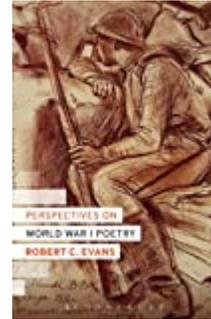




**Robert C. Evans.** *Perspectives on World War I Poetry*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. vii + 230 pp. \$94.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4725-1021-1; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4725-1310-6.



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The year 2014 marked one hundred years since the onset of the First World War, an event that inspired an outpouring of literature that attempted to make sense of and remember the conflict's horrific nature, both on and away from the front lines. As part of the centenary, numerous works have sought to reevaluate and analyze the significance of that literature. Robert C. Evans's *Perspectives on World War I Poetry* provides an accessible, if less traditional guide to the varied poetic responses to the First World War. Although Evans fails to unite his observations into a cohesive argument, he presents multifaceted and detailed analyses of selected poems, greatly enhancing both students' and the public's understanding of World War I poetry.

Although readers may initially balk at the term literary theory, Evans is quick to dispel potential fears in the preface, stating that literary theory should be a fact, needs to be accessible, as knowledge of it can positively affect the reading and analyzing of literary works. He also argues that although literary theory may seem abstract and inconsequential for the average reader, it is something that every reader of a literary work uses, since readers inevitably make assumptions about why and how a text should be interpreted, understood, or appreciated. Having a basic working knowledge of liter-

ary theory, Evans argues, allows readers to become more conscious of these assumptions, thus introducing us to different ways of reading texts and prompting us not only to think for ourselves but to make sure that we can explain why we have chosen to think and read as we do (p. 1). In the introduction, Evans explains and breaks down each of the twenty theories used throughout the book; some examples include Platonism, traditional historicism, Marxism, postmodernism, and Darwinian criticisms. Although some readers may feel the need to keep a dictionary close by, the language is not overly complicated. Evans also consistently reminds readers as to the meaning of each theory in the main text, negating the need to flip back and forth or to memorize them at the outset. Before plunging the reader headlong into the main set of poems, Evans—in the manner of a successful instructor—provides Carl Sandberg's poem "Grass" as a test case for how the various literary theories can be used to interpret a single work (p. 9). Having practiced their lesson, readers are thus informed and ready for the main analyses.

Evans presents twenty-four poets and thirty-nine poems, with the work of such well-known poets as Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, and e. e. cummings occupying close to half the book. This should not

be considered a detriment, however, as Evans's theoretically based analysis sheds new light on the seemingly overused poems by these poets. This allows even students familiar with World War I poetry to gain new and valuable insight. An example of this is Owen's "Dulce Et Decorum Est." Much emphasis is typically placed on the significance of the title—the Horatian line, "It is sweet and appropriate to die for one's country"—but Evans, using the traditional historical theory, illustrates how "practically every line seems more resonant when read with historical facts in mind" (p. 173). Beyond these four, readers are introduced to numerous female poets as well as gay poets and poets of color, all of whom represent a range of English-speaking countries. All poems are reproduced in their entirety, and each subsequent analysis emphasizes a "close reading" approach in that Evans directly references specific lines and words used in the poem—a helpful technique for students and general readers alike. This attention to detail does not mean that Evans employs all twenty theoretical perspectives for every poem. Instead, he focuses on those literary theories that most assist in the overall analysis and understanding of each work. Evans does make clear in the preface that "the most general discussions" are located at the beginning (p. viii), thus the ensuing chapters tend to include a greater number of theories and slightly more complex analyses.

Despite its many strengths, Evans's work also con-

tains some minor flaws. Though he states in the preface that the book "is organized by dates of the poets' births, with the earlier poets preceding the later ones," and that it is "designed so that individual sections can be read in isolation but also so that each section builds on the one before it," the reader is still left speculating as to the chosen layout (p. viii). One might expect theme to factor in in addition to birth chronology, but this does not appear to be the case; chapters end and begin seemingly at random, with the reader questioning the break points. Evans also does not explain his choice of poets and poems; although certainly inclusive, one wonders why these "made the cut" and others did not. In a similar vein, Evans does not include much in the way of biographical information for the poets, though his analyses do place the work and author within the broader literary and historical context. Finally, this book could have benefited from a distinct conclusion, rather than a final chapter that further explains each literary theory. Evans does include a works cited list and a list for further reading, which gives interested readers access to secondary source material on the subject. Overall, however, *Perspectives on World War I Poetry* is an excellent addition to World War I scholarship, one that offers students and general readers alike a new and accessible method of understanding literature from one of the most significant conflicts of the twentieth century.

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