Midcentury Short Guide

Midcentury by John Dos Passos

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Contents

Characters

Because the characters have fuller emotional lives and greater freedom to make choices outside the marketplace than in the previous novels, the characterizations in Midcentury are fuller and the characters more fully engaging than in many of Dos Passos's books. As in his other major works, several types of characters are represented here, and several differing literary techniques govern their presentation. Typically, the characters range widely over the spectrum of American industrial life, from successful businessmen such as Milliron to ne'er-do-wells such as Bowman. Additionally, Dos Passos offers biographical glimpses into the lives of important American citizens: powerful generals such as Douglas MacArthur and William Dean; politicians such as Senator MacClellan and Congressman Bob La Follette, Jr. (whose father was the subject of a sympathetic profile in The 42nd Parallel); scientists, including Robert Oppenheimer, Jr. and Sigmund Freud; entertainers such as Samuel Goldwyn and James Dean; relatively unknown financiers such as Robert R. Young; and labor leaders such as John L. Lewis, Walter Reuther, and Hoffa.

The four principal narratives divide equally between characters associated with labor concerns and those who have management connections. Milliron and his son-in-law Jenks represent management, but from differing perspectives. Jenks, an entrepreneur, wants to establish his own taxicab company in Duquesne, where Redtop Cabs has a monopoly based on political influence, graft, and labor protection.

Redtop offers poor service because customers have no alternative, but when Jenks sets into motion the American dream of owning one's own business by offering better service than the competition, political pressure rapidly gives way to threats, then violence, by local unions and organized crime. One of Jenks' drivers, Lomax (who represents the labor side of the equation in Dos Passos's scheme) offers support to his new boss, but is murdered. Although he has won the contest over cab service, Jenks finally responds to these pressures by considering an offer to merge the companies under his management. He knows that this is a compromise in principle, for he has been fighting monopoly policies all along.

His responsibility in Lomax's death, however, forces him to consider this offer as a way to stop the taxicab war.

The case of Milliron is equally complex, but more comprehensive, in its treatment of industrial relations. As "The Prime Mover" begins, Colonel Milliron seems to be an embodiment of the American Dream. From humble beginnings in the middle west, he has become an indispensable associate of a major industrialist, has served in the military with distinction, and has become a key manager in a major industry. With the death of his benefactor and his assignment to manage the southern region, a power struggle begins in the firm. This struggle is really between progressive forces represented by Milliron and less innovative policies by those who prefer sure profits to taking risks.

The other main characters, Lomax and Blackie Bowman, are connected with labor. Lomax, a veteran suffering from mental stress, recovers to become a key figure in bringing a union into a rubber plant at which he works. His motives are generous; he finds that management exploits the immigrant labor pool. The obvious solution is a union that can protect the rights of the workers, and Terry becomes a leader in unionizing the plant.

What he does not know is that the union is willing to act in collusion with management. He is dismissed for fighting with a union official who owns stock in the company and has connections with organized crime. An appeal to the state labor arbitration board is perfunctory — his witnesses will not testify because of fear — and Terry decides to leave the labor movement and become a taxi driver. Driving a cab is a brief sanctuary from labor politics, for Terry is reluctantly involved in the Duquesne taxicab war. His loyalty to Jenks's enlightened management techniques costs him his life.

Bowman, a dying veteran, tells his story of growing up in a Baltimore blue-collar community and becoming a seaman and a wanderer involved in several strikes and labor activities. He marries into a New York political family, and his sister-in-law is a leftist spokesperson. Blackie is somewhat of an ideological purist who sincerely believes in the workers' revolution, but his labor activities always lead him to defeat and back to the sea.

Blackie's failure, however, does not result from radical activities, but from drinking. His marriage is a disaster because both he and his wife have alcoholic tendencies. After long separation from her, he seems on the verge of settling down with a generous dancer who nurses him back to health and lands jobs for both of them with the WPA. A chance meeting with his exwife causes Blackie to abandon Thelma, to get back into the whirlwind of leftist politics, and to go back to the bottle.

Bowman's defeat provides a counterpoint to the thematic emphasis on love in Midcentury, for his irrational attraction to Eileen and the destructive elements in that relationship rob him of his chance at happiness.

Social Concerns

the novel, Midcentury, published Induring the early years of John F. Kennedy's presidency, Dos Passos is as explicit in his critique of the political left as he had been in his incisive dissection of the counterproductive effects of capitalist greed on the American economy during the Roosevelt administration. For this reason, many critics who have leftist leanings have regarded Dos Passos as a betrayer of ideological causes, and have therefore questioned his value as a cultural commentator.

Although Midcentury is a chronicle of the tempestuous years after the end of the Second World War, the book addresses the American labor movement's corruption of its promise. In all his technical innovations, the author portrays organized labor as a movement that has betrayed the very principles it was organized to defend. Labor, Dos Passos implies, has become a force of equal power with management; more importantly, the driving impetus of organized labor has become self-preservation and expansion. In its quest to exert a power equal to management's, labor has forgotten the needs of individual workers and the premise that the firm's fiscal health is essential to the worker's economic survival.

More dangerously, labor, in its attempt to survive and grow, has entered into perilous, unwholesome alliances.

Several zealous, earnest, and even principled characters like Terry Lomax are defeated because they do not know about collusion between labor and unscrupulous management. Totally antithetical to the needs of the workers is organized labor's association with organized crime. This association contributes to Lomax's defeat and eventual murder. Dos Passos also includes biographical profiles of Teamster President James Hoffa, long believed to have been affiliated with organized crime, and Senator John McClellan of Arkansas, who brilliantly chaired the Senate Select Committee charged with investigating the influence of the mob on organized labor. In seven vignettes called "Investigator's notes," the author chronicles a wide variety of workers who feel that their interests have been betrayed by labor's alliance with organized crime. Many of these witnesses are fearful that their testimony, if made public, will endanger their or their families' lives. This climate of fear occurs again in the McClellan biography when the Senator receives anonymous letters from citizens who encourage his investigation of the relation between crime and labor, but who are afraid to give their names because they anticipate violent reprisals.

In Midcentury, then, Dos Passos treats key social issues like violence and crime, as well as corruption in the work place. These concerns have obvious implications for the quality of life in America at mid-century, and they suggest that the work place, in which a citizen must derive at least some sense of his self-worth, can no longer be a positive force in the individual's life because it is ruled by fear and compromise.

For the health of the nation, Dos Passos implies, these apparently pervasive conditions indicate shoddy production, economic inefficiency, and eventual industrial collapse. The

author clearly intends this novel as a warning to political leaders and private citizens that, unless the collusion between labor and management as well as the cooperation between labor and organized crime are remedied, the country faces sociological and economic catastrophe.

Techniques

The narrative methods of Midcentury offer subtle variations on those of the U.S.A. trilogy. Dos Passos blends documentary with narrative sections, and he again uses four main narrative lines.

These intersect when Lomax, the hero of "The Big Office," appears as a supporting character in "The Great Taxicab War," much as Margo Dowling became Charlie Anderson's mistress in The Big Money (1936).

The documentary sections include briefer, and more pointed, variations on the "Newsreel" sections of U.S.A.

These reflect the movement of American journalism to electronic media and often the fragments are somewhat more developed than their earlier counterparts. Also, Dos Passos depends more extensively on the biographical profiles, poetic and judgmental glimpses into the lives of people who shaped history. In Midcentury, there are fourteen profiles, and a character like MacArthur, whom the Dos Passos of the 1930s would probably have satirized as aristocratic and authoritarian, receives favorable treatment as a man of uncompromising principles. The "Proconsul" section reminds one of Shakespeare's Coriolanus as an ambivalent portrait of an aristocratic military leader betrayed by the complexities of political expediency.

The most innovative documentary technique is the inclusion of seven vignettes called "Investigator's Notes."

Investigators for the McClellan committee take depositions from seven different victims of the collusion of labor, politics, crime, and management.

These episodes are a triumph of Dos Passos's "flat style." The language is nonjudgmental, so the facts about these characters are allowed to speak eloquently for themselves.

Among the narratives, Dos Passos varies his method by using first-person narration for the "Blackie Bowman Speaking" episodes. Although the author has generally preferred omniscient points of view in previous works, he adapts the dramatic monologue well. Dying alone in a veteran's hospital, Blackie reviews his life with humor and pathos. Giving a direct voice to Blackie, Dos Passos effectively realizes one of his chief objectives, capturing the rhythm and vitality of the spoken American language.

Because Midcentury effectively adapts many of Dos Passos' best narrative methods, and because the characters exercise some choice and are capable of giving love in a troubled world, this book is an important American novel. It convincingly gives the lie to claims that as Dos Passos' politics became more overtly centrist, and occasionally conservative, his art deteriorated.

Themes

Just as Dos Passos's social concerns represent a significant departure from those of the novels of the 1930s, his themes indicate artistic and philosophical maturation. He is concerned with the ways in which sexual and fraternal love pose an antidote to the universal problem of alienation. This theme receives a more optimistic treatment in this novel than in the U.S.A. trilogy (1930-1936). In those books, Dos Passos despaired of any possible personal solution like love. In fact, one constant thread in U.S.A. was that ideological commitments and the desire for success rendered the characters incapable of giving or receiving love. They substituted lust for love and became so selfcentered that they were not capable of feeling the needs or concerns of someone else.

In Midcentury, quite the opposite theme pervades. Except for Blackie Bowman, all the central characters find solace in their lives by discovering a capacity for love. This does not mean that Dos Passos introduces a trivial theme like "love conquers all." Love does not improve the characters' material fortunes, as usually happens in a Shakespearian comedy or a romantic novel. Jasper Milliron, the protagonist of the "Prime Mover" episodes, is forced out of his corporation, in part because of his affair with the company's television spokeswoman, but after divorcing his wife and marrying Lorna Hubbard (Suzy Standish on television), Milliron finds happiness working for a consulting firm and living with Lorna in rural Pennsylvania. His son-in-law Will Jenks is finally compromised after a long competition with a crooked rival cab company, but his love for his wife and daughters gives him a spiritual refuge even while he learns that the collusion between labor, management, and organized crime makes it impossible for his business to survive without compromising his high principles.

Terry Lomax, another key character, seems less consistent with this theme of love as antidote. His adventures in World War II are followed by a series of numbing defeats at the hands of a union local he organized, then reduction to driving a taxi, and finally assassination by thugs from the company that rivals Jenks's. Despite this pattern of frustration, Terry is lucky enough to meet and marry Tasha, from a Slavish immigrant working-class family, and their love is a support for him throughout his disappointments in the work force. In the touching scene when Tasha and the children come to the hospital to identify Terry's body, the reader's emotions conflict between the waste of his productive life, the grief this cohesive family must bear, and the feeling that his life, while short and tempestuous, was worthy, even noble, because he loved well.

In the case of Milliron and Lomax, love begins as sexual attraction, much as it did in U.S.A. Midcentury is one of Dos Passos's most important novels because the characters progress from physical to spiritual love, and that love gives their lives a meaning that persists despite setbacks in the world of work.

This mature treatment of the possibility of love as an alternative source of human value allows Dos Passos to explore the theme of human worth in a more comprehensive way than he had when he concentrated on human attraction as stimulus-response. His

endorsement of love as the supreme value in human experience affords dignity and freedom to people trapped in unwholesome economic conditions.

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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994