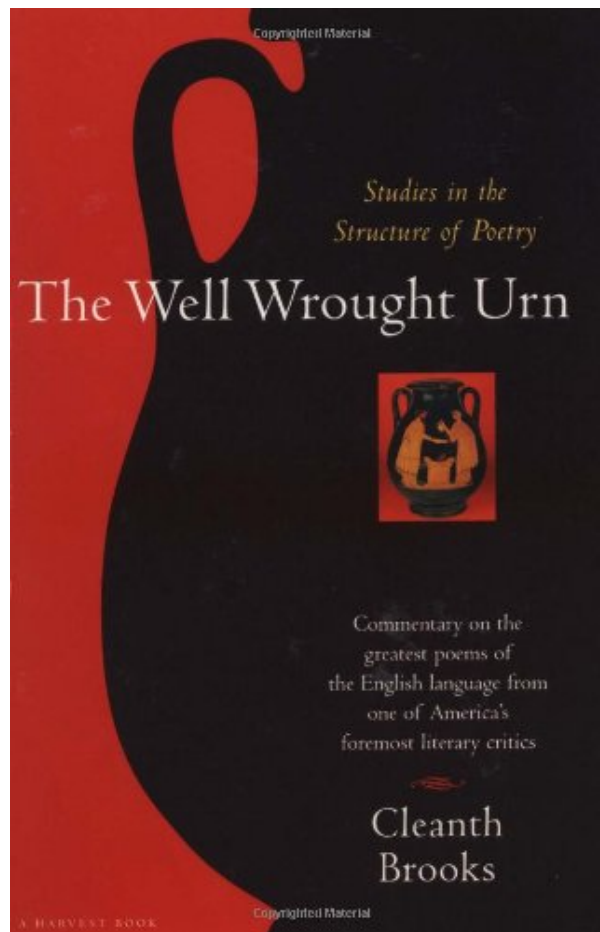
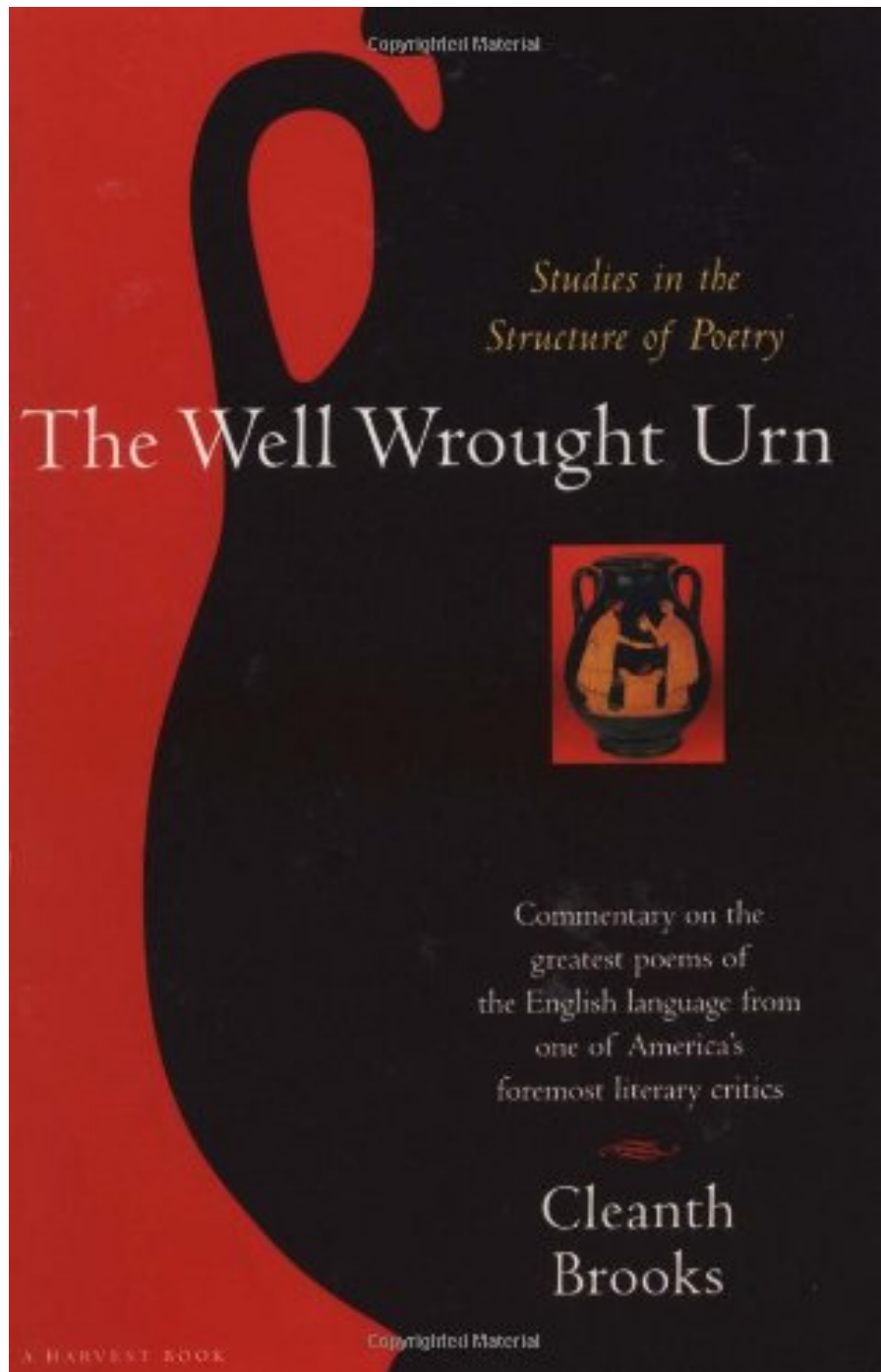


THE WELL WROUGHT URN: STUDIES IN THE STRUCTURE OF POETRY BY CLEANTH BROOKS



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A classic that has been widely used by several generations, this book consists of detailed commentaries on ten famous English poems from the Elizabethan period to the present. Index.

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About the Author

No Bio

Most helpful customer reviews

50 of 52 people found the following review helpful.

A Book that Shows Us How to Read a Poem

By A Customer

I first read "The Well Wrought Urn" in 1978, when I was a first year grad student. Now I assign it for English majors taking their final undergraduate seminar. "The Well Wrought Urn" is a collection of essays on various poems. The essays were published in various journals in the 1940s. Why is the book still read? It is read because these essays are superb examples of literary criticism at its best: insightful, accessible, graceful, witty. It is read because when one reads a poem, then reads Brooks' essay about it, then reads the poem again, one learns a great deal about how to understand poetry and gain from it meaning and pleasure. Brooks' insights aren't the only valid insights into these poems, but they are good ones. It's not that we read these essays to understand these specific poems, but to understand how to approach any poem. There's a lot of interesting literary criticism available in libraries, though far more is not very interesting or graceful. Few essays, however, are more helpful to students as tools for teaching the technique of literary analysis. Of course, Brooks, as a New Critic, is using a style of literary criticism not presently trendy. Still, the technique of discovering insights about poetry is still the same, no matter what the theory one uses.

The review below this one is worthwhile, but I would suggest that the author misses the joke. What he takes as condescension is a condescension that includes the readers within the circle of initiates. It doesn't scoff at the reader. Thus, it is meant to help English majors think that they are a sort of blessed priesthood who have been initiated into the secrets of the fellowship. (When I was in grad school, that's what I thought we were.) Of course, this is all somewhat tongue in cheek and meant to be witty.

About twelve years ago I had the pleasure of hearing Brooks, then quite elderly (I don't know if he is still alive), present a paper at a conference. I remember him as slim, polite, self-effacing--the essence of the Southern gentleman at his best.

18 of 18 people found the following review helpful.

Literary Criticism as if Literature Mattered

By A Customer

This book, written nearly a half-century ago, has never been out of print. To read it is to see why. With Cleanth Brooks, who taught at Yale for most of his career, you feel as if you are sitting in a seminar with the most brilliant professor you've ever known, one who is also a true gentleman with extraordinary solicitude for his students/readers. He takes you through the poems line by line and helps you to *see* the artistry of the poet at work. And so sparkling is his prose style that the essays are themselves works of art. This book is especially appropriate for students who are just beginning to appreciate poetry.

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

The Poem Over the Poet

By Martin Asiner

When one compares Understanding Poetry with The Well Wrought Urn, one is struck by an odd pairing of likenesses with differences. Both seek to advance the acceptance of New Critical tenets by listing a number of well-known poems and analyzing each to determine how the poet focuses attention on the organic unity, which requires the reader to consider how that poet integrates a dozen or so manifestations of language and structure all of which coalesce to produce the one "correct" interpretation. The primary difference does not lie in the many more poems of Understanding Poetry but rather in Brooks' determination to reply to the charges of critics who loudly complained that Brooks had unfairly and unreasonably excluded any reference to disciplines external to the purely literal. For Brooks, these external differences were holdovers from the previous generation's fascination with the historical/biographical school of literary interpretation, a related theory which suggests that facts from the life and times of the poet are crucial in fixing the behind the scenes mixing of form and content as prerequisites to uncovering the meaning. Brooks went to considerable lengths to emphasize that he had no problem with historical/biographical approaches to literature. They had their place in the literary scheme of things but criticism was not one of them. Brooks noted that there was no objective proof that knowing a fact about either the reader or his times revealed anything germane about the text. What historical/biographical criticism did not address were the excellences of a poem. Nor did they explain how the varied elements of New Critical analyses (figurative language, imagery, symbolism, etc) interacted with each other to uncover the meaning.

The most striking chapter was "The Heresy of Paraphrase." Brooks contended that it was impossible to write a prose paraphrase of a poem such that the paraphrase contained the full power and sweeping imagination of the originating poem. What the paraphrase had were the external trappings of the poem with none of the language that made that poem a poem. Language is a complex unity of a myriad of factors that add up to more than the sum of a poem's parts. If one substitutes the language of a paraphraser for the language of the poet, the result is not unlike comparing lightning to a lightning bug. One simply cannot mistake one for the other. Brooks' anathema toward paraphrase fits well into his schema concerning New Criticism in general. The focus should be on the words of the text not the re-worded words or life or history of either the poet or the critic. That The Well Wrought Urn is still a staple of criticism suggests that even if New Criticism as a distinct theory has long since left center stage as a power player the ability to use its principles of close reading is a telling reminder that a critical eye on a text is a tool that will never go out of style regardless of the inane theory making use of it.

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