

The Evolution of Miltonic Criticism: A Technical Reassessment of the C.S. Lewis and T.S. Eliot Dialectic

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The mid-20th century witnessed a seismic shift in the evaluation of the English literary canon, primarily driven by the conflicting yet converging perspectives of **C.S. Lewis** and **T.S. Eliot**. At the center of this intellectual conflict stood the legacy of **John Milton**, particularly his epic *Paradise Lost* and his early masterpiece, *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* (The Nativity Ode). This article provides a comprehensive technical analysis of how Lewis and Eliot negotiated Milton's influence, the structural mechanics of their critical methodologies, and the broader implications for modern literary studies.

1. The Theoretical Framework: Modernism vs. Traditionalism

To understand the friction between Lewis and Eliot, one must first analyze the theoretical foundations of their respective schools of thought. T.S. Eliot, a titan of **Modernism**, initially viewed Milton as a disruptive force in the development of English poetry. Conversely, C.S. Lewis, representing a **Traditionalist** scholarly approach, sought to rehabilitate Milton's reputation against the modernist "strictures."

1.1. Eliot's Dissociation of Sensibility

Eliot's primary technical objection to Milton was grounded in his theory of the **"dissociation of sensibility."** Eliot argued that in the 17th century, a split occurred between thought and feeling in English poetry. He blamed Milton and Dryden for this fragmentation, suggesting that Milton's "Grand Style" sacrificed the nuances of common speech for a specialized, artificial language. This, Eliot claimed, led to a linguistic atrophy that modern poets needed to rectify.

1.2. Lewis's Defense of the 'Grand Style'

Lewis responded with *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942). His technical defense was based on the concept of **Primary vs. Secondary Epic**. Lewis argued that Milton's style was not an artificial imposition but a necessary technical requirement for the Secondary Epic—a form designed to be read rather than recited, requiring a ritualistic, heightened language to elevate the subject matter.

2. Technical Analysis: The Nativity Ode and the Milton Legacy

The **Nativity Ode** serves as a critical focal point for assessing the divergent views of Lewis and Eliot. As noted in the research by **Charles A. Huttar** in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, the poem represents Milton's early experimentation with poetic architecture and theological integration.

2.1. Structural Mechanics of the Ode

The poem is divided into two distinct sections: the four introductory stanzas in **Rime Royal** and the twenty-seven stanzas of the "Hymn" using a unique eight-line stanza (AABCCBDD). Lewis admired this structure as a masterpiece of **mathematical precision** and architectural balance, whereas Eliot initially found the rhythmic patterns too rigid and removed from the flexibility of the dramatic blank verse he championed.

2.2. Metric and Rhythmical Patterns

Lewis's analysis focused on the **iambic pentameter** and the final **alexandrine** (a 12-syllable line) that closes each

stanza. He viewed this as a technical solution to the problem of ending a stanza with a "sonic weight" that prevents the poem from feeling rushed. Eliot's reassessment in 1947 (Milton II) eventually acknowledged that Milton's technical mastery of sound and rhythm was unparalleled, even if it led English poetry in a direction Eliot originally found problematic.

3. Comparison and Evaluation Matrices

The following table outlines the technical differences between Lewis and Eliot in their approach to Miltonic scholarship and literary value.

Feature / Parameter	T.S. Eliot (Modernist Perspective)	C.S. Lewis (Traditionalist Perspective)	Technical Implication
Language Priority	Common speech and vernacular.	Ritualistic and elevated 'Grand Style'.	Determines the 'accessibility' vs. 'reverence' of the text.
Sensibility	Unified (Thought + Feeling).	Hierarchical (Intellect guiding Emotion).	Influences the emotional resonance of the imagery.
Poetic Form	Fragmented and Allusive.	Structured and Linear.	Affects the reader's navigation of the narrative.
Milton's Satan	Symbol of flawed romanticism.	A study in the 'Progress of Degradation'.	Defines the moral framework of the epic.
Key Work	The Sacred Wood (1920)	A Preface to Paradise Lost (1942)	Primary critical texts for the Milton debate.

4. The Problem of Milton's Satan: A Technical Breakdown

A significant portion of the Milton legacy involves the interpretation of Satan. As highlighted by **David V. Urban**, Lewis's analysis of Satan remains one of the most controversial chapters in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. Lewis used a **moral-logical framework** to deconstruct the Romantic view of Satan as a tragic hero.

4.1. The Progress of Degradation

Lewis applied a sequential analysis to Satan's character arc, which he termed the "progress of degradation." He argued that Satan's technical function in the poem is to show the inevitable shrinkage of the self that results from pride. **Technical Steps in Lewis's Argument:**

- Initial Grandeur: Satan appears as a majestic rebel to establish the scale of the conflict.
- Internal Contradiction: Lewis points out the logical fallacy in Satan's claim that he was self-begotten.
- Metamorphic Descent: The physical transformation from a bright Archangel to a toad, and finally a serpent, mirrors his moral decay.
- Final Absurdity: The transition from a tragic figure to a comic/absurd one, ending in the involuntary hissing in Pandemonium.

4.2. Eliot's Re-evaluation

While Eliot was less concerned with the moral implications than the aesthetic ones, his later work admitted that Milton's Satan provided a necessary **psychological depth** that influenced the development of the "Modernist anti-hero." This convergence suggests that while their starting points differed, both recognized Milton's technical ability to map the human (and sub-human) psyche.

5. Practical Implementation: The Anglican Psalter Collaboration

Beyond criticism, the relationship between Lewis and Eliot transitioned from adversarial to collaborative, most notably in the revision of the **Anglican Psalter**. This project required a high level of linguistic and technical precision.

5.1. Linguistic Engineering in Translation

The task involved reconciling the **Coverdale translation** (known for its beauty) with modern **philological accuracy**. Lewis and Eliot had to execute a step-by-step workflow to ensure the text remained suitable for liturgical chanting while correcting historical mistranslations.

5.2. Technical Workflow for Psalter Revision

1. Philological Audit: Comparing 16th-century English with the original Hebrew Masoretic text.
2. Metric Analysis: Ensuring the 'pointing' of the Psalms allowed for traditional Anglican chant rhythms.
3. Semantic Filtering: Removing archaic words that had undergone 'semantic drift' (changing meaning over time) while preserving the 'sacred tone'.
4. Consensus Building: Negotiating between Eliot's preference for poetic density and Lewis's preference for clarity and traditional imagery.

6. Case Studies and Field Analysis

The impact of this critical dialectic is seen in how Milton is taught in modern pedagogy. The **pedagogical proposals** mentioned in the JSON data suggest using translation as a didactic element to enhance literature lessons.

6.1. Case Study: The 'Forgotten Scot' Connection

The BBC highlights the "forgotten Scot" (George MacDonald) who inspired both Tolkien and Lewis. MacDonald's influence is a vital technical link because he provided the **theological blueprint** that Lewis used to defend Milton. MacDonald's view of the imagination as a "divine faculty" allowed Lewis to argue that Milton's creative acts were a form of sub-creation, a concept later popularized by Tolkien.

6.2. Troubleshooting Critical Misconceptions

A common error in Milton studies is the "Satanic Fallacy"—the belief that Milton was "of the Devil's party without knowing it" (Blake). **Solutions for scholars:**

- Contextual Mapping: Placing the poem within 17th-century political and religious frameworks.
- Structural Prioritization: Giving more weight to the poem's resolution (Books XI and XII) rather than just the initial books.
- Linguistic Analysis: Distinguishing between the narrator's voice and the characters' rhetorical strategies.

7. Synthesis and Broader Implications

The reassessment of the relationship between C.S. Lewis and T.S. Eliot reveals that the "Milton Legacy" was not merely a historical artifact but a living laboratory for 20th-century critical theory. Through their debate, we see the maturation of **Literary Criticism** into a rigorous discipline that balances aesthetic appreciation with historical and technical accuracy.

Lewis's defense of the Grand Style ensured that the epic tradition remained viable in an age of irony and fragmentation. Eliot's eventual concession to Milton's genius signaled the integration of traditionalist values into the modernist framework. Together, their work on the Anglican Psalter and their individual critiques created a **bi-focal lens** through which we now view the 17th century: one eye focused on the technical brilliance of the verse, the other on the enduring moral and psychological truths it conveys.

Ultimately, the Milton Legacy is a testament to the power of structured, disciplined criticism. By moving beyond personal resentment to professional collaboration, Lewis and Eliot demonstrated that the study of literature is an iterative process of refinement. The technical workflows they established for analyzing verse, character, and translation continue to provide a foundation for contemporary Milton studies, ensuring that the "Nativity Ode" and

Paradise Lost remain central to the English-speaking world's cultural and academic consciousness.

Baca Juga (Artikel Terkait)

- [The Epic Tradition of African American Autobiography: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Quest for Freedom and Literacy](http://alghafgolden.com/african-american-autobiography-quest-for-freedom-literacy.pdf)

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Tags: #C.S. Lewis #T.S. Eliot #John Milton #Modernism #Literary Theory

