the patient through Screwtape’s letters the story is left to our imagination.

Like C. S. Lewis' *Pilgrim's Regress* or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, here is also a story of a pilgrim who is called the patient who might regress or progress towards Heaven. But the author's choice of telling – epistolary style – makes us realise that the purpose of this telling is beyond this line. He wants to stir our imagination onto how the devil's brain works and he tries to tempt humans in the subtlest ways, and moreover, by the way, makes us understand the heart of God, the Father (who is called as the Enemy in this novel). The letter form is the chosen medium of the narrative and also an element of the plot.

I once had a patient, a sound atheist, who used to read in British Museum. One day, as he sat reading, I saw a train of thought in his mind beginning to go the wrong way. The Enemy was at his elbow in a moment. Before I knew where I was I saw my twenty years' work beginning to totter. If I had lost my head and begun to attempt a defence by argument I should have been undone. But I was not such a fool. (Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* 3)

Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts,

Yours affectionate uncle,

Screwtape. (Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* 61)

The earlier passage is an instance where the senior devil recollects his past. He tells Wormwood not to raise an argument by recounting a story from his past. With regard to the temporal determination of the narrative instance, Genette calls the narrative in past tense as subsequent narrative. The whole letter doesn't stay in past tense i.e., as subsequent narration. The temporal determination sways between the present and the past. The latter passage is in the present tense implying its contemporariness with the action. Such a narration in present will be called simultaneous narrative. But this epistolary novel is a complex one where the narrative combines subsequent as well as simultaneous narrative. The narrator tells us the past experiences and past events and combines them with his present impressions while writing these letters. Genette calls such a complex narrative as interpolated narrative. This type of narration is also used in *Till We have Faces* where

the narrator [Oural in *Till We have Faces* and Screwtape in *The Screwtape Letters*] is at one and the same time still the hero and already someone else: the events of the day are already in the past, and the 'point of view' may have been modified since then; the feelings of the evening or the next day are fully of the present, and here focalization through the narrator is at the same time focalization through the hero. (Genette 218)

Focusing on the temporal position, the author has obviously neglected the spacial determination in this novel, since there is no record of where the patient is in particular. Only knowledge regarding the place is that the patient belongs to the earth and Screwtape to Hell.

Being an epistolary novel, *The Screwtape Letters* has different levels of narrative too. Genette defines the difference in levels as "any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level

immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed” (Genette 228). The first level of narrative is called extradiegetic. It is exchange between the author and the reader. The next level happens between Screwtape and Wormwood, where Screwtape is the narrator and Wormwood is the narratee. In other words, the events told inside the first narrative is intradiegetic or diegetic level.

There are narratives within this narrative in the metadiegetic level. In the context of metalanguage the prefix ‘meta’ means the transition to the second degree. A character in a story can tell a story of his or her own, creating a narrative within a narrative, or a tale within a tale. The original narrative becomes a frame or matrix narrative, and the story told by the narrating character becomes an embedded or “hyponarrative” (Bal 48). A matrix narrative is a narrative that contains an embedded or hyponarrative. Normally both the shift to a hyponarrative, its end and the return to the matrix are explicitly signalled in a text.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, the narrator Screwtape sometimes turn to hyponarrative when he narrates stories from his past to guide his ward, Wormwood. In his first letter, Screwtape writes a story about a patient he once had. He was “a sound atheist who used to read in the British Museum” (Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* 2). He one day had a thought in his mind which could lead him towards God (the Enemy). Screwtape didn’t argue with him but instead gave slight diversions: “Much better come back after lunch and go into it with a fresh mind” (3). Once he came out to the street, the devil gave him “a healthy dose of real life”, showing him “a newspaper boy shouting the midday paper, and a No. 73 bus going past” (3). This story of another patient becomes a hyponarrative within the matrix of the primary narrative.

One of the functions of this metanarrative is explanatory function in which the narrator explains what events have led to the present situation. The above hyponarrative explains why Wormwood should not argue with the patient but divert with subtlest suggestions. Screwtape’s patient is now safe in their Father’s house (Hell). “You begin to see the point? ...they find it all but impossible to believe in the unfamiliar while the familiar is before their eyes. Keep pressing home on the ordinariness of things” (Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* 4). The story is to explain his point better.

The narrator narrates in the intradiegetic and also in metadiegetic levels using temporal determinations. But what kind of narrator is he? The choice of the narrator an author chooses is to fulfil the purpose of the telling. The narrator is different from the flesh and blood author. The one who narrates *The Screwtape Letters* is not the real C. S. Lewis but Screwtape the narrator. There are some narrators such as in *The Chronicles of Narnia* who doesn’t have a distinct name or a personal history but simply remain as a voice. But here the narrator has a specific name – Screwtape. He has a personal history – a Senior Devil who is in administrative position in Hell; uncle and mentor of Wormwood, a Junior Tempter. This kind of narrator with “distinct, named character, with a personal history, gender, a social-class position, distinct likes and dislikes, and so on” is called “‘overt’ or ‘dramatised’ or ‘intrusive’

narrator” (Barry 234). He intrudes into the story to pass philosophical or metanarrative comments and has a distinctive voice.

Based on the narrator’s relationship to the story, Gerard Genette categorises narrator as homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators. The narrator who is not a character in the story is a heterodiegetic narrator. The Narnian Chronicles has a heterodiegetic narrator who is less overt, omniscient and a third person. If the narrator is present in the story as a character in the story, then he is a homodiegetic narrator. Screwtape is a homodiegetic narrator since he is one of the characters in the story. But he is not the main character, whereas Wormwood, the Patient and the Enemy (God) are the main characters directly involved in the story. Screwtape acts as an advisor. From Wormwood’s letters and from other devils he comes to know about the patient, his mother and his friends, and his activities. Therefore the narrator is not the ‘experiencing I’.

The only voice heard in the narration is that of the narrator. The narration is written epistles. The whole narration sounds like a monologue. The voices and actions of the characters – the patient, Wormwood, the Enemy, patient’s mother, his friends – are presented through the perspective of Screwtape. Screwtape thus becomes the sole narrator and focaliser of the story. “A focaliser is the agent whose point of view orients the narrative text. A text is anchored on a focalizer’s thoughts, reflections and knowledge, his/her actual and imaginary perceptions, as well as his/her cultural and ideological orientation” (Jahn 38). And moreover, he is called “fixed focaliser” since the presentation of narrative facts and events are from the constant point of view of a single focaliser.

The author has chosen such a homodiegetic narrator to narrate in epistolary style with reasons. The narrator has specific functions which fulfil the purpose of his telling. First the narrator is there for the sake of narration. This is his fundamental role.

Secondly, the narrator directs the text. Screwtape interrupts the story to direct it through his instruction of right and wrong and also through metanarrative articulations. The third function of the narrator is to provide ideological support. The narrator interrupts his story to introduce instructive comments or general wisdom concerning his narrative. It serves for didactic purposes.

The fourth function of a narrator according to Genette is testimonial function. The narrator has to affirm the truth of the story. Lewis picked Screwtape to be the narrator to bring to light the existence of the Evil in the world and how the devil prowls like a lion to deceive humans. Through the senior devil’s advice and stories, the actual reader gets to know the satirical meaning behind the narration. The satirical note helps. How the devil’s mind works is what C. S. Lewis tries to capture through the narration of Screwtape. And Screwtape does an excellent job as a narrator in establishing truth of the unfamiliar world. The anger and disappointment of Screwtape when the patient slips towards Heaven reflects emotions behind the scenes.

Finally the narrator's function is his relationship with the narratee. Screwtape directly addresses Wormwood, the narratee. The letters form a means of communication between the narrator and the narratee. The intradiegetic narrator can only have an intradiegetic narratee. The narrator and the narratee are indispensable, irreplaceable and integral components in any narrative form. They help in making the narrative a colourless medium of life in all its intricate web of thought and actions.

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