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PORTRAYAL OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY AND POLITICS IN THE NOVELS OF DOS PASSOS

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ABSTRACT

John Dos Passos, the most considerable figure in contemporary American Literature, presents the evils of contemporary American society and politics in his novels. He plays the role of a social historian in this regard. The characters of his novels have no inner life commensurate with the outer world. Unlike the other writers of his time, Dos Passos invents a new form by which he is able to present his agony in a powerful manner. As a journalist he is able to observe the society and, accordingly create characters with a critical mind in his novels. He depicts the American life of the period after World War I. The present study focuses on social and political consciousness in the novels of Dos Passos. Dos Passos first began to use the experimental techniques developing more fully in his major contribution to American fiction.

Key Words: Dos Passos, Social, Political & Techniques.

1. Introduction

As an American novelist, essayist, poet, and journalist, Dos Passos is best known for his socio-political novels of pre-World War II America. His central concerns are social injustices, the exploitation of the working class, and the injurious emphasis on materialism in American society. Detail and realism are important elements in Dos Passos's work, often emphasized through such innovative means as his Newsreel and Camera Eye techniques. Strongly political and social Dos Passos moved from his early, left wing revolutionary philosophy to a later conservatism.

The trends of mass-periodical fiction do not necessarily coincide with those of serious fiction, indeed; the evidence is rather to the contrary. There seems little doubt that the American social novelists of the 1920s and 1930s differed increasingly from those of the two previous decades, they depicted a different society, had new social and political attitudes, and naturally inclined to other types of heroes.

Dos Passos wrote more than forty books during his lifetime, including poetry, plays, travel books, political tracts, histories, and biographies. He is better known, though, for his novels, and best of all for the documentary style fiction he wrote during the twenties and thirties. I have limited the documentation of his critical reception to the novels. Also he is best known for, and to those others

which are representative of a period in his career or of a change in political or stylistic direction. Though it is certainly true that no American writer has been more subjected to political judgment than Dos Passos, has the history of the critical response shows that what made him the most promising American writer of the thirties and a much less respected writer. Later on, he had as much to do with his art as with his politics, if indeed the two can be separated. A critical reception never stops developing, and neither does historical consciousness ever fully reveal itself in openly stated principles or propositions.

Jean-Paul Sartre once called Dos Passos “the best novelist of our time.” The critical reputation Dos Passos achieved in the twenties and thirties still acts as a buffer against some of the stinging criticism he has lately received. Alfred Kazin wrote that Dos Passos’s triumph of style, as U.S.A. trilogy, provided “a machine prose for a machine world.” Society appeared as its hero, and the work became an epic, “a study in the history of modern society, of its social struggles and great masses, but it is a history of defeat.”

Dos Passos asserts that personal freedom and individual liberty constitute the highest good, and that this good is under attack by evil in the form of institutional authority in mass society and in the form of “the prescriptions of doctrine.” Finally, the theory asserts that the individual must “struggle against oppression,” against “the daily exploitation of everything take the leap of faith.” Dos Passos, the most considerable figure in contemporary American Literature, presents the evils of contemporary American society in his novels.

The body of the trilogy is devoted to the careers of a dozen representative people through the years from about the turn of this century to the big money days of the twenties. The first novel approaches World War I. The second deals largely with civilian activities during the war, in New York and Paris, the third explores the big money boom after the war. There is no central character in U.S.A. Each novel deals with about four of the dozen, and there is a slight carry-over from one novel to the next.

In *The 42nd Parallel* the main characters are Mac McCreary, son of a laborer, who struggles through the labor movement, joins and leaves the Industrial workers of the world in the Northwest, and ends by living with a Mexican girl and comfortably selling radical books from their shop. J. Ward Moorehouse, from Delaware, who marries wealthy women, rises through business and public relations into politics. Where he pompously mediates between capital and labor with the purpose of keeping the latter in line, and has a long platonic relation with Eleanor Stoddard, who is a frigid, frustrated, artistic, ambitious bitch from Chicago, comes to New York. Where she prospers as an interior decorator, has an important position in the Red Cross in Paris, and finally marries a Russian prince and Janey Williams mousey and fearful, who becomes the devoted secretary of J. Ward Moorehouse.

1919 adds the career of Janey’s brother, Joe Williams, an ignorant man trying to get along, who joins the navy, deserts, and brawls his way purposelessly through the action. Richard Ellsworth Savage, cultured and personable, who some how drifts down into opportunism and debasement of his literary talents in J. Ward Moorehouse’s employment, a kind of unhappy playboy. Eveline Hutchins, daughter of a Chicago minister who terrifies her, seduced by a Mexican painter, who joins Eleanor Stoddard for a while as interior decorator, goes with her to Paris is jilted by the man she loves, has a brief affair with Moorehouse and another with a soldier named Paul, and later dies from a lethal dose

of sleeping pills. Daughter a girl who has a gay and frantic life spending her father's money and running from men, traveling abroad after the war, who transfers the early frustrated passion that has been the cause of her restlessness to Dick Savage, and who dies, pregnant and rejected by him, in an airplane crash.

The Big Money almost has a central character, Charley Anderson, aviator and war ace, who goes into business manufacturing airplanes and is on the way to riches when he is caught up in the fever of market investment that takes his money as fast as he can make it. An airplane crash puts him out of circulation and he loses his part in the business. His drinking and gambling increase and he dies in Florida after an automobile accident when he tried to beat a train to a crossing, going eighty-five miles an hour. Charley's is the grittiest and most desperate story in the whole trilogy. There are also Mary French, a spectacled student, drab and miserable, who devotes herself to reform. Margo Dowling works her busy, heartless way through a number of men to a fat contract in Hollywood.

The three devices which interrupt the central narratives and formalize the confusion depicted represent the ultimate stylistic expressiveness of the naturalistic movement. The Newsreel introduces a section with bits of headlines, advertisements, feature articles, and phrases of news, interwoven with lines of poetry which presumably represent some of the emotions usually popular and sentimental being experienced at the time. Superficially, it represents a world of fraud and sophistication, violence and treachery. It is a backdrop of hysteria behind which the serious business of society, if such it can be called, is concealed. For high finance and international relations continue to control the world, while the public is engaged with sentiment and sensation.

The Biographies there are twenty-five of them scattered through the three volumes are condensed records of typical public figures of the time. From the fields of business, politics, technology, labor, and the arts, such figures as Carnegie, Hearst, Insull, Valentino, Duncan, Bryan, and Debs constitute a sampling of specific figures that dominate the stage and also move the properties and scenes of our time. They are set forth ironically and bitterly, for the businessmen are greedy and unscrupulous. The entertainers are victims of their public as well as panders to its lusts and vanities, the liberal politicians are confused by their ambitions and the inadequacies of their idealism.

The efficiency expert is an inhuman machine that dies with a stop watch in his hand. If these are the public heroes, the images of greatness which they portray for the common man through the glittering Newsreel show why "our storybook democracy" has not come true. The one figure presented by Dos Passos with a devotion approaching reverence is Veblen, the lonely and satiric analyst of leisure class conduct and the disruption of efficiency by rapacious business, who could not fit into our academic world and who died leaving the request that his ashes be scattered into the sea and no monument or memorial of any sort be erected in his name.

The Camera Eye is Dos Passos's subjective and rather poetic commentary on this world. It occurs fifty-one times through the trilogy. It is revealing the character, interests, and life history of the artist how he came out of Virginia, went to school abroad and at Harvard, drove an ambulance during the war, was disillusioned by the Versailles Treaty and the violent way of materialism which followed it. He lived as a newspaper reporter and radical through the big money days of the early twenties. He is an oversensitive and fastidious intellectual, recoiling from the dirty masses and yet seeing in them the backbone and heart of America. The great sweep of his novel shows being corrupted, debauched,

and enslaved by the forces of commercial rapacity. He sees America through the lens of a poetic tradition Whitman, which impels him to identify the physical elements America with the dream of greatness and individual realization that it has always embodied for the transcendentalist.

The characteristics attributed to American idealism when it breaks away from its scientific discipline and control of unfocused idealism and uncontrolled protest become increasingly evident in the notions. That virtue is in the people, waste is the natural expression of the exploiters, and wealth is in a long term conspiracy to disruption labor and destroys our resources. It is perhaps not extravagant to identify the perfectly expressive form of this work with the final division of the great stream of American idealism.

Most important, it brings down the curtain on Dos Passos's remarkable effort throughout his literary career to convey the panorama of twentieth-century society. His later novels are partly right wing polemics, but anyone wanting to dismiss Dos Passos should remember that he was not a crank, but an intelligent, thoughtful man of letters who agonized about his politics. The general search for order and definition was at the center of Dos Passos's quest for his father. Given his rootless background with scarcely an identifiable human connection except, his mother his search for pattern and form took, perforce, a social direction. His primary need was to forge his own link in the human chain. He was not alone, of course, either in his feeling of a pressing need for order, or in its social emphasis.

2. Conclusion

Considered Dos Passos's masterpiece, U.S.A. presents a fiercely critical and pessimistic portrait of American society during the first three decades of the twentieth century. The trilogy stands as his most forceful presentation of his central concerns, the failure of the American Dream, the exploitation of the working class, the loss of individual freedom, and America's emphasis on materialism. The novels also represent Dos Passos's most successful experiments in narrative form. Building on the innovative techniques of his earlier works, he interspersed the narrative with prose poem passages, excerpts from newspapers and popular songs, and biographical portraits of famous Americans, thus evoking multiple layers of detail and realism. Described as an epic novel as well as a study of history, U.S.A. established Dos Passos's reputation as an important literary innovator and as a major chronicler of twentieth-century American life.

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