

'The Chronicles of Narnia' and the Power of Learning from the Past

Ever since I first read [The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe](#), I have been enthralled with the brilliance of C.S. Lewis' books for children. So, I was surprised when I first read John Milton's [Paradise Lost](#) and stumbled across a few lines that were very familiar:

*His visage drawn he felt to sharp and spare,
His arms clung to his ribs, his legs entwining
Each other, till supplanted down he fell
A monstrous serpent on his belly prone*

If you have read [The Silver Chair](#) from *The Chronicles of Narnia*, this passage might ring a bell for you as well. When the Queen of the Underland fails in her attempt to enchant Rilian, Eustace, Jill, and Puddleglum, she loses her pleasant demeanor and transforms into a serpent:

Her arms appeared to be fastened to her sides. Her legs were intertwined with each other, and her feet had disappeared. The long green train of her skirt thickened and grew solid, and seemed to be all one piece with the writhing green pillar of her interlocked legs. And that writhing green pillar was curving and swaying as if it had no joints, or else were all joints. Her head was thrown far back and while her nose grew longer and longer, every other part of her face seemed to disappear.

Milton's influence on Lewis is striking through these passages. In fact, Lewis had such an appreciation for Milton's work that he wrote "[A Preface to Paradise Lost](#)" to help

readers better understand the poem. In [Lewis' view](#), "M[ilton]'s great success [in *Paradise Lost*] lies in practicing the credal affirmation without losing the *quality* of myth." In other words, Milton created a beautiful and seamless blend of art and Christian belief in his story. Many readers would agree that Lewis achieved the same effect in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

This respect Lewis has for Milton presents a frequently ignored fact to us today: Paying attention to the wisdom of those who have gone before us strengthens our ingenuity and helps us evaluate our present culture. Our culture today is diseased with a disregard for history. Frequently, people in the past are seen as being backward, bigoted, and ignorant. With all of our enlightened modern philosophies, scientific knowledge, and advanced technology, we are above anything that previous ages could teach us. Or maybe not.

Lewis, an adherent-turned-critic of "chronological snobbery" [wrote](#):

Our own age is also 'a period,' and certainly has, like all periods, its own characteristic illusions. They are likeliest to lurk in those widespread assumptions which are so ingrained in the age that no one dares to attack or feels it necessary to defend them.

According to Lewis, the way for us to see beyond the limited perspective of our own culture is to seek out and learn from the past.

This was a conviction that Lewis took to heart. So much so, in fact, that he recommended [reading an old book after every new one](#). As is evidenced in his writing, Lewis read broadly and thought deeply about many old books, including Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Paradise Lost is a beautiful narrative poem on the fall of

humanity in the Garden of Eden. Since he was the chair of medieval and Renaissance literature at Cambridge (and an avid reader), it is no surprise that Lewis was influenced by Milton's poem. Multiple different stories, mythologies, and concepts—many of them ancient—are woven seamlessly into *Narnia*. Lewis' study of past works deepened his art, philosophy, and theology, making his books fresh and informed for a modern audience.

For instance, the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost* seems to reappear in both Jadis and the Queen of the Underland. The scene where Aslan creates the Narnian creatures out of the ground in [The Magician's Nephew](#) also comes almost directly from the pages of *Paradise Lost*. Even Jadis' method of tempting Digory to eat the apple in *The Magician's Nephew* mirrors that of the Miltonic Satan when tempting Eve.

Milton is still one of the giants of English literature today. His work has impacted many books, not just *The Chronicles of Narnia*. And just as Lewis learned from Milton, we too can find the value that comes from learning from the great minds of the past.

If we do not learn from previous ages, not only will we lack the skills we could have gained by studying masterpieces, but we also limit ourselves to our current time's way of thinking. Recognizing those who have done work well in the past helps us continue to create work that is well-rounded and informed in the present. It also enables us to recognize the fleeting ideas and fads of the day and focus on that which lasts.

In a world full of so much noise, blind pride, and unfounded assertions, isn't it time for us to follow Lewis' example and reach for the work of the ancients as we evaluate the present?

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