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Jane Austen's *Lady Susan* as a Possible Source of Inspiration behind C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*

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JANE AUSTEN'S *LADY SUSAN* AS A POSSIBLE SOURCE OF INSPIRATION BEHIND C.S. LEWIS'S *THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS*

SONG (JOSEPH) CHO

“THE HARD CORE OF MORALITY AND EVEN OF RELIGION seems to me to be just what makes good comedy possible” (370). Thus writes C.S. Lewis in his short article “A Note on Jane Austen.” Lewis examines the four heroines of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey* and writes that all four characters “painfully, though with varying degrees of pain, discover that they have been making mistakes both about themselves and about the world in which they live. [...] All realize that the cause of the deception lay within” (362). Lewis continues by highlighting that “in all four the undeception, structurally considered, is the very pivot or watershed of the story” (363).

Similarly, the theme of self-deception figures prominently in *The Screwtape Letters*. Consider the following line from the veteran devil as he writes to his nephew Wormwood:

How much better for us if *all* humans died in costly nursing homes amid doctors who lie, nurses who lie, friends who lie, as we have trained them, promising life to the dying, encouraging the belief that sickness excuses every indulgence, and even, if our workers know their job, withholding all suggestion of a priest lest it should betray to the sick man his true condition! (23-24, Letter 5).

Given C.S. Lewis's interest in Austen's novels, it is possible that *The Screwtape Letters* may have been inspired by one of Austen's lesser-known works—namely *Lady Susan*. Published posthumously in 1871, *Lady Susan* was written, like *The Screwtape Letters*, in *epistolary style*, in which various characters write letters to one other. The titular character Lady Susan is a beautiful, flirtatious widow who is also ruthless, conniving, selfish, manipulative and cunning. This “Mistress of deceit” seeks to control her daughter Frederica whom she describes as “the greatest simpleton on earth” (Letter 2). She tries her best to control and manipulate Frederica into marrying the “contemptibly weak” (*ibid.*) Sir James. As in *The Screwtape Letters*, deception constitutes a major theme. This is made clear when Lady Susan writes to her friend Alicia rejoicing in the fact that she managed to deceive her husband Mr. Johnson: “it is undoubtedly better to deceive him entirely; since he will be stubborn, he must be tricked” (Letter 5). It is also worth noting that some of the letters end in a similar fashion as those written by Screwtape: “Your most obliged and affectionate sister,” “Your affectionate mother,” etc. Hence, *Lady Susan* and *The Screwtape Letters* appear to display a number of similarities.

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