

C. S. Lewis's *The Discarded Image* (1962/4)—The Great Model and its Supposals

"I am less like a botanist in a forest than a woman arranging a few cut flowers for the drawing room. So, in some degree, are the greatest historians. We can't get into the real forest of the past; that is part of what the word *past* means." --*De Descriptione Temporum*

"To judge between one *ethos* and another, it is necessary to have got inside both, and if literary history does not help us to do so it is a great waste of labour"—*English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*

"I mean the real or primary history which meets each of us moment by moment in his own experience. . . . What MacDonald called 'the holy present'. Where, except in the present, can the Eternal be met? If I attack Historicism it is not because I intend any disrespect to primary history, the real revelation springing direct from God in every experience. It is rather because I respect this real original history too much to see with unconcern the honours due to it lavished on those fragments, copies of copies of fragments, or floating reminiscences of copies of copies, which are, unhappily confounded with it under the general name of *history*."—"Historicism" (1950)

C. S. Lewis's *The Discarded Image*, though completed in 1962 and published posthumously in 1964 represents a long-long study of the classical and medieval periods, and versions of the material were delivered in lectures over a decade before the book. The book continues to a helpful and winsome introduction to the world-picture of the period. Not all scholars hold, however, that Lewis's picture is complete or entirely accurate. Robert Boenig, for example, believes that Lewis's description of the European Middle Ages is too uniform, tending to lump together differing ethnic regions, as well as differing classes and social groupings. Lewis, he charges, projects the writings of the intelligentsia back onto the rural and town cultures. David Lyle Jeffrey, in turn, while praising Lewis's coverage of the texts of Late Antiquity, holds that Lewis often projects nineteenth-century medievalist notions back on to the actual Middle Ages. Be this as it may, *The Discarded Image* also provided excellent insight into how Lewis's medievalism shaped his popular fiction, including the Space Trilogy and the Chronicles of Narnia.

Exploratory Questions

1. Do our models of the universe have to be true to be valuable? Why and/or why not?
2. Is a principle, such as Occam's razor, necessary to eliminate false (or untidy) supposals?
3. What are some advantages and pitfalls to the method of the organizer? Of the harmonizer?
4. How much trust can you (or should you) put in authorities?
5. How sure can we be about our historical narratives?
6. Are historical periods real? Why and/or why not?
7. Can knowledge of the past help us predict the future?

Comprehension Guide for Chapters 1 and 2

1. Should Lewis accept the anthropological picture of pre-logical (i.e. "savage") societies as an accurate one? Is his counter-portrait of medieval culture dependent upon it?
2. What are the chief components of the bookish culture that Lewis describes? What would it be like to live in such a culture?
3. Why does he take the time to distinguish non-classical pagan sources, such as the Old Norse and Celtic, from the mainstream classical ones?

4. How did the medieval genres of the romance and ballad survive until the nineteenth-century neo-medieval revivals?
5. Why does Lewis describe the model of the universe as a work of art? Do you agree? (12)
6. How does Lewis distinguish the great thinkers, the poets, the spiritual writers, and “the ditchers and alewives” in their attitude towards the great model?
7. According to Lewis (and Owen Barfield) what was the real difference between Copernicus and Galileo? (16)
8. Why must Lewis consider the diffusion of the model into popular imagination?

Comprehension Guide for Chapter 7, Section H “The Human Past”

1. What is the traditional picture of Greek and Hebrew views of time and history? Why does Lewis hold that these are not correct?
2. Why were not all medieval historians what Lewis calls historicists?
3. What are John Barbour’s three purposes for history? What fourth one does Froissart add? (277-178)
4. How were story and history not yet entirely delineated in the medieval period?
5. How did not having a sense of historical period shape the medieval historians?
6. How did a view of the past being more splendid promote the virtues of humility and joy in the medieval?

Comprehension Guide for Chapter 8 and Epilogue

1. What do the catalog, the commonplace, and the pageant reveal about the medieval aesthetic?
2. How did having a significant form that manifested wisdom and good sense shape the medieval creator’s response to the world and to the work?
3. Why would the medieval author have not placed a high stress on originality?
4. Why does Lewis argue that the medieval model was not true, but then neither exactly are the current models of the universe?