

C.S. Lewis on the 4 Major Differences between the Present and the Recent Past

You may have read C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and perhaps you've even read some of his nonfiction works such as *Mere Christianity* or *The Abolition of Man*.

But chances are you haven't come across Lewis' "[De Descriptione Temporum](#)" ("On the Description of Ages") – the first lecture he gave after receiving the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge University in 1954. In the lecture, Lewis discusses what marked the shifts between Antiquity, the Dark Ages, the Middle Ages, and the Enlightenment.

But interestingly, he thought the "greatest of all divisions in the history of the West" was between the time of Jane Austen (1775-1817) and his own time. Here are the four reasons why:

1) The change in political order.

"If I wished to satirise the present political order I should borrow for it the name which Punch invented during the first German War: Govertisetnent. This is a portmanteau word and means 'government by advertisement.' But my intention is not satiric; I am trying to be objective. The change is this. In all previous ages that I can think of the principal aim of rulers, except at rare and short intervals, was to keep their subjects quiet, to forestall or extinguish widespread excitement and persuade people to attend quietly to their several occupations. And on the whole their subjects agreed with them. They even prayed (in words that sound curiously old-fashioned) to be able to live 'a peaceable life in all godliness and honesty' and 'pass their time in rest and quietness.' But now the organization of mass excitement seems to be almost the normal organ of political power. We live in an age of 'appeals,' 'drives,' and 'campaigns.' Our rulers have become like schoolmasters and are always demanding 'keenness.' And you notice that I am guilty of a slight archaism in calling them 'rulers.' 'Leaders' is the modern word. I have suggested elsewhere that this is a deeply significant change of vocabulary. Our demand upon them has changed no less than theirs on us. For of a ruler one asks justice, incorruption, diligence, perhaps clemency; of a leader, dash, initiative, and (I suppose) what people call 'magnetism' or 'personality.'"

2) The change in the arts.

"I do not think that any previous age produced work which was, in its own time, as shatteringly and bewilderingly new as that of the Cubists, the Dadaists, the Surrealists, and Picasso has been in ours. And I am quite sure that this is true of the art I love best, that is, of poetry... I am not in the least concerned to decide whether this state of affairs is a good thing, or a bad thing. I merely assert that it is a new thing. In the whole history of the West, from Homer-I might almost say from the Epic of Gilgamesh—there has been no bend or break in the development of poetry comparable to this."

3) The change in religion.

"Thirdly, there is the great religious change which I have had to mention before: the un-christening. Of course there were lots of sceptics in Jane Austen's time and long before, as there are lots of Christians now. But the presumption has changed. In her days some kind and degree of religious belief and practice were the norm: now, though I would gladly believe that both kind and degree have improved, they are the exception."

4) The change in technology.

"Between Jane Austen and us, but not between her and Shakespeare, Chaucer, Alfred, Virgil, Homer, or the Pharaohs, comes the birth of the machines. This lifts us at once into a region of change far above all that we have hitherto considered. For this is parallel to the great changes by which we divide epochs of pre-history. This is on a level with the change from stone to bronze, or from a pastoral to an agricultural economy. It alters Man's place in nature... Our assumption that everything is provisional and soon to be superseded, that the attainment of goods we have never yet had, rather than the defence and conservation of those we have already, is the cardinal business of life, would most shock and bewilder [our ancestors] if they could visit [our world]."

According to Lewis, the changes between his age and that of Jane Austen were great, and they were rapid. The rapidity of change continues in our own time. Men and women are forced to quickly adapt to innovations and patterns of life which prior generations never fathomed, leaving them little time to catch their breath.