Adventures of a Young Man Short Guide

Adventures of a Young Man by John Dos Passos

BOOKRAGS

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Characters

Dos Passos is occasionally criticized because his minor characters seem more the embodiments of ideas than fully realized fictional people, and this tendency is arguably more manifest in the District trilogy than in U.S.A. In a limited way, the charge is true of the minor characters in both trilogies. In political fiction, most authors create a wide cast of supporting characters, each of whom is developed briefly. Robert Perm Warren's masterwork All the King's Men (1946; see separate entry), which treats the same historical figure as Number One, uses an identical strategy. These authors follow the literary tradition of Charles Dickens, and Dos Passos often succeeds in the Dickens's manner of creating minor characters who satirically represent one narrow view of reality.

This is especially true of Adventures of a Young Man, where Dos Passos's concentration on chronicling Glenn's disillusionment precludes exhaustive development of the secondary characters. Yet many of the supporting characters succeed, as Dickens's do, in illustrating the consequences of a superficial acceptance of an idea. Bibulous, activist lawyer Jed Farrington, whom Glenn assists in his first activist role, is introduced as a wonderful representative of decadent Southern liberalism, perhaps the prototype for William Faulkner's Gavin Stevens in The Hamlet (1940) and The Town (1957) and Walker Percy's Lancelot Lamar in Lancelot (1976). Farrington, however, discovers his purpose as a Party warrior in the International Brigade and readily consents to Glenn's victimization by the party. In The Grand Design, Jed has internalized his new identity as a killer and has become a morally degenerate sadist as well. Marice Gulick, Glenn's mistress and his mentor's wife, is satirized as an air-headed heiress who dabbles in politics and uses her interest in Freudian psychology to justify something approximating nymphomania.

In The Grand Design, however, Marice has become a fashionable, chic liberal Washington hostess despite the persistence of these negative qualities. Miners like Pearl Napier and his family effectively represent an entire class of exploited labor victims, but they also come to life in the dignity with which they face being ground down by the mine owners and the Communists who profess to be protecting them.

This matter of characterization and the relationship between autonomy and consistency in literary characters, points to the central issue of this novel, the naivete of misguided idealism. As a sympathetic hero, Glenn keeps our respect up to what Dos Passos calls "The Moment of Choice" (ambiguously, several moments of choice occur in the section bearing that title). But why does Glenn, aware of the mess Silverstone and his bosses have made of the Harlan County affair and of the human consequences involved, meekly wait until the Party expels him? Why does Glenn not, in the Emerson-Whitman tradition of Yankee individualism Dos Passos so ardently admired, expel the Party?

As a character Glenn is more than a caricature of the political initiate; the conditions circumscribing his choices are anything but simple. In this realistic novel, Dos Passos has successfully made us aware of multiple causes for Glenn's idealism. Like Jimmy Herf in Manhattan Transfer (1925; see separate entry) or the "Camera Eye" in U.SA.,

Glenn was scarred by his mother's death while he was very young, and he keenly felt the need for a sense of belonging as his father retreated into himself and his brother sank into a bottle; radical organizations provided a psychological mechanism for belonging to a large enterprise, by which he could assert self-worth and purpose.

Moreover, his father's lost post as a Columbia University professor because of his pacifist views became a victory of principle in the family narrative.

His youthful associations, when he was most impressionable, allied him with young men having radical leanings and/or developed social consciences: Paul Graves, with whom he was fired from a day camp at which he worked for teaching the children to play Reds and Whites (proving, of course, to the conservative owners that Paul and Glenn were Bolsheviks); George Dilling, a schoolmate and a fanatical devotee of Henry George and Single-Tax economics, with whom Glenn heads west to work and live the romanticized life of "the workers"; Ben Noe, a migrant laborer with whom Glenn thinks he's discovered the working-class Adam until Ben uses Glenn's money for gambling and whores; Mike and Marice Gulick, a sociologist and his wife whose role as parlor pinks is the butt of some of Dos Passos's best satire here and again in The Grand Design; and Boris and Gladys Spingarn, a chemist and his radical wife who eventually has an affair with Glenn after he becomes a famous radical orator.

Boris, a foil for Paul Graves, later abandons his scientific and political objectivity to become a Party stooge, whereas Paul becomes increasingly suspicious of radical politics as he becomes a more accomplished agricultural engineer.

All these characters, from the brilliantly satirized party followers like Gladys Spingarn to the sympathetic victims of party politics like Lupe Perez and the pecan-shellers, or the Napier family in the coal fields, or Sylvia, the party worker who supports Glenn through his expulsion and acquiesces in, even though she does not agree with, his decision to join the International Brigade, are manifestations of the novel's main concern: the degree to which our politics shape our lives. They are variations on the central concern of Glenn's life, the way in which we seek to serve larger causes but may do so at the risk of our integrity, our souls, and our lives. As minor characters in a picaresque novel, they appropriately live their politics. What this indicates is that Glenn, as the protagonist acted on by a variety of influences, ought to know better, or to learn from his experiences that there is more to his life than his politics. Dos Passos's despairing theme is that Glenn seems unable to learn this simple truth from his experiences.

Social Concerns

Although some critics argue that John Dos Passos's second trilogy, District of Columbia (Adventures of a Young Man, 1939; Number One, 1943; and The Grand Design, 1949) is not as artistically powerful as his first trilogy, U.S.A., each of the novels creates a distinctive and memorable chronicle of the American effort to put liberalism into practice, and its subsequent disillusionment, during the Depression and World War II. Each moreover offers a variation on Dos Passos's increasing criticism of the efforts of both liberal and Communist movements to reshape the American experience after the economic collapses associated with the Great Depression and the global realignments brought about by U.S. participation in the Second World War and the rebuilding of Europe after the Allied victory. The trilogy articulates its author's final break with the several liberal movements with which he had been allied since World War I and the fulfillment of the anarchistic and agrarian impulses he had expressed with Jimmy Herf's rejection of "the City" as urban construct at the end of Manhattan Transfer (1925; see separate entry) and the adventures on the road of Mac, a principal character in The 42nd Parallel (1930).

The premise behind all three books comprising the District trilogy is expressed in the prose-poem that begins Adventures of a Young Man: "The American people/ entered their time of trials/with very little preparation." Out of the chaos of laissezfaire capitalism, the failures of which Dos Passos had chronicled so brilliantly in U.S.A., the nation entered the worldwide depression with many competing and often irreconcilable ideologies but without a clearly defined sense of national identity. In District of Columbia, the author explores several efforts to substitute ideology, largely imported from the revolutionary movements in Europe, for a native sense of national purpose. By the final novel of the set, The Grand Design, Dos Passos's emphasis has shifted from ideology to what he came to see as President Roosevelt's betrayal of the liberal causes that brought him to power. In Dos Passos's view, while the president became obsessed with perpetuating his own power and misused unprecedented talent for communicating with and rallying a fragmented people, his subordinates competed to succeed Roosevelt, with considerably less attention to his legacy than to their own private agendas.

The first of the novels, Adventures of a Young Man, examines the corruption and politicizing of the American Communist party, a theme that was at least implicit, if not increasingly overt, in The Big Money (1936; see separate entry). A bright, idealistic young man becomes progressively involved in the radical movement only to discover that he cannot follow the party line without compromising his principles; he is ultimately sacrificed by the Party intent on furthering its own historical purpose. Number One, a thinly disguised treatment of the career of Louisiana politician Huey Long, addresses the issue of populist demagoguery as a perversion of liberal ideology, while The Grand Design focuses on the New Deal approach within the Roosevelt administration and the internal bickering, as well as the corruption of needed reforms, that attended upon this jockeying for position. In each novel it ultimately becomes impossible for a man of good conscience to keep faith with his ideology.

With all the outrage of the social critic depicting abuses by monopoly capitalists exploiting workers in Nineteen Nineteen (1932). Dos Passos powerfully documents once more the need for reform in Adventures of a Young Man, especially in his treatment of his protagonist's involvement in party organization during a Kentucky strike, which the mine owners have determined to break by using lock-outs and hired goons as well as their control of the sheriff's department. These scenes, among the novel's most powerful, are drawn from Dos Passos's experiences in 1931, when he and fellow writer Theodore Dreiser were arrested for helping with relief work during a bitter coal strike in Harlan County, Kentucky. In the novel as in the writer's life, strike leaders are persecuted, threatened, and arrested for crimes they could not possibly have committed. Sympathetically drawn strike leader Pearl Napier is framed for killing a deputy, and after being beaten cruelly in jail, he dies in an escape attempt; his life of sacrifice and disillusionment resembles very closely the biographical sketch of Wesley Everett in Nineteen Nineteen (in the prose poem biography Everett was associated with American folk hero Paul Bunyan), a war hero-turned-labor activist who was victimized by the timber interests and savagely murdered.

Many sections of Adventures leading up to the protagonist's, Glenn Spottswood's, expulsion from the Communist Party occupy a thematic niche virtually unheard of in American literature before or since, one we might call "reformist anti-Communist idealism." Several key episodes in Glenn's political evolution involve causes in which Dos Passos clearly enlists the reader's sympathy with the oppressed groups with which Glenn identifies, whereas the author's incremental censure rests with Glenn's idealistic and ideological, as opposed to pragmatic, loyalties. It is not Glenn's involvement that Dos Passos satirizes; it's the form that involvement ultimately takes and Glenn's failure to recognize, or to act upon the recognition, that the Party places its own interests far above those of the groups, to say nothing of the individuals, needing help.

Two revealing examples are a pecan workers' strike in Texas that occurs while he is still a young, liberal idealist vaguely associated with Party members, and the mine workers' lockout in Kentucky, in which Glenn, now a card-carrying Communist using the Party-defined identity "Comrade Sandy Crockett," works as a CPUSA [United States Communist Party] organizer.

The pecan worker's strike imposes on Glenn his first truly meaningful obligation to choose between self-interest and the good of an oppressed minority, and he chooses an altruistic if ultimately misguided course of action. After college and some youthful flirtations with radical causes, he reluctantly takes a job a relative arranges in a Texas bank. As his older brother Tyler later admonishes him, Glenn's future would have been assured if he had simply capitalized on his family connections and his success in stock portfolio advising. Through liberal lawyer Jed Farrington, who becomes one of Dos Passos's unambiguously evil characters as a Party operative in Spain and later in The Grand Design, Glenn finds himself sympathizing with a strike by Mexican pecan shellers that has all the radical elements of the labor strikes of Nineteen Nineteen and The 42nd Parallel (1930): an oppressed labor force, management stool pigeons, sympathetically drawn workers in reluctant rebellion, and a brutal management that values no cause other than profits.

At no point in the novel does Dos Passos even hint that these workers' cause is anything but just; quite the contrary, he paints strikers and sympathizers as entirely justified in their anger and their fear.

Moreover, capitalist and establishment types are portrayed just as satirically here as anywhere in U.S.A. or most other proletarian fiction of the Depression era.

At one extreme, two dull-witted archcapitalists, the bank president and Glenn's uncle, are easily swindled and left holding a considerable economic bag by a Hindu con man who convinces Glenn's aunt that his spiritual and prognostic "powers would leave him the moment he let himself think of profit or business."

These same bank executives, so easily duped in their own area of expertise, summarily fire Glenn because of his involvement with the strikers despite the fact that he's very good at managing his clients' portfolios. In a more savage variation on Dos Passos's satire aimed at the establishment, one of the capitalists' flunkies, police chief Logan, has stool pigeons in the Mexican community; he sadistically beats up strikers, their wives, and their children, then puts "'em in jail and [thows] away the key." Dos Passos portrays Logan as a hypocrite as well; after discriminating against the Mexicans to serve the interests of the monied class, he plans to run for a higher office courting their vote.

But not all the oppressors wear badges or have memberships in the Country Club. Bank employee Eddy James, who appears in both other novels making up the trilogy as a newspaperman (therefore a shaper of public opinion), warns Glenn about his vulnerability if he insists on associating with the cause of "those poor ignorant creatures [the Mexican strikers], hardly any better than niggers," a racist sentiment echoed by Tyler while warning 5023 Glenn that the Ku Klux Klan plans to take action in the matter (just before being fired, Glenn witnesses an intimidating parade of Klansmen in full dress hoods with the unambiguous support of Logan's police). Because of his political connections, Tyler knows all about Glenn's involvement but pulls strings to keep Glenn's name out of the press. He thus manipulates the media to cover up the family's "shame" because Glenn affiliated with Hispanic strikers.

There is, however, a key tonal difference between the labor concept in Adventures and that in U.SA.: here the cure (a Communist strike) is explicitly at least as bad as—but not demonstrably worse than—the disease (rampant capitalist oppression). In addition to the police chief, the villains of this piece include Farrington, whom Glenn ironically introduces to Communist circles, and operative Irving Silverstone, whose plan reflects Dos Passos's key indictment of the Party. Called in by Glenn and Jed to offer expert advice and thereby help the workers, Silverstone immediately takes over the tactical side of the strike operation.

He insists that the case be exploited for its political significance, that the court motions become "a school for the workers" in which the Mexicans "must be made to see the significance of this strike as part of the daily struggle of the world proletariat against the encroachments of the exploiting class." Individual strikers' fates are unimportant as long as the strike has propaganda value. By the time Silverstone's tactic of spreading leaflets

and making speeches on the strike's "historic position" results in a judge's granting a change of venue that will ultimately help the prosecution convict the strikers, Silverstone is already well on his way to another historic situation, thus leaving others to face the consequences of his actions. When Glenn later makes a speech on the strikers' plight at a Party function, Silverstone accuses him of being politically incorrect because he included an I.W.W. slogan about solidarity (a radical group that preceded the communist movement in America and one whose anarchistic values appealed to Dos Passos far more than the lock-step ideology of the CPUSA ever did); further, Silverstone accuses Glenn of failing to curse Rockefeller as the bogeyman behind the strike's failure (of course Rockefeller, one of the standard targets of radical outrage before and during the Depression years, had nothing to do with the Texas strike).

Therefore, the emphasis in Adventures of a Young Man is not primarily on capitalist abuses, but on the failure of the organized left to respond meaningfully. Although this theme gained prominence throughout The Big Money, it occupied a less conspicuous role than in the second trilogy, because Dos Passos's emphasis remained primarily on abuses by those in power. In the Harlan County episode of Adventures, Pearl Napier's defense, again undertaken and directed by the Communists (led by the ubiquitous Silverstone), concentrates not on freeing Napier and other striking miners but on using their trials as an opportunity to "educate the masses," or in other words to promote their own ideology.

In this episode we discover the heart of Dos Passos's criticism of the leftist movement in America and what he perceived as the key element in its failure. Implementing desperately needed reforms, the leaders lose sight of the people they claim to represent. The Pearl Napiers, and ultimately the Glenn Spottswoods, of the world are expendable if their defeat can be used to promote a political cause. In this way, the leftists are as guilty as the capitalist exploiters of the sin Dos Passos most deplores: losing sight of the individual in the quest for power or profit. As Dos Passos puts it in a representative prose-poem from Number One, "When you try to find the people, in the end it comes down to a miner, maybe . . . ."

According to Dos Passos, America cannot be reduced to an ideology; America consists of individual people and any movement, reactionary or radical, which loses sight of that fact betrays America.

Techniques

District of Columbia is not as innovative in technique as Dos Passos's earlier works like Manhattan Transfer or U.S.A., but the author employs original variations on traditional narrative forms in each book.

In one respect, the three novels are less like one another than were the three comprising U.S.A., which, as critic Alfred Kazin was among the first to argue, is a progressive refinement of one single experiment in narrative montage. One innovation for the second trilogy as a whole is that all three books are linked by their emphasis on the fate of the Spottswood family and the association of each story with the emerging geographical center of world power, Washington, D.C.

As in U.S.A., several minor characters appear in all three novels.

Another common innovation is the introduction of each section by a prosepoem. A few critics have complained that these are unnecessary, that the situations and characters should suggest the concerns Dos Passos expresses in the poems.

This seems an inappropriate judgment; in many cases the poems are effective commentaries on the action, and several, especially the ones that treat Dos Passos's abiding concern with language and its role in our construction of reality, are quite effective as commentaries and as works of art in themselves; moreover they operate simultaneously to complement and comment on the narratives themselves.

As its title implies, Adventures of a Young Man adapts the traditional picaresque form, a method Dos Passos had used successfully in his early war novel One Man's Initiation: 1917 (1920) and in his more expository travel work Rosinante to the Road Again (1922). The narrative sequentially chronicles the episodes in the life of one character, from his childhood to his early death. Minor characters come and go in the narrative as the accidents of Glenn's life bring him into contact with them.

One exception to the author's habit of overstatement is worth developing in some detail. In an uncharacteristic exercise in understatement owing to his decisions about point of view, Dos Passos elects not to represent Pearl Napier's death and Hank Davis's severe injury directly. These miners, whom Dos Passos has carefully drawn to enlist the readers' unqualified sympathy, are the most empathic victims in this whole novel of victimization by the laissez-faire capitalists and by the exploitative Communist party.

His commitment to a limited omniscient mode of narration means that Dos Passos would be artistically inconsistent if he elected to dramatize these events. In Chicago Glenn reads a newspaper account of the alleged jailbreak. Like the accounts of the deaths of Mrs. Sinico in James Joyce's "A Painful Case" or Skeeter in John Updike's Rabbit is Rich (1981), the novel concentrates on the effect Pearl's death has on Glenn rather than on the pathos of the death itself, and this reaction reveals much about Dos Passos's larger themes. What is lost in drama, by this choice to present material

indirectly, is richly compensated for in theme, for Glenn temporarily breaks Party discipline out of an outraged sense of personal loyalty, but eventually subordinates his human feelings for Pearl by submitting to Party discipline, even while the leadership expels him for individualism. He soon, however, reverses this moment of epiphany Dos Passos has so brilliantly developed by the restraint of electing not to dramatize the most intense moment in the novel, and we as readers feel keenly Glenn's loss of his individual human autonomy as he bows yet again to the Party's will and suppresses his own. It is perhaps the most poignant, but not the only, chance this "young man" misses to grow up intellectually and ethically.

Themes

In addition to its primary critique of radicalism and its failures, Adventures of a Young Man treats the themes of disillusionment, the family unit, and love. None of these is new for the writer, but he treats each in a fresh and illuminating way.

The novel chronicles Glenn's disillusionment with American culture, then with various Communist movements. He finds the society repressive, and his brief career in banking confirms his fear that the dominant culture is totally indifferent to the suffering of the poor. Having flirted with radical ideas in college under the influence of Columbia economist Mike Gulick (who appears as a very successful establishment liberal in The Grand Design), he throws himself into the movement wholeheartedly, expressing both a profound psychological need to do something worthwhile with his life and a hope to contribute to the well-being of the oppressed, but he consistently learns that the organized left will sacrifice individuals to promote its own interests. He becomes unwilling to accept party discipline and is formally expelled while working at a plant in Pittsburgh. When the Party rejects his application for reinstatement, Glenn joins the International Brigade to fight fascism in Spain. Jailed near the front line for free thinking, he is sent on a suicide mission as Franco's armies surround the town in which he is held. Although he knows he is being offered as a sacrifice by the Party that has betrayed him several times, his commitment to the relief of human suffering and the principles of reform require that he undertake the assignment at the cost of his own life.

The gesture resembles that of Robert Jordan, the hero of Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940), in the sacrifice of one's life for an ideal in which he no longer believes. But Jordan's sacrifice is tragic; Spottswood's is melodramatic, one of the least convincing scenes the author ever created. Part of the dignity of Jordan's sacrifice is that he realizes his own life cannot be sustained because of a wound he received from the fascists guarding the bridge. More importantly, Jordan, like Dos Passos but unlike Spottswood, feels a powerful solidarity with the Spanish peasants with whom he has fought. This love is compounded by his erotic love for Maria. Unlike Jordan, Spottswood mixes politics and sexual love many times in his story, but he is unable to make the leap from erotic to spiritual love.

All of Dos Passos' fiction treats the possibility of love as a personal alternative to ideological constructs, but in Adventures of a Young Man this theme is treated somewhat more clinically. Glenn has many love affairs, but he cannot form a lasting commitment to another person, even the admirable Lupe Perez, on whom Glenn develops an adolescent crush in Texas. At one point Lupe almost grounds Glenn's romantic pretensions about his work as a stock advisor as being a "spy in the camp of the enemy" and his vision of his eventual destiny as "part of the new masses in their great upsurge towards a new world" by reminding him that his bank job at twenty-five dollars a week is better than most people's labor at ten, thus superimposing (for both Dos Passos and the reader) common sense on Glenn's idealistic affiliation with "the workers." Lupe, by contrast, expresses her belief in the strike practically; she collects food and money for the strikers at great personal risk. By contrast, Glenn's frustrations

in movement politics render him unable to make himself vulnerable as one must be when giving love. Yet a letter he wrote to his brother while serving in the International Brigade, which Tyler reads while being betrayed by the demagogue Chuck Crawford in Number One, indicates that Glenn never completely lost the capacity to feel familial love. He did, however, lose the opportunity to grow emotionally and spiritually by experiencing authentic love.

Love for one's family is another of Dos Passos' key themes throughout the trilogy. District of Columbia treats the breakdown of the Spottswood family as Glenn throws himself into Party politics, Tyler becomes a bitter, alcoholic, political henchman, and their father Herb, who once lost a teaching job because he would not compromise his pacifist principles, finally achieves influence and economic success as a radio commentator dedicated to bringing America into World War II.

By contrast, in The Grand Design Dos Passos portrays two men who find in their families' love a source of support that sustains them in the confusion of New Deal politics. Glenn's boyhood friend Paul Graves, who taught him social awareness at a youth camp in Adventures of a Young Man, is able to preserve his identity through a confusing series of political entanglements, largely because of the point of reference his wife and children provide him. Similarly, Millard Carroll, a liberal businessman who makes material sacrifices to come to Washington and work for the New Deal, retains his integrity while most of his associates lose theirs. At least some of Carroll's honor traces to his love for his family, a love that can hurt—one of his sons is killed in military service during World War II.

Key Questions

Much of Dos Passos's fame rests on his often poetic language. Even if his ideas do not appeal to group members and his characters seem flat, his prose style may of itself inspire discussion. How does he construct his imagery? How does he use words to make the action come alive? More controversial are his ideas. In his own day, many people considered him to be a radical, although political extremists often detested him for his criticism of their abuses of people. Are group members able to discern Dos Passos' own political leanings in the text of Adventures of a Young Man? Does he seem to subscribe to any of the ideologies featured in the novel? Another approach to discussion would be to focus on the novel's characters. Dos Passos often created characters to represent ideas, but often for the purpose of showing how destructive an idea can be if a person makes it the focus of his or her life.

Which characters represent ideas? What do the ideas do to the characters? Are any characters well developed figures, with the contradictions, strengths, and weaknesses typical of human beings?

1. How is the conflict between personal integrity and public policy handled in Adventures of a Young Man? Which is more important?

2. How are union members treated?

Are they entirely sympathetic victims?

3. Which is more important—the individual person or the ideological cause?

4. How many examples of exploitation are there in Adventures of a Young Man?

What do these examples represent? What point does Dos Passos make with them?

5. Which characters are betrayed in the novel? Who does the betraying? Is there no hope for justice for the betrayed?

6. Why does Glenn Spottswood sacrifice his life for a cause that he knows has treated him unjustly and has betrayed him? Is he a fool?

7. Is Spottswood's inability to love someone fully symbolic? What might it represent? Is there anything that he does love fully?

8. Which characters represent individual ideas? What themes do they promote?

9. What purpose do the prose-poems that start the chapters serve? Are they merely annoying?

10. Which is more important in Adventures of a Young Man, characterization or themes? Are characters and theme effectively tied together?

11. Is Adventures of a Young Man topical, tied to the issues of the era in which it was written and no longer of much pertinence to the present day?

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