

ENGLISH LITERATURE OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

A CRITICAL STUDY

by

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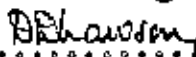

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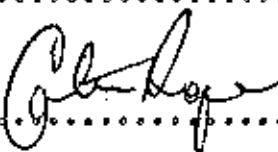
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ABSTRACT

The present study attempts to demonstrate the impact of the First World War upon English literature. It traces the various stages of the attitudes of the contributors to this literature, who had witnessed the War and given vent to their feelings in prose and poetry. A brief review of techniques and styles is included to help the evaluation of the War's literary by-product. The emphasis is not so much on individual reactions as on how the War affected the whole generation, as seen in the 1914 - 1918 literature.

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INTRODUCTION

When I decided that my thesis would be about the First World War, I was many times asked with concern why I did not choose a less nerve-racking theme. To people who are by no means connected with it, a war is something to keep away from. Why bother spending months haunted by wailing grenade shells and nauseating decomposition? 'Life is too serious to be taken seriously; a friend said. Images of ravaged landscapes, disintegrated homes and premature deaths, all for no obvious ends, are depressing and can readily make one lose faith in things. But, aren't things what they are because we often refrain from facing facts? Everybody is somehow aware of the horrors of war. Yet, in defiance of numberless peace attempts, humanity is continually under its threat: the Vietnam war and the one between the Arabs and the Israelis now, to mention the most terrifying wars at the present time. I am interested in this particular grim facet of man's nature: the unavoidable upshot of many enterprises that man is capricious enough ^{to undertake} ~~to~~ and never really cares to avoid.

I have always been interested in literature, which I regard as the embodiment of national personality. This is not a subject directly useful in everyday life. But I believe that a study that makes one understand more of life and of one's fellowmen, is always worthwhile. Life is not without fluctuations and human institutions are impermanent. If life is mysterious, man is even more so -- clever and unpredictable. What a literature can reveal in this connection is little, but it is better than nothing. In a peacetime society, one feels restricted by social conventions.

Motives are less spontaneous than calculated, for more of life is still to be granted. The present study provides a closer view of a war in which one can discern a kind of comradeship that no situation less dynamic than a war can strike up. Infantrymen, with the possibility of destruction not far ahead, feel more or less in the same boat. Their reactions are pathetically sincere. Is it only when man feels at bay, when he can no longer call his life his own, that he gives expression to his true feelings? Likewise, to a mother whose country calls for her only child, the war is monstrous. She does not want him to be killed; at the same time, out of patriotism, she wants him to carry out what is expected of a man. A man does not want to kill, because he sees no point in so doing; yet he has to for fear of being called 'shirker' or otherwise looked down upon. Desertions almost always end up with court-martialing and shooting. Is it so hard for man to have his will? A few words from a conscientious objector can probably clarify this point. As for a war literature, it can depict only a mere slice of life.

In dealing with World War I, I am concerned with the English side. This is the first modern war, and the literature of this war puts emphasis on the 'anonymous' ^{soldiers} in the ranks, who are portrayed as victims rather than as heroes. Previously, a war literature is intended to glorify "leaders and lords." The age of hero-worship has long passed. Thomas Hardy's citizen soldiers who "well know what they're doing", can be contrasted with Tennyson's professional Victorian troopers:

Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.

Many attempts were made to give the inner meaning of the 1914-1918 war, but they failed, for writers subconsciously tended to think of it in terms of the old-type war-motivated by patriotism. Charles Sorley was credited for first finding expression in writing that "patriotism is not enough." The deeper significance of the War lies in the fact that it was an aimless, calamitous exploit of humanity that transcends the cleavage of war. The First World War, breaking out of industrial competitions and differences in ideology, resulted in vast casualties. In this study, however, I am concerned with the stress that modern civilization exerted upon arts, paying more attention to the moral impact of the War than to its external phenomena.

There are few principal writers of the First World War. It is still to be allowed that the men of genius are never found in large numbers. The names reviewed in the following pages are even fewer. Herbert Read has to be completely left out, and Robert Nichols can be discussed only briefly because of the lack of material resources.

The study is divided into four main chapters. The first chapter deals with the writers who reflect the early romantic excitement of a nation going to war. The second chapter is about those whose writings reveal a correct understanding and a duly changed attitude of the people who have been through the fighting themselves. There are a few writers who have to be discussed separately in Chapter III, because they do not markedly reveal any change of attitude. This is due either to the fact that they knew, from the start, what the

"real war" was like and what it would cost, or to the determination never to let the War disturb their techniques and styles. Some writers produced both poetry and prose works. But there is no separation in this connection. Each name is finished with all his available achievement. The techniques and styles of the most outstanding ones are discussed in Chapter IV.