

C.S. Lewis: 3 Reasons Why Students Should Read Old Books

In the last couple years, I've written a [handful](#) of [posts](#) on how the school reading lists of today compare with those of a hundred years ago.

While there are often many differences between current and past reading lists, one of the most glaring is that modern lists are heavily weighted with recently written titles. Suggesting that this is a problem, however, inevitably [leads to a scolding](#) for hanging on to the past and not allowing students to wrestle with issues prevalent in today's society.

But according to C.S. Lewis, failing to introduce students to the books of the past may be more of a serious problem than today's schools realize. In his essay collection [God in the Dock](#), Lewis explains three reasons why students should have a steady diet of old books:

1. It's Easier to Learn from the Source

When it comes to Plato and Aristotle, many automatically assume they are not up to the task of reading and understanding the works of these great men. Such an assumption, Lewis notes, is completely false:

"I have found as a tutor in English Literature that if the average student wants to find out something about Platonism, the very last thing he thinks of doing is to take a translation of Plato off the library shelf and read the Symposium. He would rather read some dreary modern book ten times as long, all about 'isms' and influences and only once in twelve pages telling him what Plato actually said. ... The student is half afraid to meet one of the great philosophers

face to face. He feels himself inadequate and thinks he will not understand him. But if he only knew, the great man, just because of his greatness, is much more intelligible than his modern commentator."

2. It Broadens Perspective

Reading old works, Lewis argues, broadens a student's knowledge and allows him to better critique and evaluate the modern books he reads:

"If you join at eleven o'clock a conversation which began at eight you will often not see the real bearing of what is said. Remarks which seem to you very ordinary will produce laughter or irritation and you will not see why— the reason, of course, being that the earlier stages of the conversation have given them a special point. In the same way sentences in a modern book which look quite ordinary may be directed 'at' some other book; in this way you may be led to accept what you would have indignantly rejected if you knew its real significance."

3. It Aids in Understanding the Present

Lewis acknowledges that the authors and thinkers of the past made mistakes. But acquainting ourselves with the books they wrote will enable us to better see the ways in which we can avoid those same mistakes:

"Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books. ... Nothing strikes me more when I read the controversies of past ages than the fact that both sides were usually assuming without question a good deal which we should now absolutely deny. They thought that they were as

completely opposed as two sides could be, but in fact they were all the time secretly united— united with each other and against earlier and later ages— by a great mass of common assumptions. We may be sure that the characteristic blindness of the twentieth century— the blindness about which posterity will ask, ‘But how could they have thought that?’ ... None of us can fully escape this blindness, but we shall certainly increase it, and weaken our guard against it, if we read only modern books. Where they are true they will give us truths which we half knew already. Where they are false they will aggravate the error with which we are already dangerously ill. The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books.”

Do we need to rethink the push for modern literature and instead reintroduce our students to the works of the past?

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