The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature Study Guide

The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature by C. S. Lewis

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The beliefs of the Medievals might in some respects resemble those of less civilized peoples. What distinguishes them, however, is that while the beliefs of "barbaric" peoples are ultimately derived from their immediate environments, the Medievals were almost obsessed with books, and their beliefs can all be traced to the authority of some author, for better or worse. Many of these writers, like Cicero and Lucan, were not even Christians, though many were such as Boethius and so-called Pseudo-Dionysius.The contributions of these authors can be as simple as descriptions of the physical universe or as abstract as the formulation of natural laws. Apuleius, an ancient Pagan, provided two such natural laws which proved essential to the Medieval understanding of the world. The first is called the principle of plenitude, which states that every region of space is filled with beings. This would greatly inform the Medieval understanding of angels and demons. The second principle is known as the principle of the Triad, which is somewhat more abstract. In essence, it states between two very different things, there must be a third thing which mediates between them. Thus, since humans and God are utterly different, it is necessary to have angels, which are somewhere between human and Divine, to mediate to them.

The Medievals more or less accepted the astronomical beliefs of the Pagans. They believed that the Universe was a series of enormous spheres centered around the Earth. In the sphere of Nature—the region below the orbit of the moon—beings are subject to change and destruction; in the upper spheres, they are perfect and unchanging. Contrary to what is often believed, the Medievals, with few exceptions, did not believe the Earth was flat, though they did believe the equator was so hot that travel to the southern hemisphere would be forever impossible, which possibly explains why exploration was stifled for so long. The upper spheres were demarcated by the orbits of the planets which, they believed, exerted a predictable influence both on inanimate matter and on the actions of men, leading to the belief in astrology. The uppermost sphere was where the first mover dwelt, who was moved directly by God and, in turn, moved the lower spheres.

Regarding the inhabitants of the Earth, many Medievals, though not all, believed in the existence of mythical, sentient creatures like elves and centaurs, though these beliefs fell into obsolescence in later periods. While knowledge of domestic animals like pigs or cows was quite good—since people often made their livelihood from these—people were unsurprisingly quite uninformed about animals in other parts of the world and believed in the existence of such animals as the Unicorn or Phoenix.

All living creatures, the Medievals believed, possessed a soul, though what kind of soul they possessed depended upon the type of being. Plants possess only a vegetative soul, which governs unconscious functions like growth or metabolism. Irrational animals possess a sensitive soul, which grants them the ability to perceive their surroundings. Humans, the "rational animal," possess a rational soul which enables the functions of reasoning and understanding.

The peculiar qualities of Medieval literature can be largely attributed to their attitude towards the universe as they understood. In short, they were in love with the universe, and so were often content merely presenting it as it is (or, rather, as they thought it was), which can make their writing seem dull and repetitive to the modern writer. In fact, the content had such a primacy for the Medieval mind that the author was, in some ways invisible, to such an extent that later writers thought nothing of borrowing heavily from previous writers, since the notion of artistic ownership did not exist.

Chapter I: The Medieval Situation

Chapter I: The Medieval Situation Summary and Analysis

The beliefs and values of the medieval man may, at first glance, bear many similarities to those of less civilized people. The belief of so-called "savages" is usually the result, ultimately, of an immediate response to one's environment. That is, it is a kind of belief that develops without long or rigorous mental exercise; rather, it develops spontaneously out of one's circumstances. With time, in some civilizations, this can even evolve to being a somewhat kind of scientific belief, but that connection to the original "savage" beginnings is always there. Medievals differ in this respect. As strange and obsolete as many of their beliefs may seem, how they came to believe them is utterly different from less civilized nations. Above all, Medieval men were book readers and gave an almost slavish amount of authority to them; it was almost as if a proposition being in a book guaranteed its truth. Of course, much that was written and found in books contradicted, or seemed to contradict, one another, and thus a great project of Medieval writers was to attempt to reconcile these competing notions. A second notable feature of the Medieval mind was the great desire to organize and systematize ideas. This can be seen especially clearly in the works of Dante and Aquinas.

Chapter II: Reservations

Chapter II: Reservations Summary and Analysis

The Model—the collection of beliefs about the universe and its inhabitants which formed a kind of backdrop for writers in the Middle Ages—is certainly a reflection of the philosophical and religious currents of thought of the time, but it should not be thought of as a direct image of it. The Model was not sensitive to some of the most heated and, historically, important debates in the Middle Ages, like the introduction of Aristotle or the debate between Nominalism and Realism. While the least educated of the Medievals was probably totally unaware of any of the elements of the model, its influence extended fairly far down the economic and social echelons.

Chapter III: Selected Materials: The Classical Period

Chapter III: Selected Materials: The Classical Period Summary and Analysis

Three sources provided the most important contributions to the Model: The Bible, Ovid, and Virgil. However, as these sources are so well-known, attention instead will be given to those less famous, though still vitally influential, sources, beginning with those from the period between 0 AD and 300 AD.

The first of these is the "Somnium Scipionis" or "the dream of Scipio" which appears in Cicero's Republic. In the dream, Scipio Minor is taken up by his father, Scipio Major, to a region of the heavens known as the Stellatum. The Stellatum is part of a common astronomical picture in which "Nature" is divided from the "Sky" by the orbit of the moon. Nature is the realm in which things constantly change whereas the Sky is a place where nothing changes and everything exists forever. The sky, naturally, is the place of the gods and where the souls of the just go, and Scipio Minor is so impressed he wishes to go there immediately. He is rebuked, however, and told that he must not commit suicide but stay on Earth until the time appointed by the gods. Scipio then notices how small the Earth is in contrast to the heavenly bodies, implying how insignificant worldly ambitions are. All of these themes—including the ascent itself—in some way, will re-appear in Medieval literature, though often "cleaned up" to fit into the Christian worldview of that period.

The poet Lucan's influence is seen throughout Medieval literature, as well. One story from Lucan that reappears continually in Medieval literature is the story of Amyclas, a poor farmer who is not intimidated when Caesar knocks on his door: He is a model of the noble poor man. Lucan's story of Cato and Marcia becomes a kind of allegory for marriage and its virtues. Lucan even developed into a kind of scientific authority for later writers, including Dante, who cited him in support of the existence of the Antipodes—a region of the Earth around its equator which was impassable due to the extreme heat—despite the fact that Lucan had no claim to scientific expertise.

The goddess of Nature, who is present throughout Medieval literature, takes on a much different aspect in pagan literature. For later Christians, Nature is something definable, a beautiful creature of God, but only one of many creatures and not the highest. For Pagans, however, Nature is much harder to write about, since for them Nature included almost everything, and by including everything, it became nothing definite at all.

Classical writing on spirits informs much of the Model's own understanding of spirits, which in the Christian era became angels. Theologians would later conclude that angels were pure spirits with no bodies, However, the popular conception of angels, which informed literature, still held onto the Pagan notion of spirits which inhabited bodies,

albeit bodies different in nature from human bodies, and even invisible to the human eye.

Apuleius provided two doctrines which would be very important for the Model. The first of these is the Doctrine of the Triad, which states that since God and man are so different, there must be a third thing—namely, the created spirits—which mediates between them. Second, he believed in the Doctrine of Plenitude, which states that all space is filled with beings, and thus even in the outer regions of the aether there are some kinds of beings.

Chapter IV: Selected Materials: The Seminal Period

Chapter IV: Selected Materials: The Seminal Period Summary and Analysis

Following the classical period is what is known as the seminal period, the period which marked the transition from a Pagan West to the Medieval West which was dominated by the influence of Christianity. While this period is marked by great conflicts between Pagans and Christians (both intellectually and violently), it would be a mistake to think, as many have, that there was a bold line which separated Pagan from Christian. In fact, despite the enmity that often existed between them, Christians and Pagans borrowed frequently from the history and heritage of the other, to such an extent that it is difficult to determine whether some writers are Pagan or Christian.

The first of the important figures from this period is Chalcidius, who is most famous for his translation of Plato's Timmaeus, the only Platonic translation the Medieval world had access to until the 13th century. Chalcidius' religion is unclear, as his writings incorporate many Christian and Pagan influences, but it is likely that he was a Christian who was trying to keep his philosophical method pure. This idea of philosophical purity comes from Aristotle's notion that the various arts and sciences ought to be strictly divided from one another. Theology and philosophy are distinct sciences, and thus it would be incorrect to include theological texts in a philosophical work, or, at least, if they are to be included, they ought to be given as much weight as other, uninspired texts. This is precisely the method employed by Chalcidius.

Along with the translation of the Timmaeus, Chalcidius included his own commentary, which often strays far from the philosophical issues brought up in Plato's text. In his commentary, Chalcidius provided a dubious interpretive key to the text, whereby the reader attributes to Plato, such a revered philosopher, whichever position is most worthy of his wisdom; in other words, the interpreter has near free reign to attribute anything whatsoever to Plato.

Chalcidius is in agreement with the two principles of Apuleius, already mentioned—the Doctrine of the Triad and the Doctrine of Plenitude. However, drawing inspiration from Plato, he expands upon the Doctrine of the Triad, and sees the three parts as the sovereign which commands, the executive which carries out the orders of the sovereign, and the subject which obeys the orders. This pattern is seen not only in God's relation to man, but also in political communities and man himself. In a state, the king commands, his soldiers carry out the orders, and the citizens obey them. Likewise, in a person, reason commands, the passions carry out the orders, and man's appetites obey them. This triadic pattern repeats itself throughout Medieval thought, especially in notions about the behavior of a chivalrous knight or the proper actions of a freeman.

The next important figure is Macrobius. Once again, his religion has been doubted, but the balance of evidence suggests that he was a Pagan, though certainly familiar with Christian ideas. His works contain many ideas about the nature and origin of the physical world. He shared the notion that surrounding the world's equator was an area too hot for anyone to ever travel through it. Now, just as geographically, the known world is cut off from the rest of the world by these "Antipodes," so too is the present cut off from the past. History is divided into discrete periods separated by great worldwide catastrophes which destroyed civilization and forced mankind to begin anew. The universe itself is without a beginning and the Earth, being at the center, is composed of those parts of it which were the densest and therefore worst.

Another part of Macrobius' legacy is his discussion of dreams. He divided dreams into two types, those which told the truth about something and those which were simply useless. Of the first type, there are three kinds: the "somnium" which told the truth as an allegory, the "visio" which literally transmitted the truth, and the "oraculum" in which some revered speaker revealed something to the dreamer. The useless type of dreams are divided into "insomnium"—dreams which merely repeated the occupations of a day"—and "visum"—a more malicious type of dream which includes nightmares.

As many thinkers in his time became critical of the use of fiction as something unfitting a philosopher, Macrobius also came to the defense of Plato and Cicero, who both had authored well-known myths about dreams. He argued that while most fiction is, in fact, unworthy of a philosopher, certain fiction can contain elements of truth hidden under the guise of fiction, and this was acceptable. He also found himself compelled to "clean up" the portion of Cicero's "somnium," which suggested that only civic rulers could enter heaven, and argued that Cicero was really talking symbolically, leaving room for religious, as well as civic, virtue.

Medieval writers were very fond of the works attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, a Greek who converted after hearing Paul, though it would later be discovered these works came centuries after the time of Paul. His most important work as far the Model is concerned is his classification and theology of angels. The angels are divided into three groups of three species (Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones; Dominations, Powers, and Virtues; Principalities, Archangels, and Angels) according to their respective dignity and "closeness" to God, the Seraphim being those angels closest to him and the Angels being those angels closest to men. Part of God's Providence is that God's "light" is transmitted directly only to the highest angels, and from there to the lower angels and eventually to man. The influence of the notion of the Triad is obvious here.

The final important figure from this era is Boethius, a Christian philosopher and theologian who was executed under the barbarian king Theodoric. His work that proved to be his most influential was the Consolation of Philosophy, a work he wrote while imprisoned about how the life of a philosopher was a happy one, regardless of the circumstances which surrounded him. Some have questioned Boethius' faith since the consolations mentioned in this book are all philosophical and not religious, but once again it is likely that Boethius was simply following the example of Aristotle and keeping the sciences distinct from one another. Though the content of the Consolation had great

influence on Medieval writers, it should be noted first that its form—alternative prose and poetry—is something which would later be repeated by many writers.

The book begins with a personified Philosophy telling the troubled Boethius that the philosopher should expect persecution, since what he teaches is often at variance with what the "rabble" want to hear. This same attitude would later be incorporated into the persona of Christ as depicted by Milton. The philosopher, then, totally rejects the admiration of the crowds.

The central topic, perhaps, of the Consolation is why it seems that fortune rewards the wicked and punishes the good. The answer given is that, even if it does not seem so, all receive their just rewards, for wickedness is punished by itself; no wealth, power, or honor is worth being a wicked person. Likewise, being a just man far outweighs the penalties that fate might impose, even being executed.

Chapter V: The Heavens

Chapter V: The Heavens Summary and Analysis

Much like the modern world conceives of physical objects "obeying laws," the Medievals spoke, for example, of a stone "desiring" to travel towards the Earth. In neither case, should the metaphor be taken literally. The "desires" or inclinations of physical objects depended upon their elemental make-up—whether their composition included earth, wind, air, or fire, and in what proportions. Earth inclined downwards, for example, while fire inclined upwards. The Medievals also conceived of a fifth element called aether, but it only existed outside of the sublunary sphere; that is, one would have to travel outside of the orbit of the moon to find it.

For the Medievals, the Universe was a series of concentric spheres and Earth was the center. Each planet had its own sphere and the final, largest sphere was where the invisible "prime mover" dwelt. It is important to note that the prime mover is not God, but rather, it is the vehicle by which God moves the highest sphere, which in turn moves the sphere below it, and so forth down to the sphere of the Moon. Outside the sphere of the prime mover is "where" God dwells in Heaven, though it should be noted that this is not to be considered a truly spatial realm. As has been noted in previous contexts, in this astronomical model the Earth is of minuscule size.

According to this model of the universe, the planets and stars also exerted influence on the earthly sphere which could, to some extent, be predicted by astrology. Though the Church condemned the practice of making predictions with astrology, everyone, even Churchmen, agreed that astrology could be used to predict the future; wise men could resist the influence of the planets, but most men were not wise, and thus subject to them. Each planet had a different "personality;" that is, each planet exerted a different kind of influence. Mars influenced men to war, for example, while Jupiter influenced men towards happiness and leisure.

The Medievals followed Aristotle in their explanation of how the heavens moved. The prime mover moved out of love for God and its circular motion was an attempt to imitate the perfection of God, since a circle is the perfect shape. Likewise, the lower spheres, which were also guided by their own intelligences, imitated God in the same fashion; however, since they were of a lower nature, their imitation was less perfect and thus their orbit smaller.

It was commonly believed by theologians that the Fall applied only to the sphere of the Earth, and thus there could be no sin or malice outside of it (fallen angels or demons lived in the air under the moon). Thus, those planets whose influences seemed to be bad—Saturn caused pestilence, for example—were only bad in the perceptions of men; truly, they were punishments sent to correct and perfect mankind.

Chapter VI: The Longaevi

Chapter VI: The Longaevi Summary and Analysis

From a historical perspective, Medieval belief in what would now be considered mythological creatures—fairies, elves, centaurs, and the like—is difficult to grasp. It is obvious that there were no fixed beliefs among common people on these subjects, and it is difficult to say how widespread these beliefs even were. The creatures appear often enough in folk stories, literature, and sometimes even more serious works that it is certain that a significant portion of the Medievals believed in them. The first thing to note about the "faeries" is that they were neither uniformly good or bad. Some of the Longaevi were pernicious and responsible for abductions or worse. Others had no bad intentions, but were shy and tried not to be seen by people.

The status of these creatures in the scale of the world seems to be a point of contention. Some writers argued they were a kind of "third species" between men and angels, and thus had a rational nature. Others, following the Doctrine of the Triad mentioned previously, argued that the Longaevi were the beings which inhabited the various elements. Some believed they were a kind of subclass of the fallen angels who rebelled with Satan, who were not fully dedicated to his cause and thus were punished in a lesser way. The view which would eventually win over, and ultimately lead to their abolition in thought, was that they were simply demonic spirits. Once this belief became more common, they also became much more sinister and thus were talked about less.

Chapter VII: The Earth and Her Inhabitants

Chapter VII: The Earth and Her Inhabitants Summary and Analysis

Just as the celestial spheres were guided by their own intelligences, so too did the Medievals believe that Earth has an intelligence which governs it. However, as the Earth is the center of the Universe, and as such does not orbit, this intelligence was identified as Fortune or Luck which governed chance events which happened on Earth.

Physically speaking, nearly all Medievals believed the Earth was spherical, contrary to the myths common in the modern world that they believed the Earth to be flat. To be sure, there were some vocal advocates of the flatness of the Earth, but those have persisted even in more modern times and were certainly a minority consciously arguing against the majority belief. Medievals even grasped many of the implications of the spherical nature of the Earth, including a crude understanding of the law of gravitation. Poor map-making is probably partially at fault for the modern myth that the Medievals believed the world to be flat. However, it is probably too much to expect the Medievals to know how to accurate represent a three-dimensional sphere on a two-dimensional piece of paper and talk of the "ends of the earth" can be safely assumed to be referring to the end of the known, or knowable, world.

Cartography was a very flawed art in the Middle Ages and knowledge of geography was probably a much more practical knowledge than one which dealt with explicit images of boundaries and shapes of land-masses. Much of Medieval interest in geography has a romantic bent: There was great interest, for example, in identifying the actual location of the Garden of Eden. Though surviving Medieval maps were quite crude—and it is questionable whether maps were meant to be practical tools in those times—knowledge of geography was fairly expansive, extending even into Asia before access was shut off during the Ming Dynasty.

Zoology, or the study of beasts, was a topic which garnered much interest. The average person actually possessed a lot of knowledge about common animals, like pigs or horses; after all, for the vast majority of men, their livelihood depended upon them in some fashion. On the other hand, legends from travelers about the animals of distant lands, either totally fictitious or at least exaggerated, led to the belief of many absurd animals, such as the Unicorn or Centaur, since their existence was difficult to verify.

Philosophers and theologians spent a large amount of time studying so-called psychology, which then referred to the science of the human soul, and much of this trickled down into the Model used by literature. The prevailing view was that there were three kinds of soul:The vegetative soul, which governed the functions of growth; the sensitive soul, which gave the power to see and move; and the rational soul, which had

the power to reason and understand. Plants possessed only the vegetative soul; beasts possessed the sensitive and vegetative soul (though, as one composite soul, not two distinct ones); and humans possessed all three (again, as a composite). The vegetative and sensitive souls were the spontaneous result of the organization of matter in certain ways, but the rational soul was specially created by God. There was, from the time of Augustine, some debate over whether souls existed before the body, perhaps drawing from Plato who believed souls to be eternal. In the late Middle Ages it was determined definitively, however, that the soul was created at the same time as the body, though the notion of the pre-existence of the soul lingered in some ways among romantic poets.

The rational soul itself is divided into two parts, what might be called "reason" and "understanding." Understanding is the power by which an idea can be grasped and "seen" by the mind. Understanding is the mode in which angels constantly operate, as they perceive ideas directly. Humans, on the other hand, often rely on the other part of their rational soul, reason, to arrive at ideas which the understanding can appreciate. Reason is the ability to take propositions and combine them to draw separate conclusions from them. Reason, however, is dependent upon understanding, which is able to grasp self-evident truths which form the basis for the reasoning; without understanding, reason could have no starting point. The medievals saw a strong connection between living morally and living reasonably. The most basic moral premises were grasped by the understanding and it was the task of reasoning to draw out the conclusions and thus apply them to everyday life.

The sensitive soul is divided into ten parts. Five of these were known as the outward senses and today are commonly referred to simply as the five senses—sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch—and are very familiar to the modern mind. The other five are the "inward senses:" memory, estimation, imagination, phantasy, and common sense. Memory is simply the ability to recall past sensations and events. Estimation is something like instinct: those automatic reflexes which guide a person or animal to do what is in its basic interests. Imagination is a much more restricted faculty than its name suggests in its modern usage; imagination to the Medieval was simply the ability to call before the mind what one has remembered. Phantasy is more akin to the modern notion of imagination, and involved piecing together various things that might be imagined into new images. Common sense, again misleadingly, refers not to conventional wisdom, but rather the use of multiple senses to achieve some composite result, such as combining the sight of a particular shape of bird with the knowledge of various bird types to identify it as a dove.

How exactly the soul was united with the body was a question much discussed by the Medievals. Following the Doctrine of the Triad, it was commonly asserted that there was some third substance—the spirits—which united the two, though the exact nature of this is rather obscure. This hypothesis had the advantage of solving the problem of insanity, or loss of reason. Since the rational soul could not lose its rationality, insanity was explained by saying that the bridge between the rational soul and the body was tainted by a corruption of the spirits.

The behavior and disposition of a person was not held to be entirely caused by the soul, however. Just as the four elements comprised the entirety of physical things in the sublunary sphere, so too did the four elements combine in the human body, though differently. Instead of earth, water, wind, and fire, the human body was composed of blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy. Depending on the exact portions one had of these, one would be a different type of person. Thus, sanguine personalities—people with a lot of blood—would be fiery and passionate. Phlegmatic people were considered sluggish and dull, and probably stupid. Choleric were angry and vengeful, even violent. Melancholy souls were what might be called neurotic and often sad.

Human history was not an exact science in the Middle Ages. Historians tried, to the best of their abilities, to present stories as accurately as they could, but they often were wholly dependent upon the word of previous writers; historical research essentially did not exist in those times. Often, however, the point of history was more to edify the reader than to necessarily transmit a true story, and some of the famous Medieval historians would even note at the outset of their works that they were unsure whether what they were transmitting was true. One might think that, as Medieval Europeans were nearly uniformly Christian, that history would thus adopt a kind of "historicist" Christian approach—that is, historical events would constantly be judged in the context of the Christian faith. However, while this happened in some cases, it was generally exceptional. The Medievals all believed in fortune which as more or less independent from God's Providence and even if there was a greater religious meaning to the histories they told, they generally did not see it as their place to point it out.

The Medievals also had a very exact division of education into seven arts—Grammar, Dialectic, Rhetoric, Arithmetic, Geometry, and Astronomy. The first three, known as the "trivium" are the most important for literature, as they regard language. Grammar was the branch of learning which dealt not only with simple grammatical rules, as it might be thought of today, but also with the general construction of literary works. Dialectic was the art which dealt with the use of reasoning and logic to construct sound and persuasive arguments. Rhetoric, finally, was the art which governed the effective use of speech, above and beyond merely being logically sound. Poets studied rhetoric to learn how to properly structure their stories and it was even fashionable to find ways to "unnecessarily" lengthen the stories, and this influence can be seen throughout Medieval literature.

Chapter VIII: The Influence of the Model

Chapter VIII: The Influence of the Model Summary and Analysis

One of the most notable features of Medieval and Renaissance literature is how permeated they are with the theories of astronomy, biology, and religion, which were current in their time. Writers seem to, at times, go to exorbitant lengths to tie in astrology to a tale which, it seems, would be well enough without it. Others go into enormous digressions about free will or even insert enormous catalogs about the various kinds of beasts which exist in the world. To the modern reader, this style of writing is surely puzzling. However, if one understands the Medieval worldview, and more importantly the Medieval attitude towards the Medieval worldview, then this literary pattern becomes more understandable. In short, the Medieval was enamored with the world in which he believed he lived. The world was a direct reflection of the goodness and wisdom of God; it was orderly, intelligible, and understood. Everything, to the finest detail, was in its proper place. Thus, the Medieval reader took great pleasure in reading about the world he lived in, even if he was simply reading about things that he already knew.

This attitude led to a literary style which is quite different from those familiar to modern readers. First of all, writing became more about realizing situations than creating new ones. Thus, Medieval literature often has a fixation on details—and it depicts them with joy—which is quite unique. It can also lead to Medieval literature seeming quite dull and unoriginal. The Medieval writer often had such faith in the intrinsic value of his subject matter that he spent no time trying to dress it up with skillful writing; contrast this with the method of Shakespeare or Dickens, where the value of the writing is precisely in how the subject is portrayed, and not the subject itself. Finally, this confident belief in the value of the subject matter often led Medieval writers to engage in what might be considered "collaborative works," rather than the individual projects more familiar in modern times. Chaucer, for example, was often more interested in expanding on a story told by a previous writer than coming up with something truly original, because the received story was something that seemed more worthwhile than something just made up. There is a kind of humility in this Medieval attitude; the writer becomes almost invisible, unlike the modern writer who has, progressively, assumed a more and more central role in the literature itself.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary and Analysis

It may be objected that none of the previous chapters which have admired the Medieval Model have acknowledged its falsity. Certainly, many or even most of the scientific beliefs of the Medievals have later proven to be false, but one ought to be careful to so boldly say that modern theories stand on much firmer ground. The world has proven itself so resistant to being easily understood that one might rightly question whether a knowledge that is anything more concrete than mathematical description is possible. Further, it is incorrect to think of knowledge as a merely progressive movement, which is always moving towards truth. Certainly, through the invention of various instruments, more is known about the world today than was possible previously, but philosophical changes and even changes simply of mental temperament are as much the cause of changes in scientific thought. For example, the theory of evolution is said to prove that, contrary to the Medieval belief, the lesser form gives way to the higher form. Yet, this strain of thought was already being developed long before Darwin's time in the philosophies of Kant and others. Thus, one should look at the Medieval Model with a bit more sympathy and understanding, acknowledging that for all its implicit assumptions and even superstitions, an equal amount exist in modern science.

Characters

Chalcidius

Chalcidius was an ancient writer who is best known for his partial translation of Plato's dialog Timmaeus. Until well into the Middle Ages, this translation was the only Plato available and provided the basis for a great deal of Medieval belief about the constitution of the universe. Along with the dialog, he included his own commentary, which established certain patterns in interpretation. Basing his argument on reverence of Plato, Chalcidius said that only the best and wisest positions should be attributed to him. Thus, if Plato seemed to say something which was demonstrably false, the good interpreter ought to re-interpret it such that a more sound reading could be given.

Drawing from Plato and Apuleius, Chalcidius applied the principle of the triad beyond the interaction between man and God. He argued that human society itself forms a kind of triad. There is, on the one hand, the king or ruling class which issues commands for how the subjects of the state ought to behave. However, since there was such a great distance between king and subject, there was need for a mediating force—the military or police force—which would take the commands and enforce them. The human soul, too, is a triad. Reason directs the lower desires, but it does so through the passions, which bridge the two.

Boethius

Boethius was an early Medieval Christian writer whose primary legacy was his work the Consolation of Philosophy. In this work, he discussed the exact nature of happiness, and how a philosopher can be happy no matter what his external circumstances are. Some have used the fact that he makes no mention of Christianity as an argument that he was either not a Christian, or at least not a very good one. However, this is more likely simply evidence that he followed the Aristotelian principle of keeping disciplines—like philosophy and theology—separate from one another.

In the Consolation, Boethius argued that the world is ultimately just, even if it does not appear so to mortal men. Even though evil men may be blessed with any number of material goods—wealth, power, fame, and so on—none of these can compensate for the fact that their souls are wicked, and this is the worst kind of unhappiness. Likewise, the just man, even if he be brought to ruin, can never lose the justice of his soul (unless he chooses to become unjust) which is more value The philosopher, then, who in Boethius' eyes was the ultimately just man, need not be afraid of fortunes; in fact, since the philosopher often teaches things which offend the masses, he should expect to meet persecution. Later Medievals would see this kind of "rabble-rousing" in the person of Christ, whose message was offensive to the masses and brought their vengeance upon him.

Apuleius

Apuleius was an ancient pagan writer who was responsible for the introduction of two important philosophical principles into later Medieval thought, the principle of plenitude and the principle of the triad.

Dante

Dante was an Italian poet whose most famous work is the Divine Comedy, a fictional account of traveling through the various places of the afterlife: Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven.

Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas was an Italian friar who was one of the most significant philosophers and theologians of the Middle Ages. C.S. Lewis cites his work as an example of the Medieval love of systematization and organization.

Albertus Magnus

Albertus Magnus, or Albert the Great, was a Friar whose primary legacy is his scientific and philosophical writings.

Chaucer

Chaucer was an English writer who was one of the first writers to use the vernacular, or common, language rather than Latin. His most important work is The Canterbury Tales.

Milton

Milton was an English writer famous for Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained, Christian-themed epic poems. Lewis views him as a kind of transitional figure at the end of the Medieval period.

Cicero

Cicero was a Roman poet whose main contribution to Medieval writing, at least as mentioned by Lewis, is his "Somnium Scipionis"—a fictional account of a dream in which the main character is raised up into the heavens and beholds the world from afar.

Lucan

Lucan was a Roman poet whose stories often reappear, in various forms, in later Medieval writing, such as the story of Amyclas, which glorified the poor.

Macrobius

Macrobius was a writer in late antiquity, probably a pagan, whose contributions to the Medieval mindset included a detailed division of the different types of dreams.

Pseudo-Dionysius

Pseudo-Dionysius is the name used to refer to a writer who originally wrote under the name of Dionysius, a Greek convert to Christianity mentioned in the Bible. During the Middle Ages, it was universally believed that they were the same person. His most important work was his work on the angels which classified them into various classes and types.

Plato

Plato was a Greek philosopher whose influence on the Medieval world came primarily through the Timmaeus until about the 13th century. His philosophies emphasizes the goodness of the spiritual and denigrates the body.

Aristotle

Aristotle was a Greek philosopher and student of Plato whose philosophy became the foundation of Christian philosophy and theology in the 13th century. Unlike Plato, he emphasized the unity of the spiritual and physical realms and that each, in its own right, was good.

Objects/Places

Nature

Nature refers to the realm below the orbit of the Moon. The distinction is significant because the Fall of Adam applies only to it, and thus the things in the realm of Nature are subject to change and destruction.

The Sky

The Sky refers to the region of the Universe above the sphere of the orbit of the Moon. Unlike Nature, it is characterized by the fact that everything is perfect and changeless in it.

The First Mover

The First Mover dwells at the most distant celestial sphere. It is responsible for the movement of its sphere, which in turn causes the movement of the sphere below it, and so on. The First Mover moves out of love of God, and tries to imitate His perfection by moving in a perfect shape, the circle.

Astrology

Astrology is the Medieval art which attempts to predict human events through reading the movement and location of the stars and planets. While the Church forbade its practice in some contexts, virtually everyone, even Churchmen, accepted that it could be used with some reliability, though they rejected the notion that men could not overcome the influence exerted by the stars.

Aether

Aether is the fifth element and exists only in the sky, above the Moon.

Grammar

Grammar is one of the seven liberal arts. It is concerned with the use of language and the construction of written works.

Dialectic

Dialectic is one of the seven liberal arts. It is concerned with the construction of sound arguments and its primary tool is logic.

Rhetoric

Rhetoric is one of the seven liberal arts. It is concerned with presenting oneself in language with style and persuasiveness, and as such it is a primary tool of the poet.

The Soul

The Medievals distinguished three types of souls. First, there is the vegetative soul which governs the unconscious functions of a body such a growth and metabolism. Next, there is the sensitive soul, which governs the senses. Finally, there is the rational soul, which has the power of reason and understanding. Plants have only vegetative souls; beasts have vegetative souls and sensitive souls (though in a single, composite soul); men have rational souls (which again, is composed with the vegetative and sensitive souls).

Longaevi

The Longaevi—or long-living—refers to a class of creatures now commonly called mythological but which entertained some amount of belief among the Medievals. They include such creatures as fairies, elves, nymphs, unicorns, and centaurs.

Themes

The Principle of the Triad

A central principle of the Medieval understanding of the world is one inherited from the Pagan writer Apuleius known as the Principle of the Triad. According to this principle, two very different things cannot directly affect one another; there must be some third thing which, so to speak, bridges the gap between them. The original application of this principle was to explain how God, a transcendent spiritual being, could interact with flesh-bound man. Apuleius reasoned that there must be some kind of intermediate being, similar in some ways both to God and humans, who could communicate the orders of God to man. Pseudo-Dionysius would incorporate this into his work and identify the angels as the spiritual mediators between men and God.

Chalcidius, a later writer, expanded the application of this principle beyond the interaction between God and man. He saw the structure of human society as a kind of triad:Just as God could not directly interact with humanity, neither could the sublime King interact directly with his subjects. Rather, the king needed an executive force—his military or police force—which would take his orders and enforce them in society. Borrowing the analogy between the state and the human soul, Chalcidius saw a triad in human nature. The will, also known as the "ruling principle" of the soul, required the use of the passions to subordinate the base appetites and desires to its edicts.

The principle of the triad also greatly influenced Medieval thinking on the interaction between the soul and body. Here, the application is obvious. The soul is totally immaterial while the body is totally material. Thus, it was supposed, there must be some third substance which binds them together; this substance they called the "spirits" (not to be confused with angels or demons). It is unclear exactly how this explanation helped anything, however, since it is difficult to imagine how something could be partially material and partially immaterial.

The Principle of Plenitude

The Medieval understanding of the composition of the world was informed by a principle from the Pagan writer Apuleius known as the Principle of Plenitude. According to this Plenitude, every region of the universe is inhabited with its own type of beings, even the remote regions of space. There is some relation between this principle and the principle of the triad, for it is supposed that God would create all the gradations of beings between himself and the lowest form of life, man. In fact, this is almost necessary, since according to some accounts of the relationship between the various types of angels, God only directly interacts with the highest types. Those angels, in turn, communicate with those directly lower than they and so on to the lowest forms of angels. Incidentally, the lowest forms of angels are the only kinds who dealt directly with men.

The principle of plenitude also formed a kind of philosophical rationalization for the existence of the Longaevi. Some argued that since there were beings proper to every region of the universe, there must be beings which belong to the four elements: earth, water, wind, and fire. This hypothesis was ultimately rejected, however, and probably never enjoyed any kind of widespread acceptance and belief in the Longaevi in general fell out of favor towards the end of the Medieval period.

Medieval Bookishness

While some of the beliefs of the Medievals may seem primitive or crude by modern standards, they should be carefully distinguished from the beliefs of other, "barbaric" societies. For most civilizations, beliefs are almost a spontaneous reaction to one's surroundings, a kind of rationalized instinct. The Medievals, however, were too scholarly for this approach; they had instead an obsession, perhaps excessive, with the authority of books. At times, it seems as if they instantly believed anything so long as it was written down. This deference extended from the time of antiquity all the way up to their present time and applied not only to inspired texts, such as the Bible, and not even to works by other Christians. The works of Aristotle and Plato were treated as almost indisputable, for example.

One problem that naturally arises from this attitude is that books tend to, at least occasionally, contradict one another. The Medieval solution to this problem was generally to find a way to get away from the contradiction through skillful interpretation. Thus, Chalcidius, on the pretext of reverence, refuses to attribute any position to Plato —however evident it might be in his works—that is "not worthy" his status; if Plato seems to argue for a false position, it is only because the reader is not interpreting him correctly.

This attitude also tended toward the creation of what might be loosely called collaborative works. Medieval writers almost always preferred taking and adapting an existing story to their own purposes rather than making up something new, and this did not amount to simply taking some element from the story or perhaps the basic plot; often, the writer would borrow entire passages and insert a few of his own. As the notion of artistic property had not yet developed, this was not seen as dishonest. Indeed, this practice, at the time, expressed a deep kind of humility. A writer used another's story because he did not feel he was capable of surpassing it; at best, he could expand it in some modest fashion. Further, by inserting his own work into that of an established author, a writer could, so to speak, borrow the authority of that author, and thus gain greater prominence for himself.

Style

Perspective

C.S. Lewis is a famous Protestant Christian writer and as the Middle Ages are so closely associated with the Christian religion, a reader must be aware of Lewis' religious background. Lewis' work is certainly revisionist. The prevailing view that he is combating is that the Medievals were backwards and unthinking, and thus hardly worthy of modern consideration. While he readily admits that the majority of beliefs described in this book are not true, his purpose is to show that they were not stupid. For what the Medievals had access to (that is, not very much), many of their scientific beliefs were quite justifiable. The first point made in the book is that the belief system of the Medievals was fundamentally different from the belief system that spontaneously arose in many barbarian cultures, because the Medievals were fundamentally scholarly (to a fault, perhaps). They were obsessed with books and with deferring to the wisdom of scholars, both past and present.

The epilogue of the book is where Lewis gives his most direct address to those modern thinkers who would utterly disregard this period. He concedes the Medievals had their prejudices and irrationalities; so too, he argues, does modern science. For example, the theory of evolution is thought to have turned upside down the notion, essential to Medieval thought, that man stood at the bottom of the great chain of being that led up to God. Rather, man stands at the top of eons of evolution from some kind of primordial sludge. However, Lewis points out that this sentiment existed long before science could back it up with any solid evidence; the philosophy of Kant, for example, hints very much at this idea, and he predated Darwin's work by over a century.

Tone

Lewis' tone throughout the book is scholarly. He is careful to cite sources for any historical or textual claim he makes and he backs up his argument with frequent quotation from primary sources. While the book is called an "introduction" to Medieval and Renaissance literature, it would be incorrect to think that it is a mere overview, one that is not arguing for a specific thesis. While Lewis does attempt to cover a large portion of Medieval belief—and, thus, in a way, it could serve as a mere overview—the purpose of his depiction of Medieval belief is to serve his thesis that Medieval literature and the worldview which it presupposed are something worthy of both modern research and respect.

Only rarely do Lewis' own religious opinions surface in the course of the book. This is somewhat remarkable, since those opinions were obviously very important to Lewis and, due to the character of the period, religious topics occur constantly. He does make one incidental jab at the Catholic religion when discussing the apparent tension between the belief in the existence of cosmic beings like the intelligences which moved

the heavenly spheres and the staunchly monotheistic nature of Christianity. He says that such beliefs did not generally enter into the religious sphere of most people's lives; the veneration of saints—a religious doctrine associated strongly with Catholicism—, he argues however, did have the effect of weakening the monotheism of Christians.

Structure

The book is divided into eight chapters with a medium-length epilogue. Many of the larger chapters are further subdivided into smaller subsections for the sake of greater organizational clarity. The work proceeds in a very logical fashion. The first chapter is dedicated to explaining the basic character of Medieval writing: how the Medieval writers thought, where they drew inspiration from, and what their basic values were. The second chapter adds some caveats to the conclusions of the first chapter. Lewis does not want to appear to be talking in overly broad strokes, and wants to make sure that the reader understands that much of what has been said applies mostly to the educated minority in Medieval society (though some did trickle down to the lowest economic classes).

As the Medievals were enamored with learning from books, Chapters III and IV explain what books in particular the Medievals drew the most from (aside from the obvious sources, like the Bible). Though not meant to be an exhaustive list—the Medievals drew from far too many sources for such to be possible—Lewis does mean to provide a general picture of the major influences on Medieval literature and show how sources were incorporated into Medieval thought. As Medieval society was dominated by the Catholic Church, much that was written in pagan works had to be cleaned up and adapted to be acceptable. Thus, the "spirits" mentioned by Apuleius which mediate between God and man are adapted to be the angels of traditional Christian theology.

Chapters V, VI, and VII touch on some specific areas of Medieval belief. Chapter V touches on the somewhat obscure topic of the Longaevi, the various mythical creatures which some Medieval people believed to actually exist, like elves and dwarfs. Chapter VI discusses Medieval astronomy and their understanding of the Earth's place in the cosmos. Chapter VII focuses on the inhabitants of earth and their nature, including the nature of man and his soul.

Chapter VIII provides some concluding remarks about how the Medieval worldview affected its literature in general, and explains some of the most peculiar features to modern readers. The epilogue is the most explicit appeal in the book, and urges the reader to not judge the Medievals too harshly for their beliefs which may seem, today, foolish.

Quotes

"They are bookish. They are indeed very credulous of books. They find it hard to believe that anything an old auctour has said is imply untrue." (11)

"Like all his successors, Cicero makes the Moon the boundary between eternal and perishable things, and also asserts the influence of the planets on our fortunes—rather vaguely and incompletely but also without the qualifications which a medieval theologian would have added." (28)

"The daemons are 'between' us and the gods not only locally and materially but qualitatively as well. Like the impassible gods, they are immortal; like mortal men, they are passible." (42)

"Nothing will seem stranger to a modern than the series of chapters which Chalcidius entitles 'On the utility of Sight and Hearing'. The primary value of sight is not, for him, its 'survival-value'. The important thing is that sight begets philosophy. For 'no man would seek God nor aspire to piety unless he had first seen the sky and the stars'." (55)

"The argument now climbs to the position that the whole and perfect good, of which we usually chase only fragments of shadows, is God." (85)

"Orthodox theologians could accept the theory that the planets had an effect on events and on psychology, and, much more, on plants and minerals. It was not against this that the Church fought." (103)

"One might have expected the High Fairies to have been expelled by science; I think they were actually expelled by a darkening of superstition." (138)

"The human body gives us another sense in which man can be called a microcosm, for it, like the world, is built out of the four contraries. In the great world, it will be remembered, these combine to form the elements—fire, air, water, earth. But in our bodies they combine to form the Humours." (169)

"But this does not explain why the authors so gladly present knowledge which most of their audience must have possessed. One gets the impression that medieval people, like Professor Tolkien's Hobbits, enjoyed books which told them what they already knew." (200)

"Always, century by century, item after item is transferred from the object's side of the account to the subject's. And now, in some extreme forms of Behaviourism, the subject himself is discounted as merely subjective; we only think that we think. Having eaten up everything else, he eats himself up too. And where we 'go from that' is a dark question." (215)

"I hope no one will think that I am recommending a return to the Medieval Model. I am only suggesting considerations that may induce us to regard all Models in the right way, respecting each and idolising none." (222)

"It is not impossible that our own Model will die a violent death, ruthlessly smashed by an unprovoked assault of new facts—unprovoked as the nova of 1572. But I think it is more likely to change when, and because, far-reaching changes in the mental temper of our descendants demand that it should." (222)

Topics for Discussion

Explain the Medieval attitude towards the so-called "auctors."

How does the Medieval attitude towards the world indicate humility, in Lewis' opinion?

In what way do the astronomical views of the Middle Ages reflect their religious beliefs?

Explain the importance of the principle of the triad in Pseudo-Dionysius' philosophy?

Lewis mentions that it was not known until the 16th century—well after the Middle Ages—that Pseudo-Dionysius was not the Greek convert mentioned in the Book of Acts. If the Medievals knew this, how do you think they would have regarded his works?

Explain the difference between imagination and phantasy, in the context of the five "inward senses."

Why does Lewis think that the Medieval Model of the world demands our respect?