

C.S. LEWIS  FORUM

Erudition

Curriculum

Ideas from Lewis's writings that we need to comprehend



Things we should know about Lewis's life and legacy



C.S. LEWIS FORUM



THE RATIONAL ROAD ... TO THE REGION OF AWE

C.S. Lewis Forum

Private group · 296 members



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- Discussion
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GUIDE 3

Is C.S. Lewis the Most Erudite Person Who Ever Lived?

This guide includes a series of posts from research posing the question: "Is C.S. Lewis the Most Erudite Person Who Ever Lived." The posts include a definition of "erudite", a list of criteria that the author proposes can be useful in assessing Lewis' qualifications for this very subjective evaluation, and various anecdotes and speculation that the reader might find interesting.

1/33 POSTS COMPLETED

Create post

Create quiz

Like

Comment

The Question: Is C.S. Lewis the Most Erudite Person Who Ever Lived?

Is C.S. Lewis the Most Erudite Person Who Ever Lived?

The C.S. Lewis Forum, a new Facebook group, was launched a few weeks ago. It initially featured a five-segment report on the "Favorite Shorter Writings" survey that I conducted with the support of many of the most recognized people in Lewisdome (or is it Lewisiana?). I hope members of various CSL Facebook groups found all that to be interesting and useful.

For the past week or so my postings have been more of an introductory ... [See more](#)

C.S. Lewis Was a Great Genius, a Polymath Even ... But Is It Possible that Lewis Was the Most Erudite Person In History?

Wisdom	Talent	Innovation	Intelligence	Erudition
"Sagacious"	"Creative"	"Inventive"	"Brilliant"	"Learned"
				
Socrates	Beethoven	Edison	Einstein	Lewis

[View insights](#)

37 post reach >

What Are the Top Ten Shorter Writings by C.S. Lewis?



1. Weight of Glory

2. Meditation in a Toolshed

3. Learning in Wartime

4. Transposition

5. The Inner Ring

6. Is Theology Poetry?

6. De Descriptione Temporum

8. The Poison of Subjectivism

9. Man or Rabbit?

9. Funeral of a Great Myth



Question #1:

Is It Plausible that C.S. Lewis Is the
“Most Erudite Person in History”?

Question #2:

Erudition Is Eroding in America, Especially
Among the Young . . . Is This a Problem?

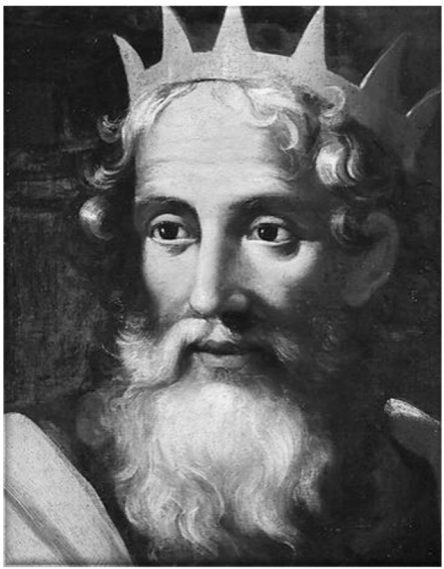
Was C. S. Lewis a Genius?



By Any Measure, C.S. Lewis Was a Genius . . . Is It Plausible that C. S. Lewis Might Be the Most Erudite Person In History?

Wisdom

“Sapient”



Solomon

Talent

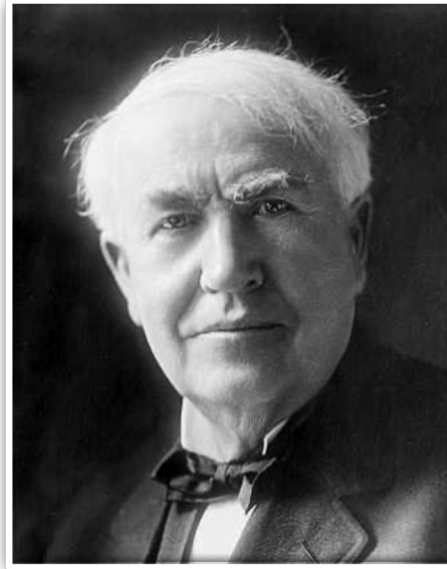
“Creative”



Beethoven

Innovation

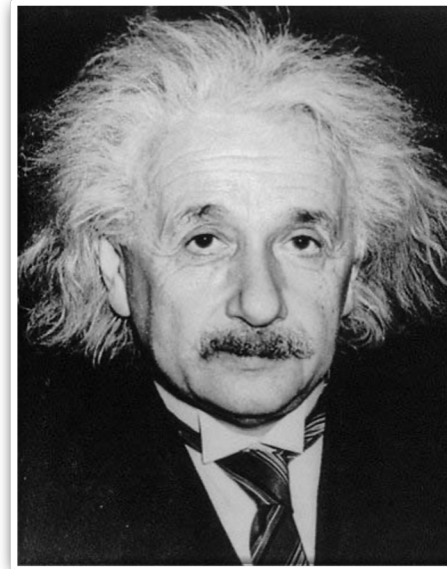
“Inventive”



Edison

Intelligence

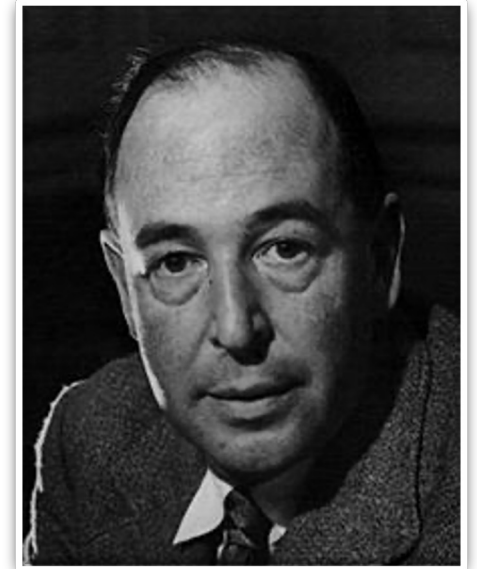
“Brilliant”



Einstein

Erudition

“Learned”



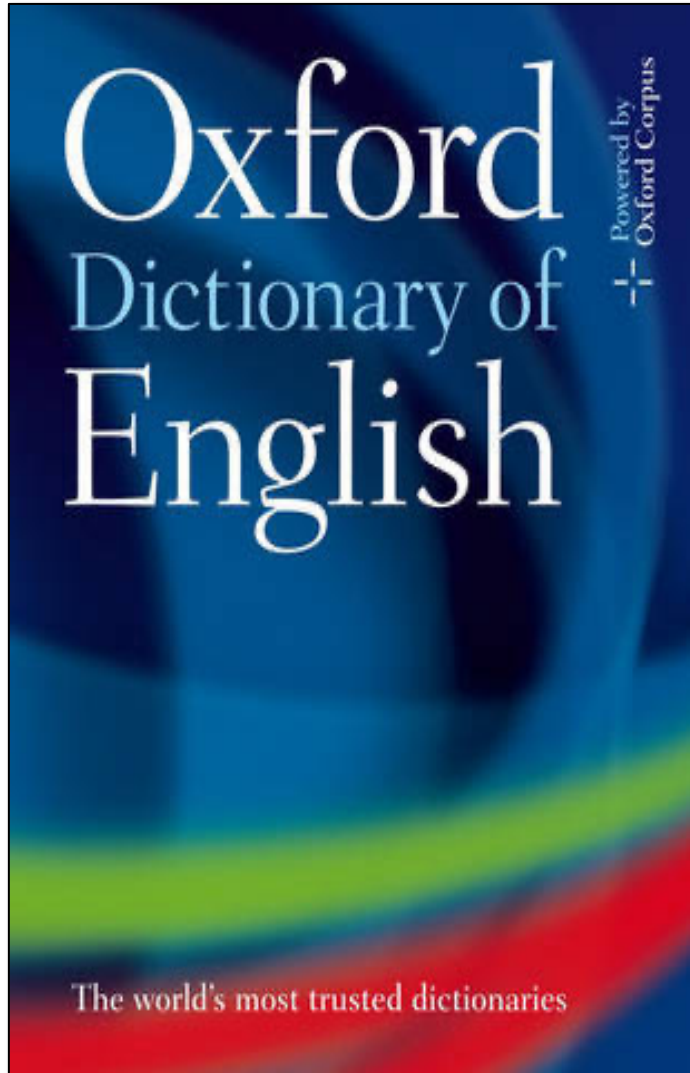
Lewis

Consider for a moment:
Who is more likely to win big
on the television show Jeopardy?
Someone with a high IQ? A wise person?
An artist? Or someone who is erudite?
For my money, the latter.

Defining Erudition



The Word “Erudition” Typically Means Profundity of Wisdom or Education Drawn from Extensive Reading of Literary Works



Erudition

- Having broad knowledge acquired from books; especially from reading literature or conducting “secondary” research
- Erudition relates to “literary learning” primarily in the fields of literature, history, philosophy, religion and linguistics
- The term is seldom applied to math or research in science
- Synonyms include learned, scholarly, literate, widely-read, studious, bookish and encyclopedic in knowledge

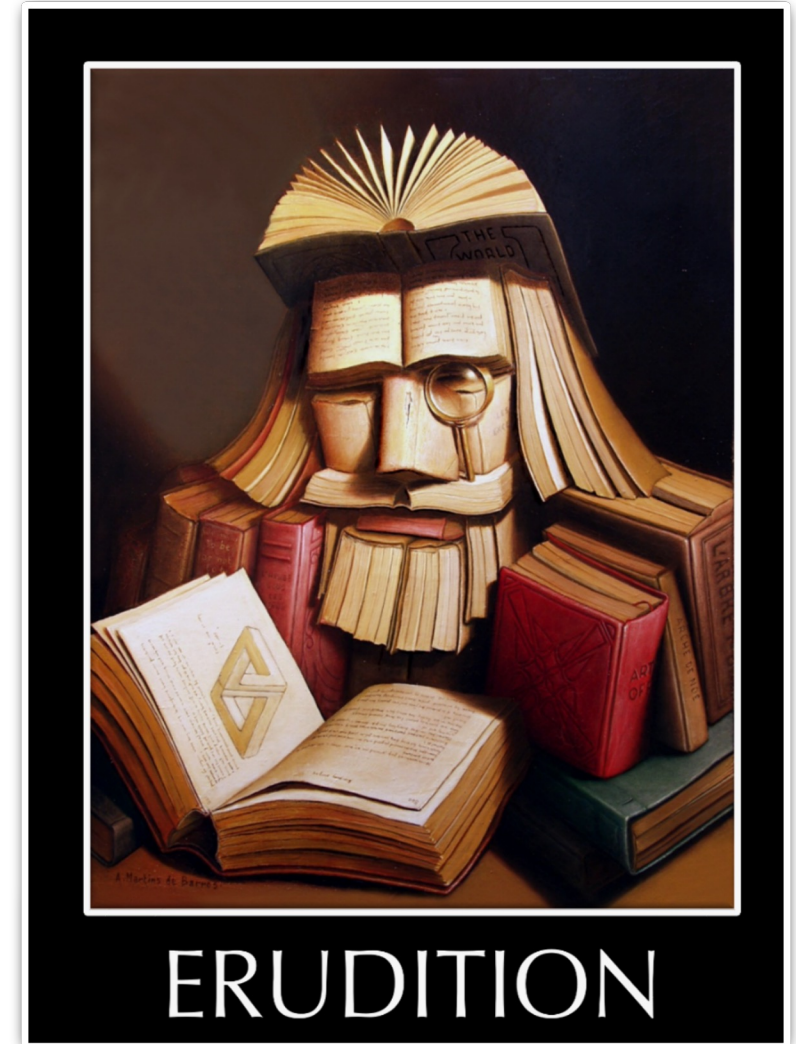
To Compare Erudition Is Difficult, Because It Is Hard to Measure and Often Confused with Wisdom and Intelligence

Is Erudition the Result of the Number of Books Read?

- Umberto Eco had a personal library of 50,000 books
- Joseph Stalin is said to have read 20,000 Kremlin books
- Bhagwan Shree Majneesh claims he read 150,000 books

Is Erudition the Result of College Coursework Completed?

- Dr. Michael W. Nicholson holds 30 university degrees
- Benjamin Bolger holds 14 degrees from top universities
- Brian “Fred-Worm” McGregor completed 738 courses

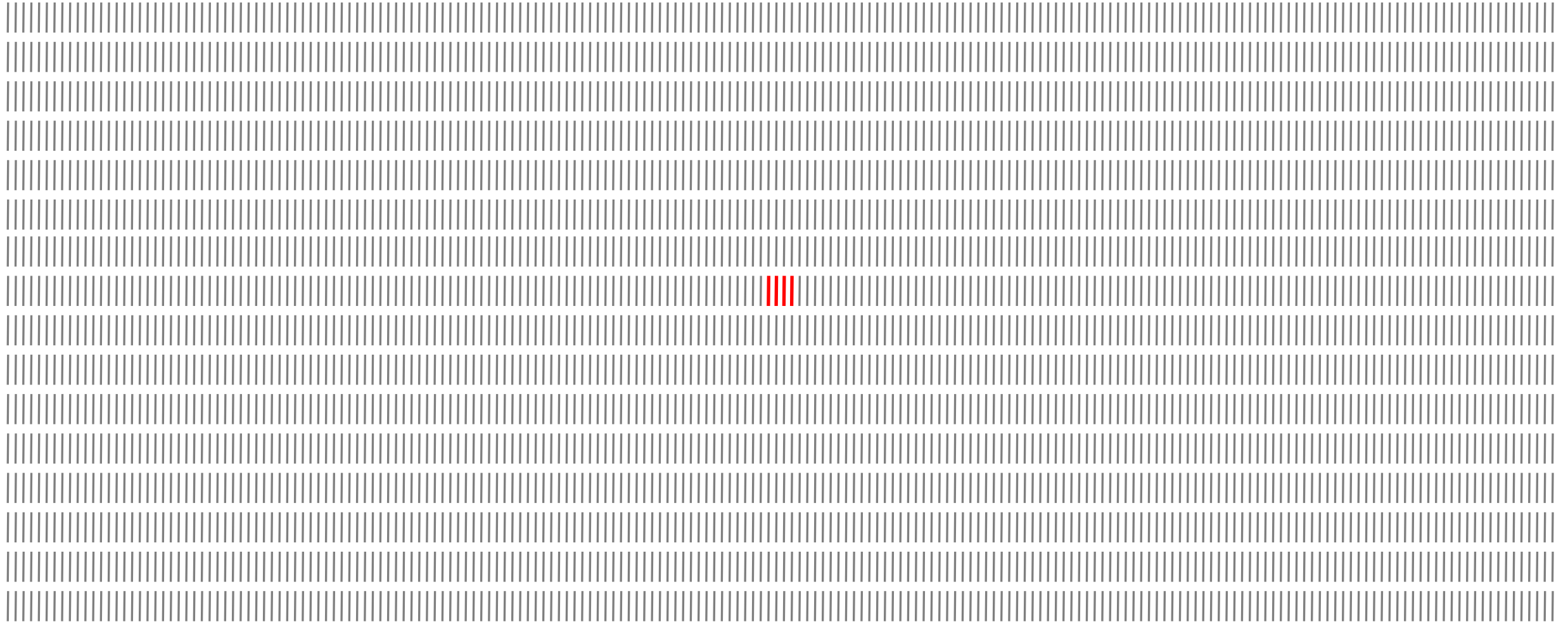


Erudition means more than
just passing something before your
eyes or streaming it through your ears.
True erudition means comprehending fully
what you read and retaining completely
that knowledge.

An Insightful Analogy

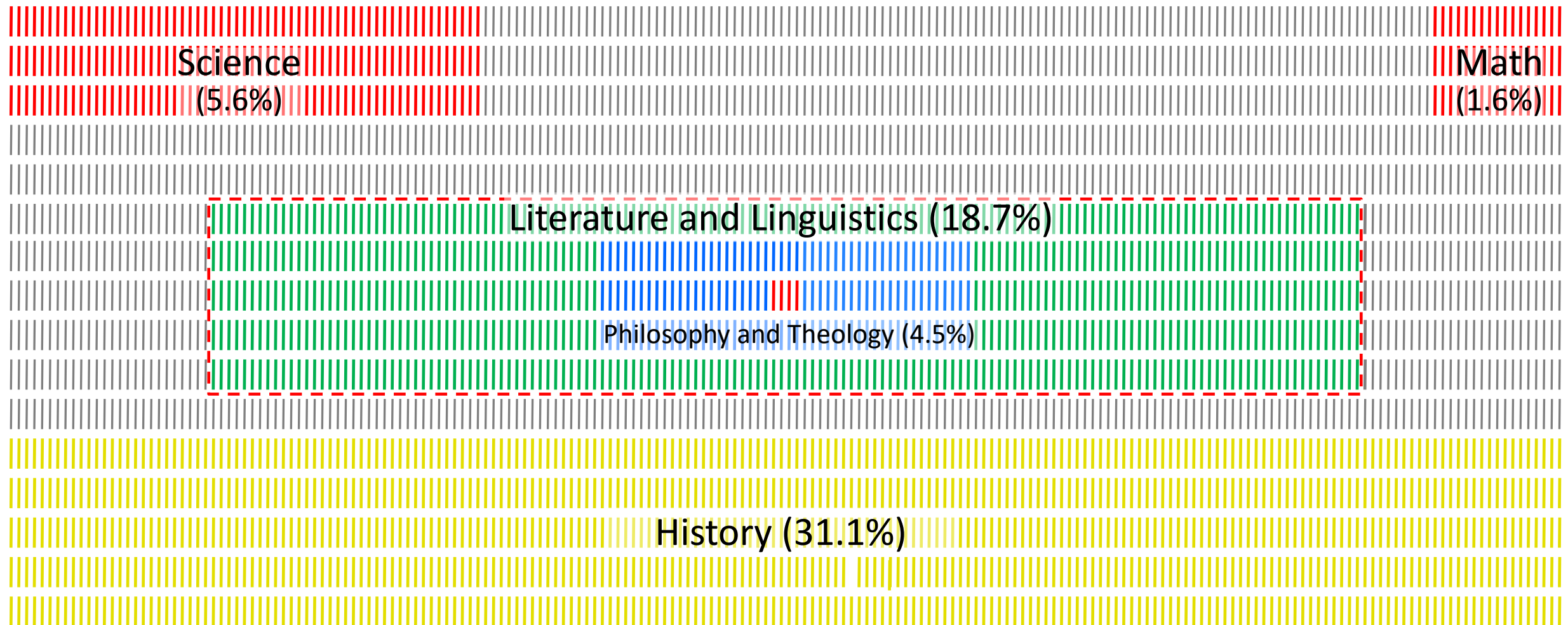


Imagine this Graphic Represents the Collection of Sixteen Million Hard Copy Books In English at the Library of Congress



Sixteen Floors, Each With Two Hundred 150' Racks, Each Rack Holds 5,000 Books

Sections with Books of Primary Interest to C.S. Lewis Included Literature, Language, Linguistics, Philosophy and Theology

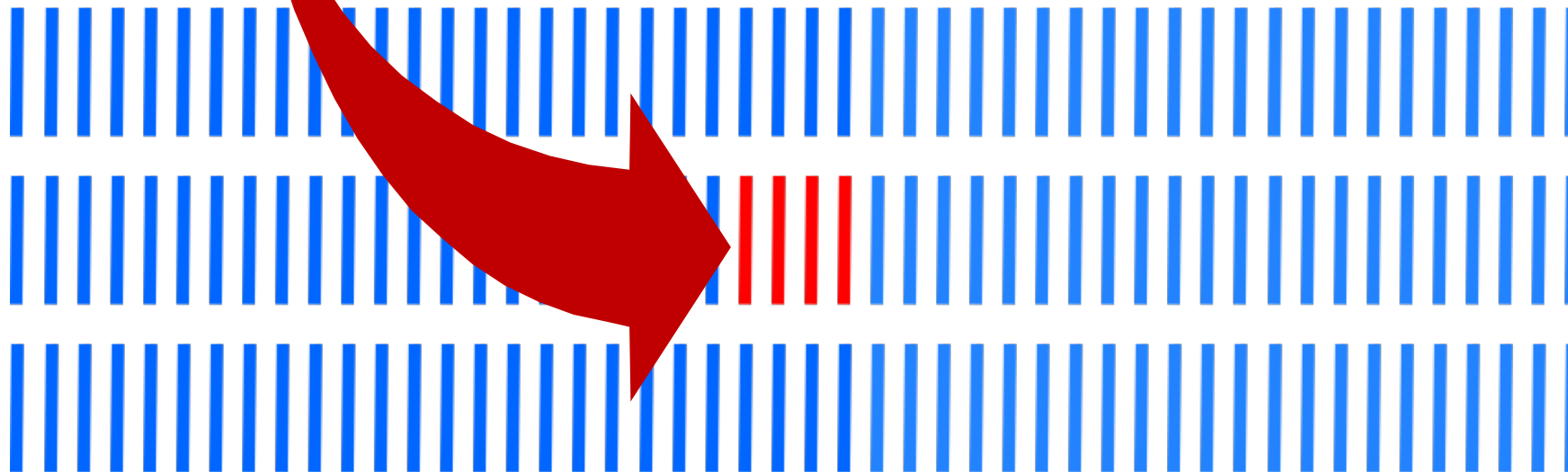
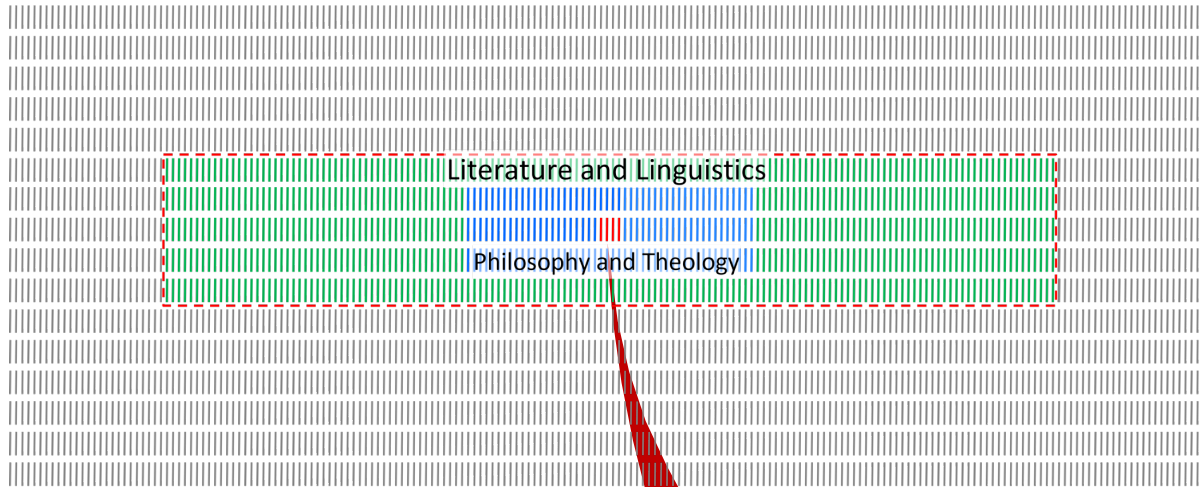


History Is Also Relevant to Erudition . . . Math and Science Not So Much

To Set an Upper Boundary on Books Read, I Speculated on an “Occupational Reader”—The Exercise Is Illuminating

Mythical “Occupational Reader”

- Rate of reading is 450 words per minute
- 8 hours per day spent reading
- 250 days per year; over a career of 45 years
- 20,000 volumes read (during entire career)
- 0.125% of LOC print books in English

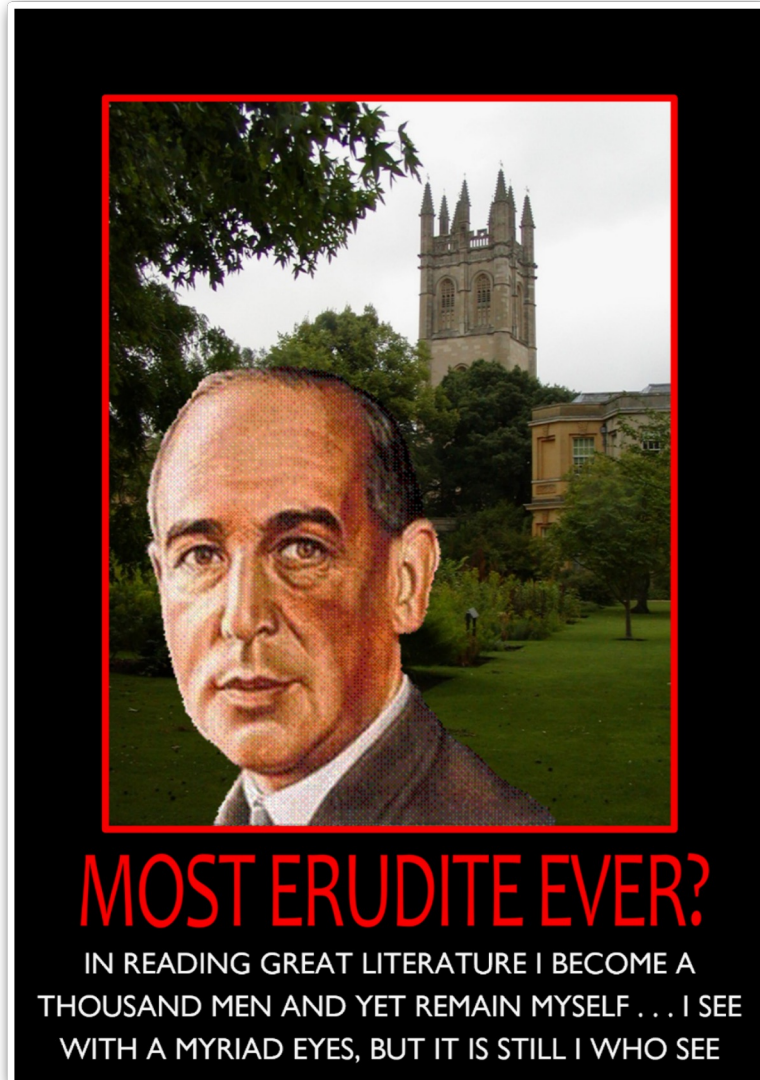


It is instructive to see how small a portion of the entire collection of 16 million books she reads. After a lifetime spent reading, she completes a mere one-eighth of one percent (0.125%) of the books. She barely makes a dent.

Framework for Analysis of Erudition Credentials



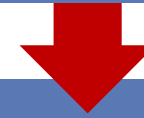
While I Assessed Twelve Separate Factors, In This Abridged Version I Will Review Only the Five That Are Most Important



1. Number of books read



2. Breadth and value of knowledge acquired



3. Ability to comprehend original author's meaning



4. Ability to recall the knowledge acquired



5. Quality and impact of writings

Socrates and Solomon may
be the wisest persons in history,
but they are not the most erudite. Books
as we know them simply did not exist.
The simple truth is that books were
not very accessible to anyone
born before 1800.

How Many Books Did C. S. Lewis Read?



Though the Analysis Is Highly Speculative, the “Bottom-Up” Approach Suggests C.S. Lewis Read Roughly 20,000 Books



Books Read During the Phases of Lewis' Life

- Nine years living at Little Lea (incl. schools) 1,500
- Three years studying with Kirkpatrick 1,500
- Four years as an Oxford student 2,000
- Thirty-eight years as a university teacher 15,000
- Fifteen years doing research for OHEL *

* (You must read the analysis to believe this astounding number)

The “Top-Down” Approach Also Points to C.S. Lewis Reading Approximately 20,000 Books . . . This Is Helpful Confirmation

Occupational Reader

- 8 hours per day
- 250 days per year; 45 years
- @ 450 words per minute
- No books read 2nd time
- 20,000 books read (career)

Voracious Reader

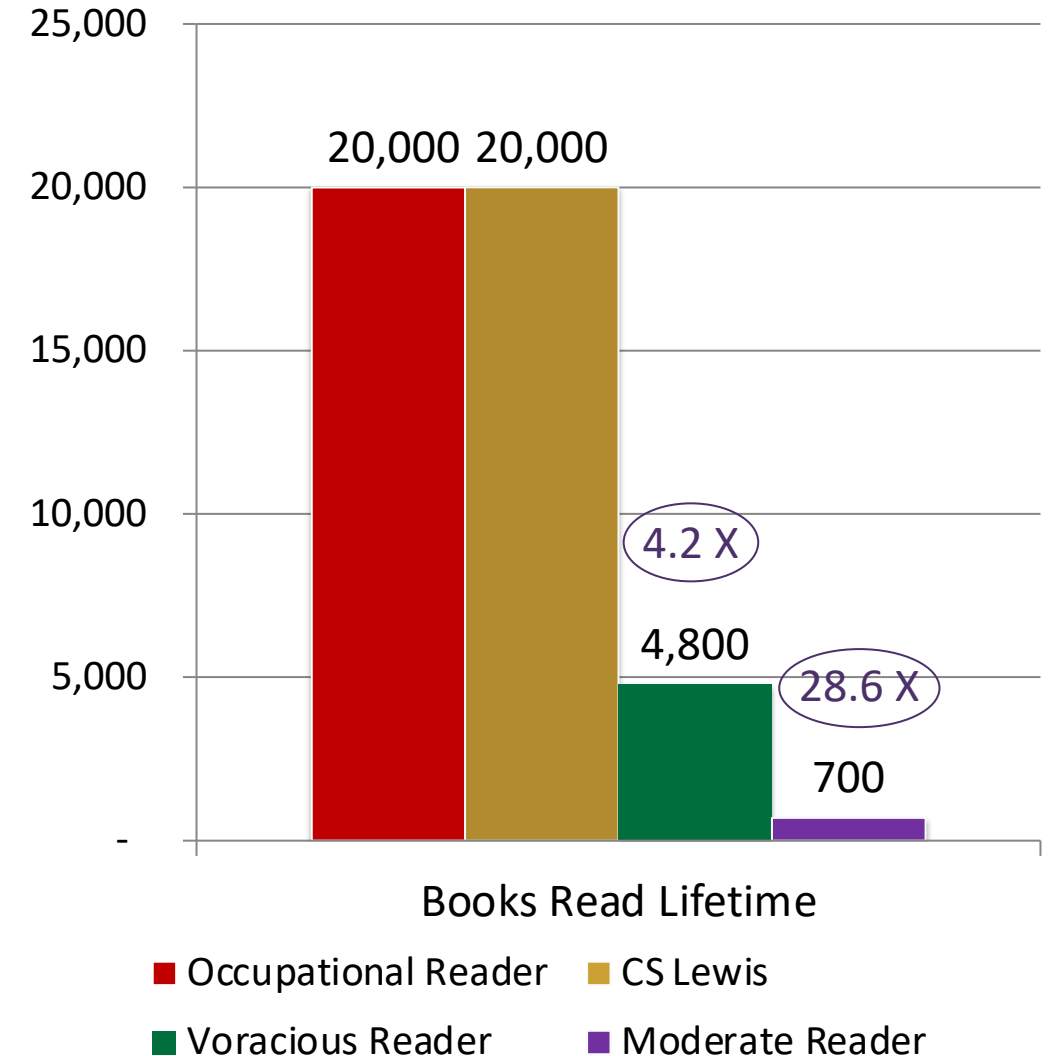
- 2 hours per day
- 200 days per year; 50 years
- @ 500 words per minute
- 1 in 25 books read 2nd time
- 4,800 books read (lifetime)

C.S. Lewis

- 4 hours per day
- 300 days per year; 56 years
- @ 700 words per minute
- 1 in 10 books read 2nd time
- 20,000 books read (lifetime)

Moderate Reader

- 1 hours per day
- 100 days per year; 50 years
- @ 275 words per minute
- No books read 2nd time
- 700 books read (lifetime)

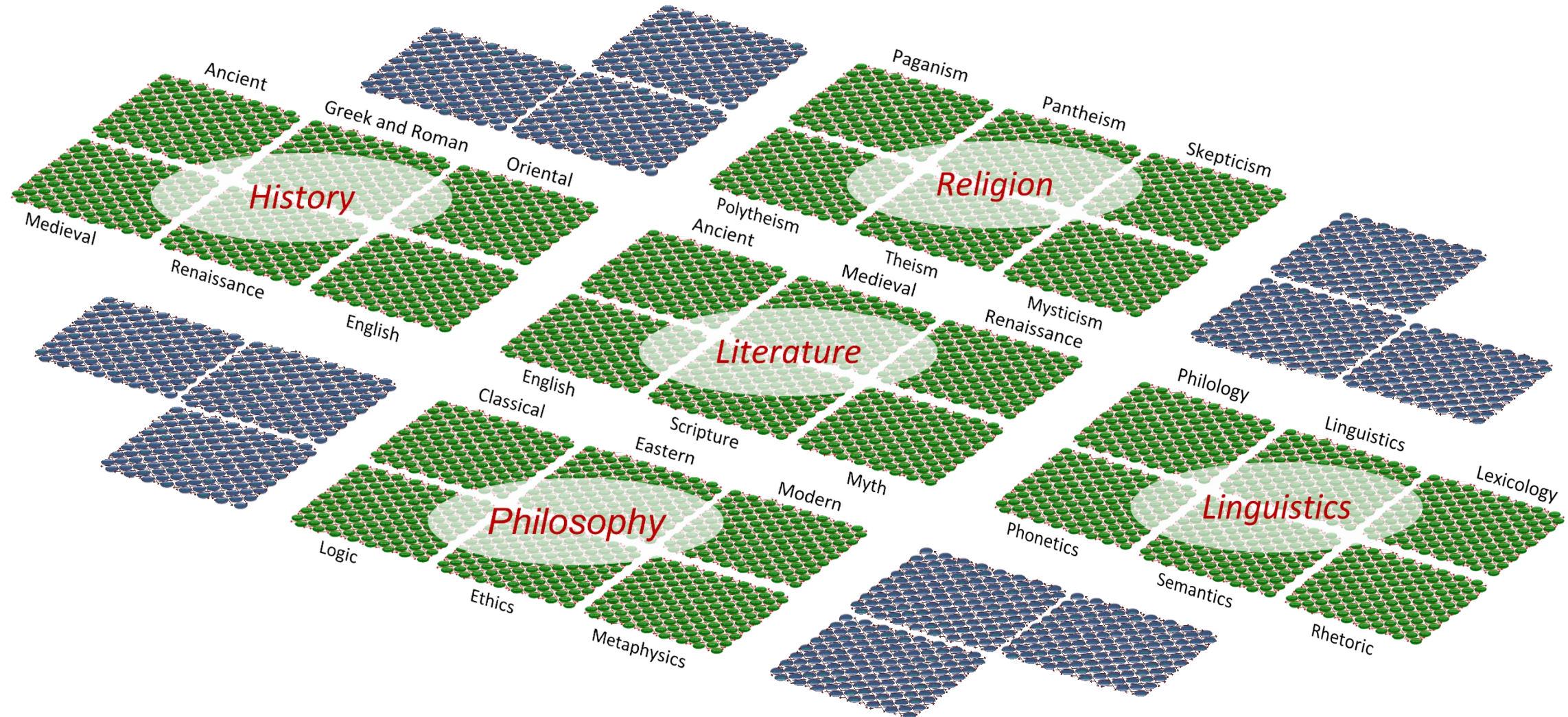


It is rare that someone can read at a pace higher than 600 words per minute. Experts insist that anyone who claims to read at a rate above 600 words is really only scanning the material. The higher the speed, the more cursory the scanning.

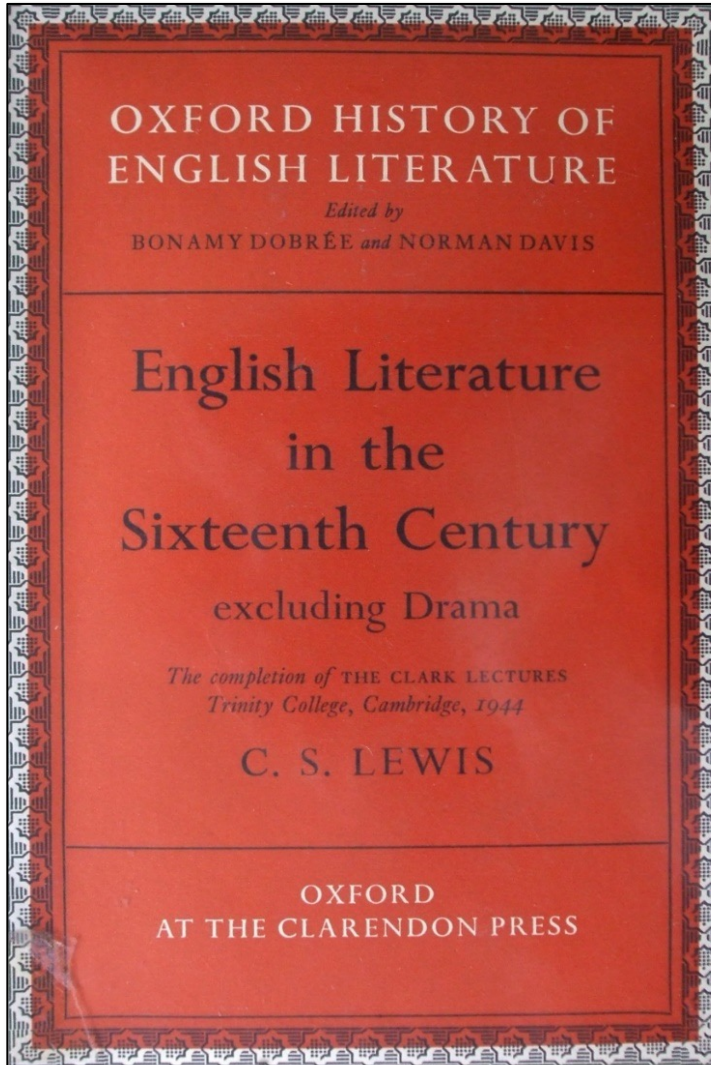
Lewis's Broad Range of Knowledge



True Erudition Comes From Mastering Information Within a Multifaceted Field of Knowledge; Lewis Had Five Such Fields



Between 1935 and 1952 Lewis Labored to Write His Longest, and Some Say His Greatest Book (and Perhaps “Least Read”)



- In 1935 Lewis was invited by the Oxford University Press to author one of 12 volumes of the *Oxford History of English Literature*, the most ambitious of its kind ever
- In his research for the task, it is said that Lewis read every book written (and still extant) during the 16th century
- Lewis read the entire works of over 200 authors, and as many as 1,000 additional books “about” the topic
- My research with the Bodleian Library confirms that Lewis read between 6,000 and 7,000 books for this assignment

Most Historians Rank the 16th Century First—a Time When Mankind Ushered In the Most Significant Developments Ever



- High point of the Renaissance
- Protestant Reformation
- Scientific Revolution
- Age of Discovery/Exploration
- Rise of Capitalism/Industrialization
- Explosion of the printing press
- Rise of universities
- Humanism becomes dominant
- Population growth; shift to towns
- Reign of Henry VIII; Elizabethan Age
- Advent of arts; Shakespearean Age
- British East India Co. (global trade)

Lewis knew virtually everything about what is (arguably) the most important century in human history. Perhaps no other person has ever had a greater grasp of the significance of the 16th century.

Ability to Fully Comprehend the Author's Meaning



Lewis Mastered Nine Ancient and Four Modern Languages and Could Read Most Old Books in the Original Language

Ancient Languages

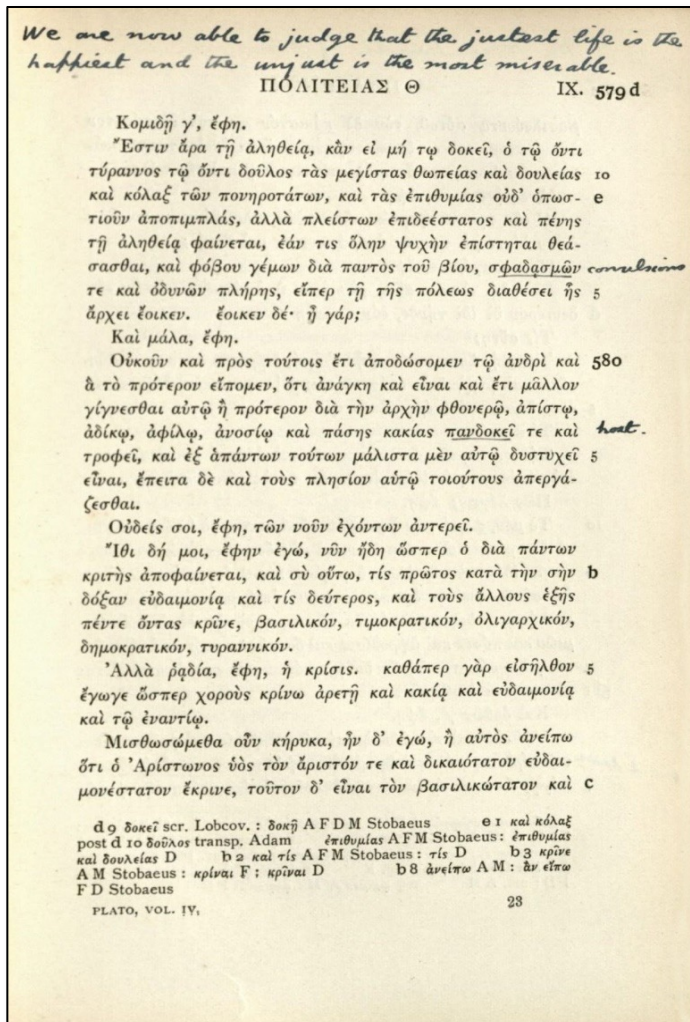
- Classical Greek
- Latin
- Old Norse
- Old Icelandic
- Old Welsh
- Old English
- Middle English ←
- Middle French
- Middle High German



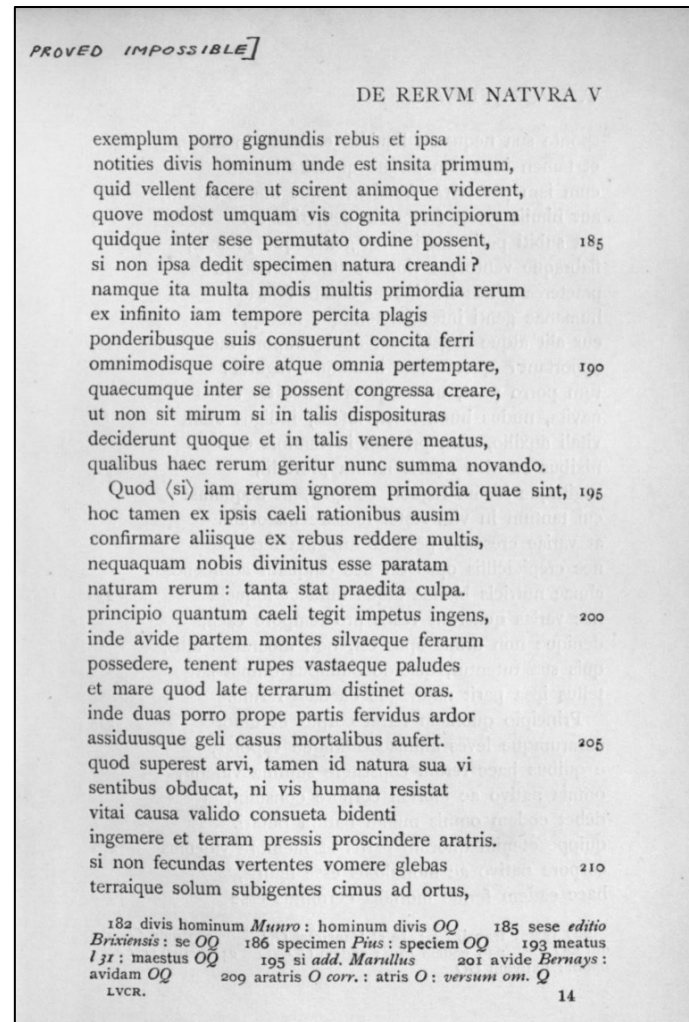
Lydgate's "Siege of Thebes"

Lewis Read Everything He Could in its Original Language

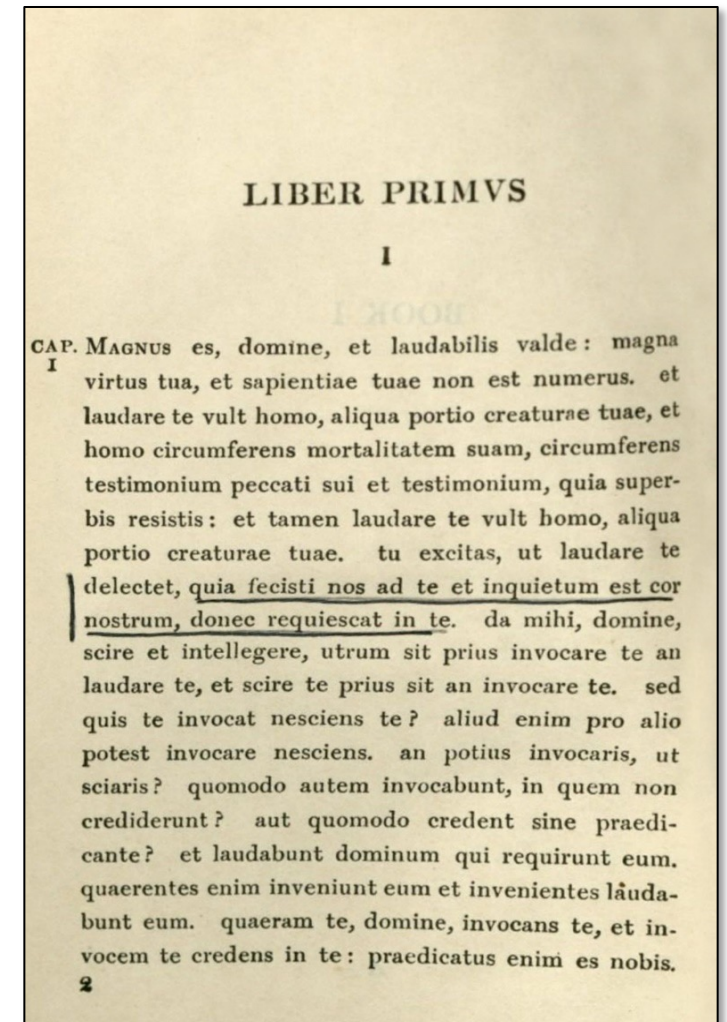
Lewis Followed His Own Advice and Always Read Ancient Texts as the Original Works AND in the Original Language



Plato's *The Republic*



Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*



Augustine's *Confessions*

Lewis Was Blessed By Extraordinary Talent That Enabled Him to Comprehend Fully the Original Author's Meaning

- Lewis had a precocious talent for decyphering very difficult ancient text
- Lewis knew the cultural, political and theological context of ancient writings
- He understood their writing styles, local vernacular, archaic semantics and metaphors
- His expertise in language enabled him to discern the author's original meaning



“I read as a native, texts that you must read as foreigners”

Lewis's Near Perfect Retention



C.S. Lewis Reputation for Having Near Perfect Retention of All He Had Read Was Renowned In Oxford and Cambridge



Students and Fellow Oxford Professors Often Put Lewis to the Test

Kenneth Tynan, a Renowned Writer and Theatre Critic, Was One of Those Who Played this Memory Game with Lewis



- Tynan was a student of Lewis in the 1940s, and the quintessential “angry young man” of the 1960s
- Tynan would be randomly led to select a book from Lewis’ massive bookshelves (3,000), then read aloud a line from this unidentified book
- Lewis would identify the work, set the line in its proper context and continue reciting the text
- Lewis could go on for several pages, reciting verbatim from the original text in the book

A Mind of this Magnitude Is a Divine Gift

Lewis Was Once Put to the Supreme Test by Richard Selig, an American Rhodes Scholar with Lydgate's *Seige of Thebes*

- Written in 1421, by John Lydgate, who considered Chaucer a master and a rival
- A poem with 4,716 lines written in the Middle English of the late Medieval era
- Rooted in contemporary politics, Lydgate was the first English poet to align his work directly with royal policy (he was a “toady”)
- It is considered by students to be the most boring book in the Bodleian library

Lydgates Seige of Thebes

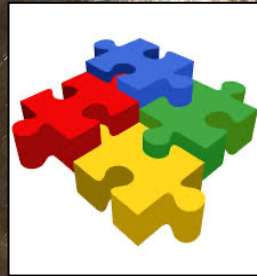
Whan brighte Phebus passed was the Ram
Myd of Aprille and into Bole cam,
And Satourn old with his frosty face
In Virgyne taken had his place,
Malencolik and slowgh of mocioun,
And was also in thoposicioun
Of Lucina, the mone moyst and pale,
That many shour fro hevene made avale;
Whan Aurora was in the morowe red,

Lewis Had Unparalleled Powers of Retention . . . Was His Memory “Photographic” or “Audiographic” or Something Else?

Was it
photographic
memory?



Or was it
something
else?

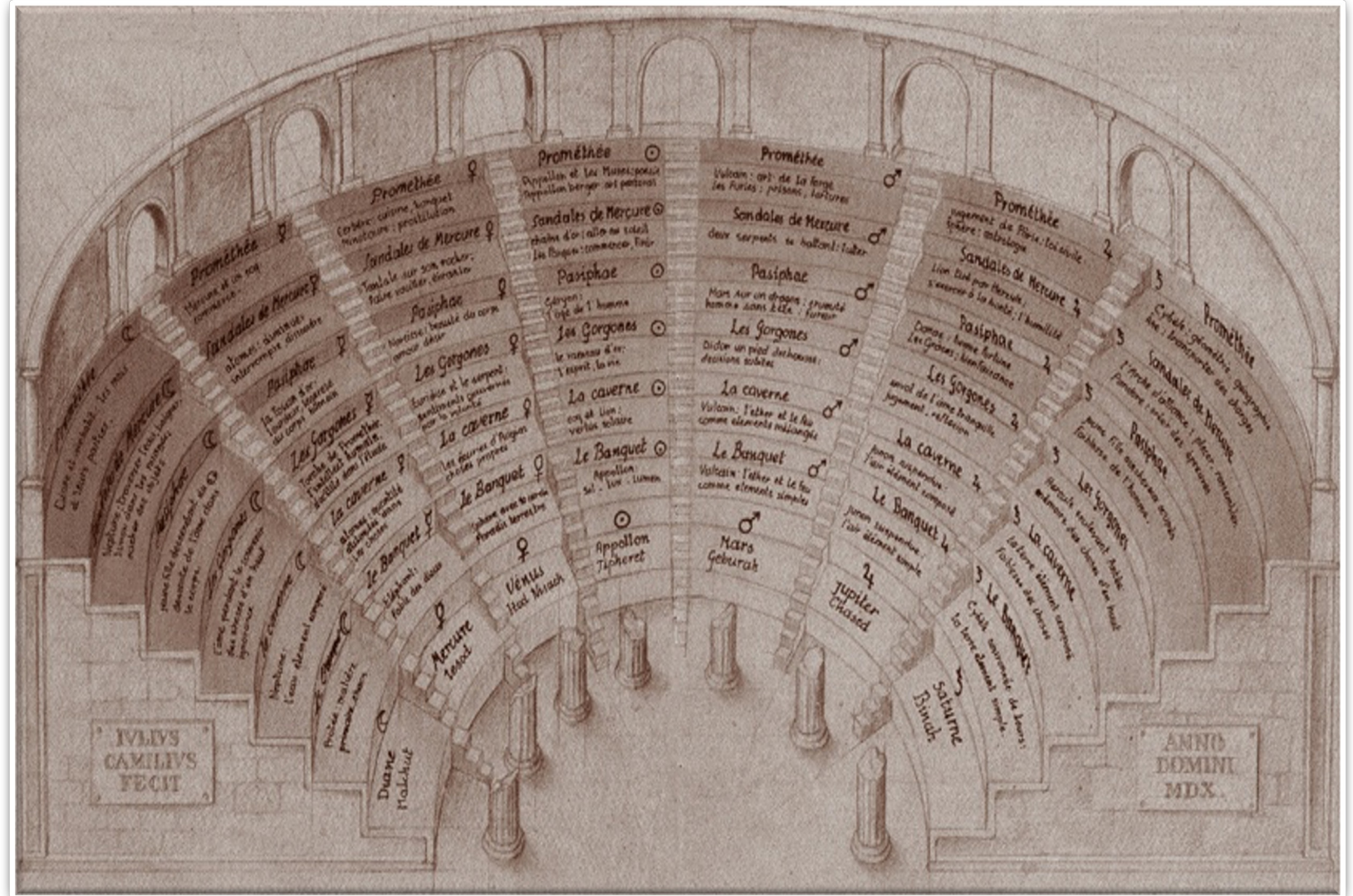


Was it
audiographic
memory?

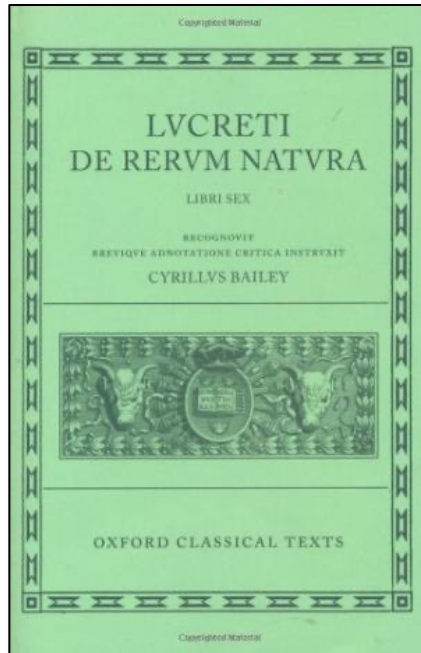


“Memory Theatre” Has Existed as an Oratorical Technique Since Aristotle in 350 BCE and Was Later Mastered by Cicero

The “Memory Theatre” technique calls for the concatenation of emotionally-stimulating mental images within visualized locations or schematic graphics, and the intentional chaining together of groups of images and the association of text with these images



The Walter Hooper Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Houses Books that Lewis Once Owned



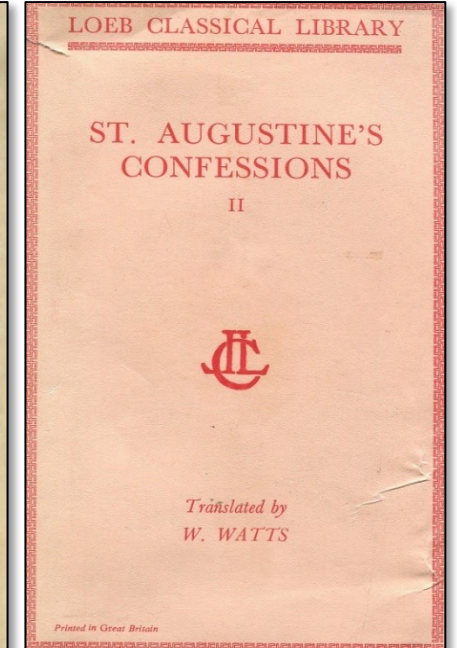
Lucretius

Although his poem contains no direct revelations concerning himself, there are few writers whose character lies more open to the reader than that of Lucretius. More than a philosophical system, more than a picture of the world as conceived by Epicurus, the Rerum Natura is a poignant and often painful psychological document. The facts that are definitely known of the poet may be very briefly stated: born, as it would seem, in 95, and dying about 54, he had lived through a period of terror and bloodshed into one of comparative security. He was acquainted with Cicero: a tradition relates that he died by his own hand in madness.

Though it would be foolish to accept Jerome's statement as literal truth, yet here the mytho-
-poeic faculty of ancient criticism has failed not without discretion. The poem is the work of an unbalanced mind. No reader can have failed to mark the atmosphere of weirdness and terror which, while it does not prevent him from joining hands in one direction with Wordsworth and Milton, allies Lucretius in another with Edgar Allan Poe or Apuleius. The gods are down: dreams, magic and portents have had their fangs drawn. But the old evil is not banished so far that it cannot continually disturb the peace of the saints. Lucretius must watch and pray lest he enters again into religion. Reason must fight a ceaseless a hardly triumphant battle against the old terrors. And even inside the garden of Epicurus we are not safe. How significant is his sudden parenthesis when in the

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Annotations and Marginalia

Structured Précis or Index

The Product of Lewis's Erudition



Ideas On a Myriad of Topics Flowed From Lewis' Mind With a Compelling Force and In a Form of Eloquence and Cogency

Pride
 Atheism
 Agape Love
 Progressivism
 The Incarnation
 Bulverism
 Education
 Christian Beliefs
 Subjectivism
 Heaven
 Postmodernism
 Scripture
 Free Will
 Faith
 Miracles
 Rationalism
 Literary History
 Coherence
 Argument from Desire
 Pantheism
 Charity
 Transposition
 Dualism
 Argument from Horror at Death
 Imagination
 Efficacy of Prayer
 The Cardinal Virtues
 Faith and Reason
 Parallel Mythologies
 Human Wickedness
 Death and Immortality
 Natural Law
 Numinous
 Skepticism
 Philology
 Reading Old Books
 Divine Goodness
 Evolution of Man
 Story Telling
 Scientific Materialism
 Problem of Evil
 Petitionary Prayer
 Nature and Supernature
 Chronological Snobbery
 Science Fiction
 Argument from Humor
 Divine Omnipotence
 Modernism
 Medieval Cosmology
 Obstinacy in Belief
 Animal Pain
 Scientism
 Hell
 Naturalism
 Time and Eternity
 Forgiveness
 Language of Religion
 The Great Catastrophe
 Joy
 Temptation
 Agape Love
 Atheism
 Pride



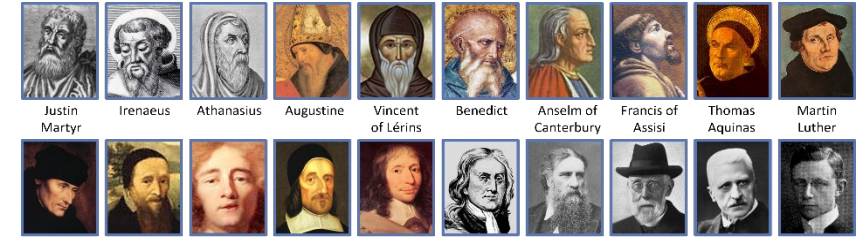
AUTHORS



PHILOSOPHERS



THEOLOGIANS

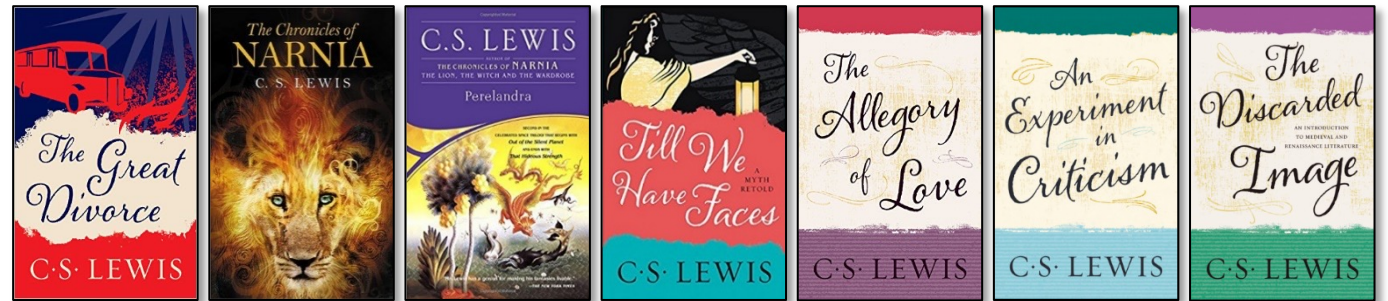
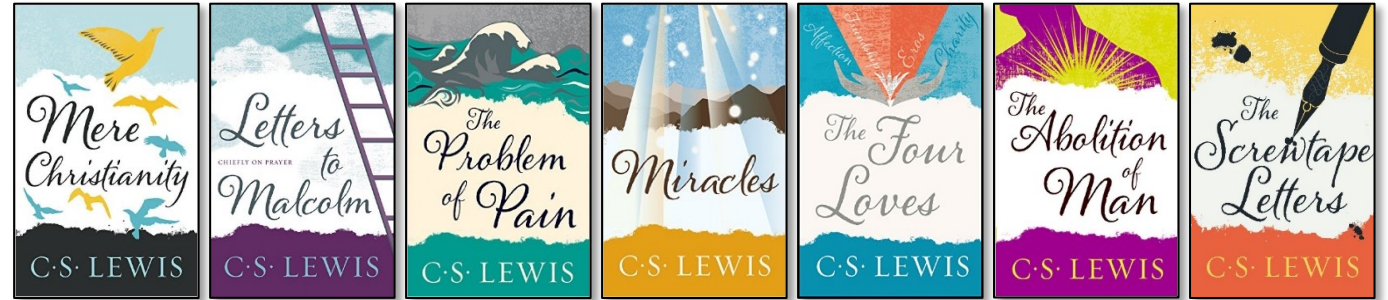


MYSTICS



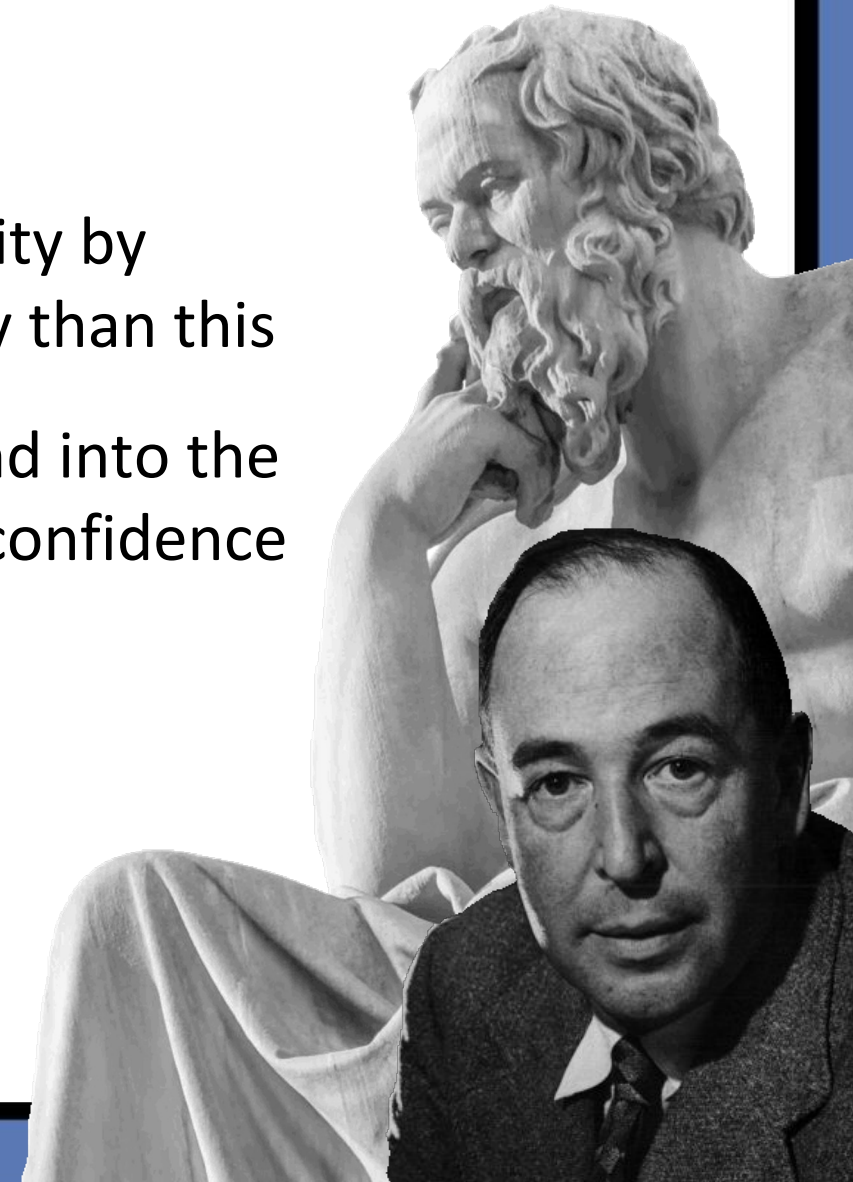
Others May Be Preeminent in Specific Areas, But C.S. Lewis Wrote Esteemed Works Within Twenty-Two Literary Genres

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| • Religion | <i>Mere Christianity</i> |
| • Theology | <i>Letters to Malcolm</i> |
| • Theodicy | <i>The Problem of Pain</i> |
| • Apologetics | <i>Miracles</i> |
| • Greek Philosophy | <i>The Four Loves</i> |
| • Philosophical Fallacies... | <i>The Abolition of Man</i> |
| • Satire | <i>The Screwtape Letters</i> |
| • Theological Fantasy | <i>The Great Divorce</i> |
| • Faerie | <i>The Chronicles of Narnia</i> |
| • Science Fiction | <i>The Cosmic Trilogy</i> |
| • Myth | <i>Till We Have Faces</i> |
| • Scholarly Works | <i>The Allegory of Love</i> |
| • Literary Theory | <i>An Experiment in Criticism</i> |
| • Literary History | <i>The Discarded Image</i> |
| • Literary Criticism | <i>Selected Literary Essays</i> |
| • Linguistics | <i>Studies in Words</i> |
| • Essays | <i>God in the Dock</i> |
| • Sermons | <i>The Weight of Glory</i> |
| • Autobiography | <i>Surprised by Joy</i> |
| • Journal | <i>A Grief Observed</i> |
| • Allegory | <i>Pilgrim's Regress</i> |
| • Poetry | <i>Spirits in Bondage</i> |



Lewis's Role With the Oxford Socratic Club Is the Least Known and Most Underappreciated of His Accomplishments

- Few realize that the Socratic Club debates played a pivotal role in the development of modern Christian Apologetics
- Except for Lewis' books and shorter writings, no other activity by Lewis has proven to have a greater impact upon Christianity than this
- The Socratic Club brought skepticism out of the shadows and into the spotlight of the public arena; believers everywhere gained confidence
- The policy of point-counterpoint and civil dialogue introduced by Lewis was entirely new to Oxford
- In its mission, the Socratic Club has never been surpassed as a forum for examining the veracity of the Christian faith

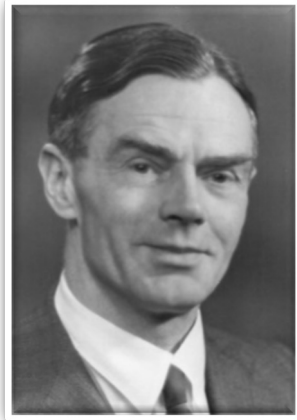


C.S. Lewis Scoured England to Find the Most Intelligent and Zealous Defenders on Both Sides for Socratic Club Debates

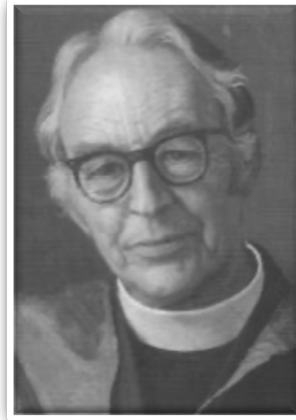
Advocates



Elizabeth
Anscombe



Owen
Barfield



Frederick
Copleston



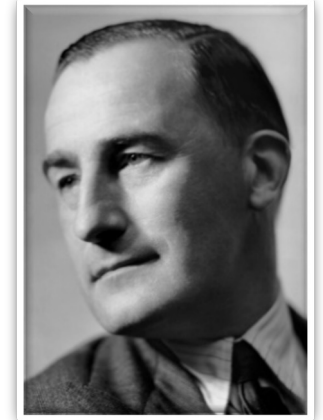
Austin
Farrer



Michael
Polanyi



Dorothy
Sayers



Frank Sherwood
Taylor

Adversaries



A.J.
Ayer



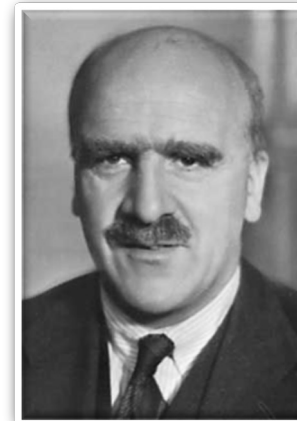
Jacob
Bronowski



Shaw
Desmond



Anthony
Flew



J.B.S.
Haldane



C.E.M.
Joad



Iris
Murdoch

What Lewis Read Was Not Only Relevant, but Understood and Retained . . . In Debate His Erudition Was Truly Breathtaking

C.S. LEWIS

- 100% comprehension
- 100% retention
- 90% relevant

VORACIOUS READER

- 60% comprehension
- 30% retention
- 60% relevant

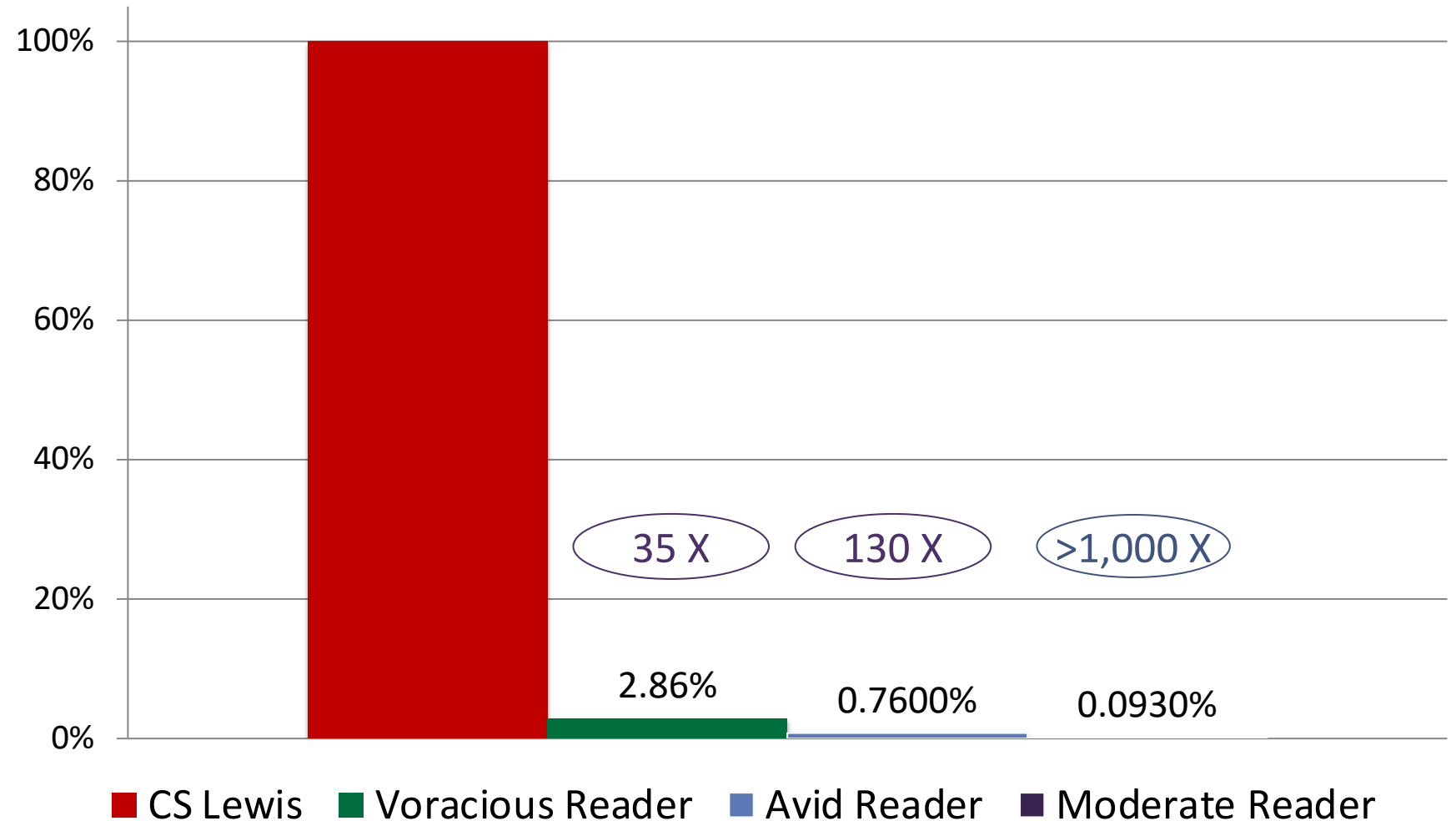
AVID READER

- 50% comprehension
- 25% retention
- 50% relevant

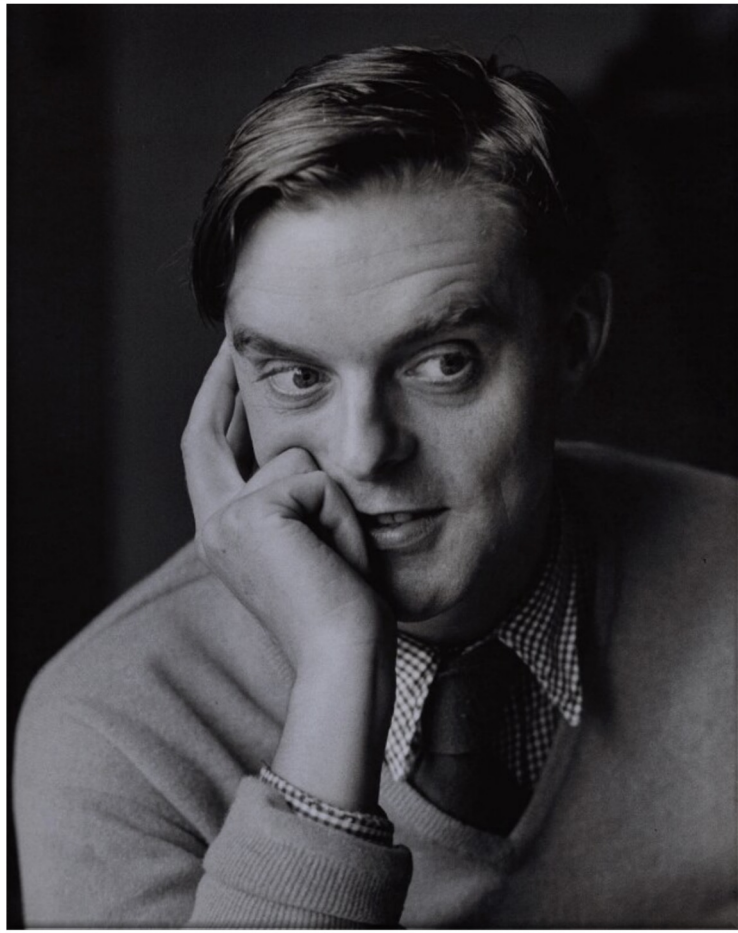
MODERATE READER

- 40% comprehension
- 20% retention
- 30% relevant

Relevant Literature: Comprehended and Retained



John Wain, a Poet, Novelist (and Part-Time Inkling) Reflected on the Performance of the Great Verbal Pugilist, C.S. Lewis



“It was Lewis’s show . . . a kind of prize ring in which various champions appeared to try conclusions with Lewis, who week after week put on a knock-down-and-drag-out performance that really was impressive. Our time has produced no better debater . . . I can remember packed meetings in stifling college common rooms where the atmosphere was positively gladiatorial.”

Many Adversaries Left the arena Hat-in-Hand, Vowing Never to Return

This Thoroughly “Dissed” Don from Oxford Finally Earned the Respect He Deserved from Cambridge and Elsewhere

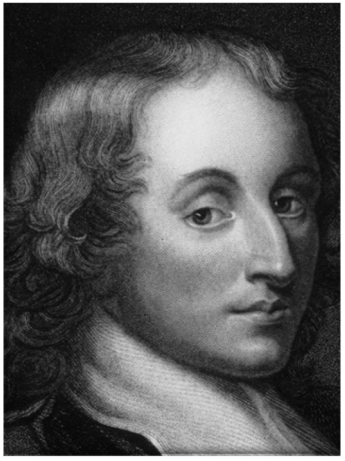


- In 1947, *Time Magazine* featured Lewis’s face on the cover for his most well-known work, *The Screwtape Letters*
- In 1955, Lewis was elected Fellow of the British Academy, the premier distinction in his field, for *English Literature in the 16th Century*
- In 2000, Christianity Today honored the books with the greatest spiritual influence: #1 *Mere Christianity*, #2 *The Screwtape Letters*
- In 1951, Winston Churchill offer Lewis the coveted Commander of the British Empire, the highest civilian distinction for his BBC broadcasts
- In 2013 Westminster Abbey places a memorial stone to C. S. Lewis in Poet’s Corner . . . ironic given poetry was his only failure in life

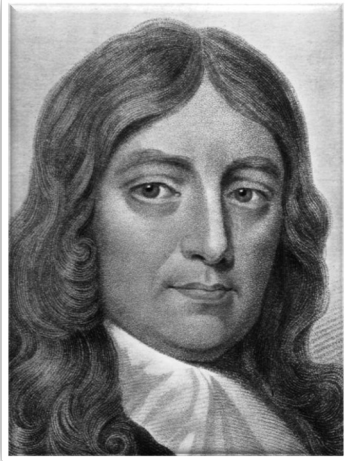
Candidates for “Most Erudite Person in History?”



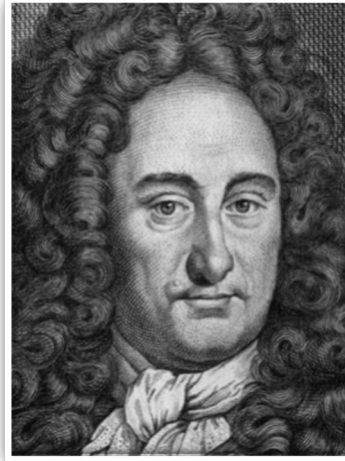
My Case Completed . . . the List Was Then Culled to the Top Twelve Viable Candidates for “Most Erudite Person Ever”



Blaise Pascal



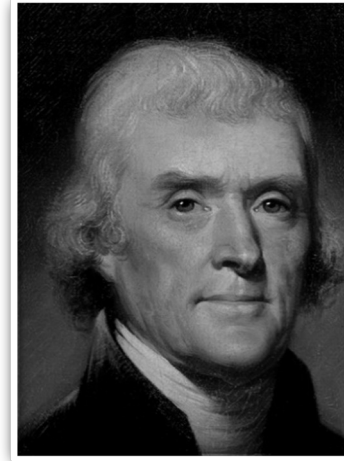
John Milton



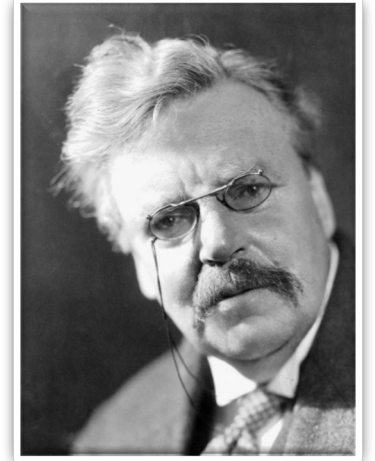
Gottfried Leibniz



Samuel Johnson



Thomas Jefferson



G.K. Chesterton



Winston Churchill



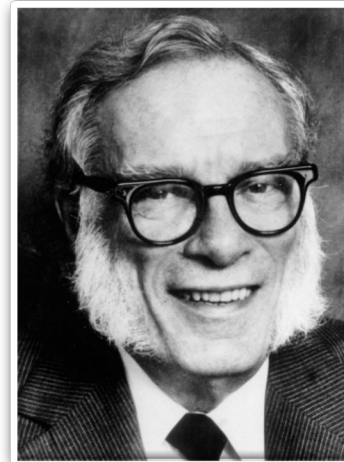
Will Durant



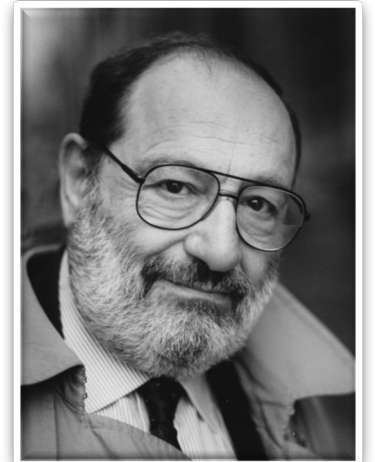
C.S. Lewis



Mortimer J. Adler



Isaac Asimov



Umberto Eco

Next the Field Was Cut to the “Final Four” . . . And The Final Decision Came Down to Mortimer J. Adler Versus C. S. Lewis



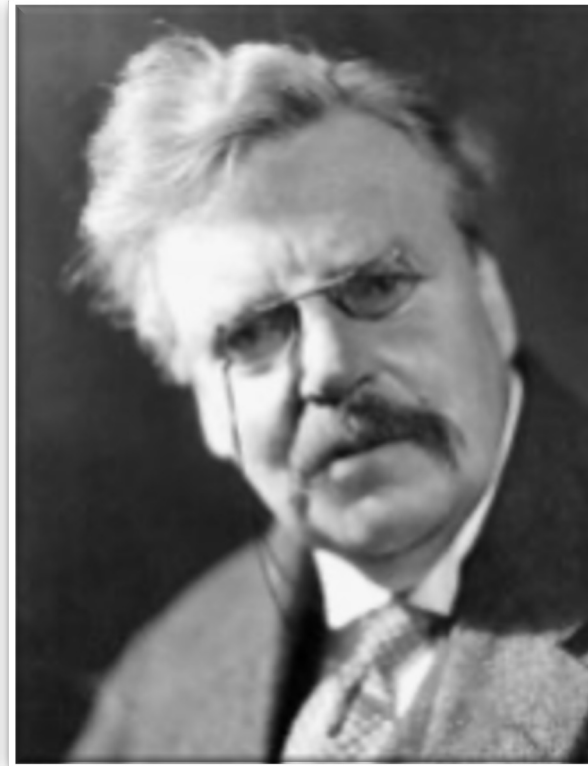
C.S. Lewis

#1



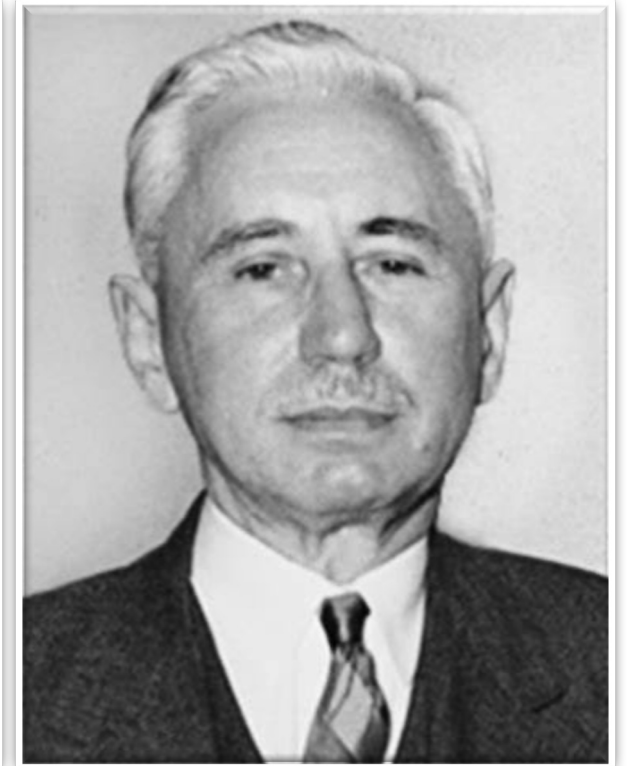
Mortimer J. Adler

#2



G.K. Chesterton

#3



Will Durant

#4

In Considering this Aristotelian Syllogism, the Conclusion Is: “It is Plausible C. S. Lewis is the Most Erudite Person Ever”

1. If Christianity is NOT TRUE, then books that describe Christianity and seek to bring you closer to a mythical Christ are meaningless
2. If Christianity is NOT TRUE, then much of what C.S. Lewis read is of no merit as erudition whether it is derived from "literary learning" or not
3. If Christianity is NOT TRUE, then C.S. Lewis simply cannot be the most erudite person in history, and it is quite possible that some skeptic like Isaac Asimov is
4. However, if Christianity is TRUE, there is nothing more important than books that bring you closer to Christ (and writers who lead you “into the region of awe”)
5. Moreover, if Christianity is TRUE, then a large part of C. S. Lewis’s erudition was extremely important, and we should do everything we can to advocate his writings
6. Christianity IS true

Question #2:

Erudition Is Eroding in America, Especially
Among the Young . . . Is This a Problem?

Erudition is in steep decline
in America. Reading is down 20%
(or more) in every segment of the citizenry.
The problem is most severe with the young.
One in three Americans never read a single
book of literature after high school.

With All This New Technology, We Have Total Information Available at Our Fingertips, But Surprisingly Little Wisdom

Americans have a short-term perspective, by which we know . . .

. . . everything about the last 24 hours

Yesterday  *Today*

. . . not that much about the last 24 years

1998  *Today*

. . . next to nothing about the last 24 centuries

400 BC  *Today*

Is “Homo Up-to-Datum” a Dunce?



