

A Song and a Letter: Which is Better?

Rhetorical Analysis by Matthew Guinan, English 102

Life is a battle, if one is willing to fight. In order to obtain any goodness in this life, sacrifices must be made. One of the most difficult battles that every person must face takes place inside—moral choices are made that define one's character. Two classic pieces of literature that exemplify this battle are *A Christmas Carol* (1843) by Charles Dickens and *The Screwtape Letters* (1942) by C. S. Lewis. Both are highly effective, yet one is certainly more influential in its themes of morality than the other. By examining the audience, goals, strategies, and themes of each, a logical determination of which is better can be reached.

One of the most memorable stories of all time, *A Christmas Carol*, is a story of warmth and new life. Composed by Charles Dickens, the story relates the journey of a bitter man in his old age, namely Ebenezer Scrooge. He has rejected all purposes of life except for his excessive, gnawing hunger for wealth. On the night of Christmas Eve, he is visited by the ghost of his business partner, who is suffering great punishment in his after-death state. He warns Scrooge that if he does not abandon his evil ways, he will suffer a similar fate. He continues on to say that Scrooge will be visited by three spirits in a final attempt to melt the ice in his heart. On the other hand, *The Screwtape Letters* is another beautiful work, written by C. S. Lewis, that presents a series of letters. The story is about the advice of one demon to another on how to corrupt a man and lead him to ruin. They want to win the man's soul. Both stories are about the interior battle that every person must face.

The intended audience for each of these books is quite dissimilar, although they do coincide in some areas. *A Christmas Carol*, for example, has a very wide range of audiences; it has the potential to appeal to both men and woman. This story, as is evident from the title, is centered on the Christmas season. It can thus be of interest to people who enjoy Christmas, and stories about this festive season. However, this story can be very dark at times and contains some intense imagery. The ghosts, for example, are vividly illustrated. Generally, those interested in this story would be middle to late teens through adults. Having said this, *A Christmas Carol* is a story for all ages. Its brevity attracts a more extensive audience, especially teens. Additionally, while the book itself is certainly not for children, the story has been adapted into many variations for adults and children.

The audience for *The Screwtape Letters* bears little similarity to *A Christmas Carol*. However, they do connect on a few points; *The Screwtape Letters*, like *A Christmas Carol*, is meant for both men and woman. *The Screwtape Letters* is aimed at those who are trying to live by moral standards and can appreciate the difficulty of this. The age range would include late teens and up. It is clearly not meant for children; the utilization of demonic characters is evidence of this.

The main goal of *A Christmas Carol* can be found in its theme or message: the graces from the Christmas season can overcome the darkest depths of the human soul and shine forth throughout the entire year. Dickens is attempting to show how appreciating Christmas can lead to a reformed life. This is best portrayed in the following quote from Scrooge: "I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach" (81). Dickens also ties in another message, but it is much more subtle. It would almost be unnoticeable if not for a very powerful, gentle, and infamous line said by the meekest of characters: "God bless Us, Every One!"(88). No one is beyond hope; that is what Dickens is implying through this quote. Also, considering this quote comes from such a seemingly weak character (Tiny Tim), Dickens is also saying that true strength comes from weakness and humility.

The Screwtape Letters also involves a lesson of morality and repentance. However, where these two texts differ, is that *The Screwtape Letters* chronicles the many attempts to corrupt a young man who is already of good character. *A Christmas Carol*, as mentioned above, is about the turning away from a life already full of corruption. *The Screwtape Letters*, on the other hand, takes a very unique approach; Lewis writes it through the eyes of the enemy. He wrote this in order to help people avoid the dangers to morality of this life. Lewis once said, "Though I had never written anything more easily, I never wrote with less enjoyment" (183), suggesting that he suffered from writing about demons who triumph and enjoy their work throughout most of the book.

A Christmas Carol has very strong examples of ethos; it is written, as earlier mentioned, by Charles Dickens. This man is arguably one of the most well-known authors in literature. *A Christmas Carol* is perhaps his most famous work, but among his many others are: *Oliver Twist*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, and *David Copperfield*. Additionally, *A Christmas Carol* also displays pathos extensively. At the beginning of the novel, there is little emotion. Scrooge is very cold and unfeeling, and Dickens wants the reader to understand this. Later, however, once the reader has had a chance to become familiar with the character of Scrooge, pathos is almost constant to the end. The reader begins to empathize with Scrooge as the pains of his past, present, and future are revealed. But, pain is also caused by Scrooge; he greatly pained the woman that once loved him. And, he, in a very distant chamber of his heart, once loved her.

Next, *The Screwtape Letters*, like *A Christmas Carol*, was written by a famous author: Clive Staples Lewis. The author of the Narnia series, C. S. Lewis has certainly made his mark in literature. At first glance, it would not appear to the reader that *The Screwtape Letters* contained pathos. Written as a series of letters by demons, this book is not written in a way that provides a personal connection with the main character. However, although subtle and uniquely presented, this book does have pathos. The reader observes the attempted corruption of the young man, and the various methods that are used. The man has many troubles in life, such as his relationship with his mother, and his consternation at the possibility of being drafted for war. The reader might also feel a tendency to empathize with the character after witnessing the demons' attack on him.

Many strategies are used in each of these books to effectively convey the moral theme. *A Christmas Carol*, for example, uses extensively descriptive imagery and the Christmas season to draw in readers. It also utilizes ghosts and time travel, to a certain degree, as a way of making the story more fantastical and engaging. *The Screwtape Letters*, on the other hand, uses only the letters from one demon to another. This way, C. S. Lewis is presenting very serious, intense, and necessary material in a more approachable manner. The fact that it is written in the form of letters puts an entertaining twist on the textual content. Both are similar, though, in the sense that they go into great detail. The moral themes are built up throughout leading to a magnificent climax, where the main character of each reaches victory. In *The Screwtape Letters*, the victory is quite satisfying after observing the pain of the main character the entire time. As the demon, Screwtape, writes to his demon nephew, "You have let a soul slip through your fingers There was a sudden clearing of his eyes (was there not?) as he saw you for the first time, and recognized the part you had had in him and knew that you had it no longer" (171). The man referred to is the main character who recognizes that all of his misfortunes have been caused by demons tempting him to leave the path of morality and goodness. In contrast, in *A Christmas Carol*, the victory is very cheerful and warm. As the narrator explains, "[Scrooge] became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world" (88). The ease and simplicity of this ending fits with the holiday season, but the emphasis on the internal moral struggle is somewhat lost in the sentimentality.

Overall, because of these subtle differences, *The Screwtape Letters* is more effective at reaching its goal. The opportunity to view the works of demons close up inspires a realization of the dangers involved in real life. While *A Christmas Carol* is certainly entertaining, its moral theme is seen more in

the context of the story. Although this theme is very relevant, though by no means non-existent in the real world, it may be seen as fictional and sentimental as the rest of the story.

Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004. Print.

Lewis, C. S. *The Screwtape Letters*. San Francisco: Harper, 2001. Print.