U.S.A. Study Guide

U.S.A. by John Dos Passos

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Contents

Introduction

John Dos Passos wrote the three novels that make up the trilogy *U.S.A.* between 1927 and 1936, drawing on his own childhood and education, his service in the ambulance corps during World War I, and his left-wing political views of current events. The trilogy was first published as a whole in 1938. Dos Passos aimed to produce a satire on American life, permeated with popular songs, current events, and headlines, that would truly portray the whole of American culture and events. The trilogy spans the years from the opening of the twentieth century through the dawn of the Great Depression and expresses Dos Passos's view of the ill effects of capitalism on the American people.

The trilogy is notable for Dos Passos's use of various experimental techniques, such as the "Camera Eye," a series of stream-of-consciousness monologues that are inserted throughout the chapters; the "Newsreels," collages of headlines, lines from popular songs and pieces of current events; and twenty-seven biographies of typical or important people of the time. He had first developed some of these techniques in his earlier work, *Manhattan Transfer*, his first novel to receive widespread readership and critical attention. In using them, he was inspired by such disparate sources as the poems of Walt Whitman, the fragmented images of postimpressionist painting, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and silent filmmakers D. W. Griffith and Sergei Eisenstein, who used montage, or contrasting scenes, to portray the busy and often ironic contrasts of the real world.

These techniques brought praise from critics of the time. Dos Passos's style of emphasizing history and current events in his narrative and his striving to produce an all-encompassing portrait of the America of his time influenced many later writers of the twentieth century, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Norman Mailer, and E. L. Doctorow.

Author Biography

John Dos Passos was born on January 14, 1896, in Chicago, Illinois, the son of John Randolph Dos Passos, a wealthy attorney, and Lucy Spriggs Madison. His parents were not married, and Dos Passos spent most of his youth traveling throughout Europe and the United States with his mother; he later recalled having "a hotel childhood." He graduated from Harvard University in 1916 and served in the ambulance corps during World War I. His first novel, *One Man's Initiation: 1917*, was published in 1917, but his writing didn't receive widespread attention until the publication of his second novel, *Three Soldiers* (1921), which was based on his war experiences and intended to present a truthful portrayal of the horrors of war rather than the glorified, romanticized images other writers had provided.

He followed this with *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and then began writing the massive *U.S.A.*, a trilogy intended to give readers a comprehensive, realistic view of American society from the turn of the twentieth century to the stock market crash and the beginnings of the Great Depression. The trilogy, which Dos Passos viewed as an indictment of American society, was made up of the novels *42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936) and was first published as a whole in 1938.

He also wrote several other novels, plays, poetry, and many volumes of nonfiction, emphasizing historical and political topics.

Dos Passos's novels are typically long and populated by a huge number of characters. Some appear only for a page, while others are focused on and followed through decades of their lives. For Dos Passos, society and setting were as important as characterization or plot□if not more so□and he typically spent a great deal of energy in describing them. He also used several experimental techniques: the "Camera Eye," which was an impressionistic collection of details specific to a particular time and place; the "Newsreel," which was a collection of popular songs, newspaper headlines, and scraps of news stories; and biographical sketches of important people of the time. These experimental techniques and his deeply detailed portraits of American society earned Dos Passos a great deal of critical praise.

During his early career, Dos Passos was politically leftist and radical and was once even jailed for his views; his early novels showed his great sympathy with workers and other underdogs, and he helped to shape other "proletarian novels" that depicted the exploitation of workers by the American capitalist system. However, the events of the Spanish Civil War did much to disillusion Dos Passos, and when he grew older, he leaned toward the political right. He altered the focus in his writing, emphasizing democracy and American history. This shift did not please many of his readers and critics, who preferred his earlier work.

Dos Passos died in Baltimore, Maryland, on September 28, 1970.

Plot Summary

U.S.A. does not have a conventional plot. Dos Passos follows twelve major characters and hundreds of minor ones through the first three decades of the twentieth century. Sometimes his characters' lives intersect; sometimes they do not. Major characters in one chapter are often only fleetingly mentioned in other chapters, and not all characters are followed to what most readers would consider a satisfying end to their stories. Their tales simply leave off, as Dos Passos takes up another life and another thread in the American tapestry. As the narrative progresses, the characters do not learn and grow, but remain static, hapless representatives of their times and their particular obsessions.

The sixty-eight Newsreels, each a few pages long, are mosaics of headlines, popular song lyrics, headlines, and news of the time. They are artifacts of their times, often satirical, mysterious, or sad and are often obliquely related to incidents in the lives of the main characters. Because they focus on incongruous, trivial, or grotesque events, they give the reader a sense of the seamy, meaningless, or dangerous side of American life, a sense of moral decay or social ill, and because they're fragmented, the reader never learns the whole story behind them, adding to this sense of unease.

The fifty-one Camera Eye monologues also relate to events in the characters' lives and those described in the Newsreels and short biographies. They are written in a stream-of-consciousness style, with little punctuation or capitalization, and are typically filled with vivid, dreamlike imagery. The narrator of the monologues, never identified, is apparently Dos Passos himself, and over the course of the novel, the narrator learns and grows as a human being, unlike the characters whose lives are described in the more traditional chapters.

In the twenty-seven biographies, Dos Passos presents short sketches of the lives of people who were famous or who somehow personified the events of their time. Their stories accentuate or contrast with the lives of the fictional characters. The biographies tend to star people who were rebels against the majority during their time, who took risks, who were inventors, or who promoted new political or entrepreneurial ideas. For example, they include Frank Lloyd Wright, Thorstein Veblen, Henry Ford, John Reed, and Eugene Debs. He also presents portraits of men he did not admire but who were highly influential, such as J. P. Morgan, Woodrow Wilson, Andrew Carnegie, and William Randolph Hearst.

The stories in the book emphasize society and history over individuality, and they provide commentaries on corporate finance, labor-management disputes, left-wing politics, union agitators, public relations, World War I, the stock market, profiteering, and their effect on American society. The author's depiction of American society is not allencompassing; for example, Dos Passos emphasizes characters who live in the Northeast and Midwest, and all of his main characters are white.

U.S.A. opens at the beginning of the twentieth century, as industry is gaining a hold on society and the old agriculturally based culture is passing away. People feel hopeful and

optimistic, until the nation enters World War I. During the war, industrialists make a great deal of money, while others lose it and class divisions become more hardened. Workers begin protesting against exploitative policies and are violently put down by the authorities. Fear of labor uprisings is fed by fears of socialism, anarchism, or Bolshevism, and workers and immigrants, who are often involved in the labor disputes, are stigmatized.

By the 1920s, America is entering a period of prosperity and glamour, despite the presence of Prohibition. Organized crime, Hollywood spectacles, and wild profits on the stock market spiral higher and higher; the rich are widely admired, and everyone else wants to get in on the money train. Middle-class and lower-class people emulate the rich and give up their souls to move in their sphere and be just like them, and any concern for the poor and downtrodden is utterly lost. Old values of respectability, hard work, and thrift have disappeared, replaced by joking familiarity, meaningless sex, moneymaking schemes, and flamboyance.

All of this ends, of course, with the crash of the stock market in 1929 and the collapse of the airy balloon of wealth that had buoyed up the nation. President Hoover's feeble reassurances do nothing to convince people that they'll be all right, and the nation sinks into the depths of the Great Depression.

Characters

Charley Anderson

Anderson grows up in Fargo, North Dakota, where his mother runs a boarding house. His father left the family about the time he was born. He is "a chunky little boy with untidy towhair and gray eyes." He has a knack for mechanical things and works as a machinist. He is politically leftist and on the side of the workers, serves as a pilot during war, and after the war goes into manufacturing with a friend. They produce airplane starter motors. At first, the business world is over his head, but he wants to make big money and be a wheeler and dealer, and eventually he learns to discuss stocks and move in the world of high finance. He loses touch with his origins, with the radical sympathies of his younger days, and with his own high standards for mechanical work. In the end, he argues with his friend, who doesn't want the production line in the factory speeded up; Charley, who was formerly so proud of his skilled work, says that competition in the business means they have to speed up, even if it means the parts aren't perfect. The two of them go on a test flight and the plane fails, leading to his friend's death. This is, of course, Charley's fault, and as a result of his failure and his increasing alcoholism, his life falls apart. He eventually dies of peritonitis.

Ben Compton

Ben Compton is a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, or "Wobblies," and works to unite workers against the bosses. He is caught and savagely beaten by authorities in Seattle, who view him as a subversive. He is a conscientious objector to the war and, as such, refuses to be conscripted. In the end, he is sentenced to jail for his beliefs. He never gives in when others attack him for his principles, no matter what the punishment they hand out and no matter how many people are against him.

He and Mary French have an affair. She wants to have a child, but he tells her it's not the time; they should save their time and energy for the movement. Later, he realizes sadly that time has passed them by and that they should have had the child. Ironically, he is expelled from the Communist Party because of internal dissents, crushing his ability to do the work for which he lives.

Concha

Concha is the woman Fenian O'Hara McCreary begins seeing after he flees his marriage with Maisie and moves to Mexico.

Daughter

See Anne Elizabeth Trent

Dick

See Richard Ellsworth Savage

Margo Dowling

Margo's mother died when she was young, and she was raised by her father and her stepmother, Agnes. Her father, an alcoholic, deserts them, and eventually Agnes remarries and takes Margo to live with her and her new husband, Frank Mandeville. He's a vaudeville performer, and through him Margo is introduced to the stage as a child. Her given name, Margery, is changed to Margo, and she learns to sing and dance. Frank sexually abuses her, a secret shame she keeps tight inside her and which makes her grow up too soon. She becomes involved with many other men, including a Cuban, Tony Garrido. Eventually, she marries him and moves to Cuba, which at first seems exotic and exciting, but she soon feels imprisoned by the slow life and repressive attitudes toward women there and flees back to the States and has an abortion; she was pregnant with Tony's child but doesn't want it.

Back in the States, she returns to the theater, sleeps with various men who might help her career, and uses her Cuban experience by telling people that she grew up on a Cuban sugar plantation and that she's descended from Spanish nobility. She meets a rich college boy, but Tony squashes that romance by showing up and saying he's her husband. He also steals the jewelry and money she's accumulated.

She moves to New York and takes up with Charley Anderson, who spends a great deal of the money he's earned in the airplane market on her. She's mercenary, chiefly interested in a man for his money, and Charley is no exception; Dos Passos notes that although Agnes talked a lot about true love, "Margo liked better to hear Mr. Anderson blowing about his killings on the stock market and the planes he'd designed, and how he was going to organize a set of airways."

Despite her lack of education, she's a shrewd self-promoter and has a good mind for business. She and Agnes head for California, and she gets jobs as a silent-film extra and impresses people with her story of being from a very wealthy family of Spanish nobles. Realizing that Hollywood is all about surface appearances, she takes a risk, buys an expensive car, and shows up for filming, with Tony dressed as her chauffeur. She looks like a star, acts like a star, and this of course convinces people that she is a star. She becomes a phenomenally wealthy and successful star of silent films. However, her career eventually ends when speaking movies come in because although she's beautiful, her voice "sounds like the croaking of an old crow over the loudspeaker."

Fainy

See Fenian O'Hara McCreary

Mary French

Mary French is an idealistic young girl, the daughter of a doctor who works in a rough mill town, and his ambitious wife. Her father wants to serve the poor, and her mother wants him to move the family to a better place and only care for rich patients. Mary inherits her father's idealistic streak. She goes to college, planning to do social work, and then quits college because she can't wait to get started. She gets a job as a reporter and is assigned to cover a story about some striking steelworkers. The editor believes they are all agitators, anarchists, and revolutionaries, paid by Russian Communists with stolen jewels. She goes to talk to the workers and finds that they're ordinary people who are being misled and exploited, and of course she's fired for writing about these atrocities.

Getting fired shocks her and galvanizes her to work for the rights of the people. She becomes a labor activist, working with Wobblies and other labor groups. During this time, she becomes pregnant and has an abortion. Then she gets back to work, this time in New York, where she takes in Ben Compton. He is a labor agitator on the run, and she lets him hide at her place. They have an affair, and although she asks him for a baby, he says they should spend their energy on the cause, not deflect their energy with a child. Reluctantly, she agrees. She spends all her time working for the cause of Sacco and Vanzetti, Italian anarchists who were accused of murder. Most people believe they are innocent but that they are accused and later declared guilty because of their radical politics. Mary throws herself into the cause of drumming up public feeling for their cause and working on appeals. She and Ben break up, and she becomes involved with another activist, who disappears to Russia and later returns married to another woman. Mary has devoted her life to causes she believed in but at the expense of her personal life. She has not had time for anything but work, and her personal relationships have suffered.

Eveline Hutchins

Eveline, the daughter of a minister, shows talent in art as a child, and as she grows up, she continues this interest. She and Eleanor Stoddard start a decorating business, and although it doesn't make much money, they meet interesting and influential people, and are "in the vanguard of things in Chicago socially." They go to New York to design costumes and scenery for a show, which closes after two weeks, but while there they meet more influential people.

Eveline is a fundamentally discontented person who has romantic and dreamy views of the world, is impressed by wealth, and wants to attach herself to it. As her interest in art indicates, she is influenced by beauty and expense. She moves from relationship to relationship, seeking something but never finding it. She and Eleanor have an uneasy friendship, nice on the surface but marred by deeper jealousies and rivalries.

By the end of the trilogy, she has become "coolly bitter" but still has hopes for her life. When Dick Savage flirts with her, she says, "There's somebody I like very much. . . . I've

decided to make some sense out of my life." The man she's referring to is a columnist, someone she idolizes as "the real poet of modern New York," but who is obviously a pompous phony. The reader has the sense that nothing will really change for her.

J. W.

See John Ward Moorehouse

J. Ward

See John Ward Moorehouse

Johnny

See John Ward Moorehouse

Mac

See Fenian O'Hara McCreary

Maisie

Maisie is the young woman Fenian O'Hara McCreary dates and eventually marries, after she is pregnant with his child.

Fenian O'Hara McCreary

Known as "Fainy" to his family and "Mac" to his friends, he is born in Middletown, Connecticut, to Irish immigrant parents. His mother is a washerwoman, and his father is a night watchman at a textile mill. After his mother dies and his father loses his job because of a strike, he moves to Chicago with his family. Seeking work, he ends up as assistant to an itinerant con man and pornography salesman, rides the rails, takes various odd jobs, and eventually becomes part of the young labor movement, which thrills him with a sense of camaraderie among "working stiffs." He joins the Industrial Workers of the World, or "Wobblies." He falls in love with a girl named Maisie, who isn't interested in his socialist ideas because they are "too deep for her." The contrast between her desire for a staid life and his new Wobbly acquaintances, who urge him to go to Nevada and take part in a labor action there, galls him, but she pressures him, and he gives in and agrees to marry her, depressed because he's "selling out" to the mainstream life. However, at the last minute, he ditches her and goes to Nevada anyway.

In Nevada, he runs into trouble, as the authorities of the town are on the lookout for agitators. He also gets a letter from Maisie, telling him she's two months pregnant. Excited by the labor movement, he ignores her letters for months but eventually hops a freight to San Francisco, marries her, gets a job at a printer's shop, and starts making payments on a little bungalow. They have a second child. He wants to help out any labor agitators who come to town, but is afraid she will find out, so he can't do much. Her brother Bill owns a lot of real estate and offers to set them up in an expensive house in a rich area of Los Angeles. This puts Mac in an uncomfortable situation of living beyond his means. Everything goes to various debts and the mortgage. He still goes to IWW meetings but is afraid to do much for fear of losing his job as a linotype operator. The other Wobblies "thought he was pretty yellow but put up with him because they thought of him as an old timer."

When he takes money out of their bank account to pay for his Uncle Tim's funeral, Maisie finds out about it, accuses him of being a worthless bum who can't take care of his own family, and says she wants a divorce. Fed up, he leaves and goes to Mexico, where the Mexican Revolution is underway, and links up with other socialists. He gets a job at the *Mexican Herald* and settles down with a girl named Concha and eventually buys a bookstore. By the time the United States enters World War I and the revolution is fully heated up, he considers leaving, but in the end he goes back to the bookstore and Concha.

John Ward Moorehouse

Moorehouse is called "Johnny" as a child but later changes his first name to the more distinguished J. Ward, and eventually to the enigmatic J. W. Born on the Fourth of July in Wilmington, Delaware, Moorehouse becomes, during high school, the head of the debating team, class orator, and winner of a patriotic essay contest. He gets a job for a real estate company that isn't doing very well, but then the firm sends him to Ocean City, where he gets a job with a company that is selling land. He meets a charming girl, falls in love with her, and decides to marry her because her father is wealthy and she is pregnant. They marry and go to Europe so that people back home won't find out about the pregnancy, and while there, she has an abortion. He is horrified, and from then on they lead separate lives and eventually divorce. He returns to the United States, where he eventually gets a job working in advertising and promotion for the Bessemer Steel Company. He becomes devoted to advertising, learning all about the industry, thinking up different ways to manipulate the customers into buying. In this, he has a kind of genius. He meets a rich girl, and when he becomes prosperous and her father dies, apparently leaving her a lot of money, he marries her. However, later he finds out that the money was all left in trust to her mother and she will only get fifteen thousand a year until her mother dies.

He convinces his mother-in-law to invest fifty thousand dollars into his new public relations business. He keeps filing cards on everyone he meets, such as judges, senators, and industrialists. He fills out the cards with every scrap of information that will help him influence them. He views World War I as "America's great opportunity" to make

money from "Europe's ruin" because there will be no competition from European manufacturers. He also campaigns for industry to stand together against the growing labor movement, exhorting that it is time for "an educational campaign and an oral crusade that will drive home to the rank and file of the mighty colossus of American uptodate industry right now, today." Pompously, he offers his services to the government "to serve in whatever capacity they see fit for the duration of the war." He becomes involved in the negotiations of the peace conference at Versailles and uses his influence to see that the corporate interests are served. By serving them, he serves himself. His public relations business prospers. His personal life, however, is a mess; his wife assumes he's having an affair with his companion, Eleanor Stoddard (in truth, their relationship is sexless), and his mother-in-law sues him to force him to return the money she invested. By the end of the trilogy, he's become a complete phony, utterly superficial, like the worst sort of politician. Janey, his secretary, is completely impressed by him. However, he has no true depth or substance despite all his success, and he is not happy.

Late in the trilogy, Moorehouse has a heart attack and makes Richard Savage a partner in his firm, perhaps because he knows he won't live long.

Richard Ellsworth Savage

Known as Dick to his friends, he attends Harvard, where he writes poetry and dreams of the literary life. However, toward the end of his college years, he enlists in the volunteer ambulance service and ships out to France. Seeing the war shocks him out of his rather effete, sheltered world view, and he writes a letter to friends that expresses his true feelings: the war is "a dirty gold-brick game put over by governments and politicians for their own selfish interests, it's crooked from A to Z." As a result, he's collared by the American authorities and sent back to the States, where, through an influential friend, he gets a military commission and winds up back in Europe as a captain in the Post Dispatch Service. Colonel Edgecombe, head of the Service, offers him a position as a courier for the upcoming Peace Conference in Paris. Through this job, he moves in wealthy and diplomatic circles and meets J. Ward Moorehouse and Eleanor Stoddard, who is Moorehouse's companion. When he is sent to Rome on an errand, he meets Anne Elizabeth Trent, who has just joined the Near East Relief. They have an affair, and she gets pregnant and expects him to marry her, but he won't; he's not in love with her at all.

He's alarmed by her pregnancy, which may embarrass him or affect his career, and urges her to have an abortion, saying he'll pay for it. He has some small regret at the trouble he's caused her, but not much; shallowly, he "wished he had a great many lives so he might have spent one of them with Anne Elizabeth."

Savage admires J. Ward Moorehouse and aspires to be just like him. He becomes his protege and probable successor, working on advertising campaigns, coming up with ways to manipulate people into buying products by appealing to their vanity or other failings. He becomes wrapped up in this world, although he's not happy there. When

Moorehouse has a heart attack and makes him a partner in the firm, his fate is sealed. Stressed, he goes out drinking and becomes embroiled in a sexual scandal that may cost him his career.

Eleanor Stoddard

Eleanor's father is a coarse, crude man who works as a butcher. She hates him and can't wait to get away from home. When she's thirteen, her mother dies, and she moves out of her father's house at the age of eighteen. She is interested in art and opens an interior decorating shop with her friend Eveline Hutchins. She eventually becomes a theatrical designer for a play in New York, but it fails after two weeks, and she never gets paid. She stays in New York, though, and through a friend gets a job decorating J. Ward Moorehouse's new house. Thus begins a long, nonsexual relationship with Moorehouse. She loves him, and everyone, including his wife, assumes they're having an affair, but their relationship remains platonic.

When the United States enters the war, she decides to go to France to join the Red Cross. Moorehouse comes too, claiming he's offered his services to the U.S. government. She remains his inseparable companion. When Dick Savage meets her in Europe, he notices, from the way she walks into the room and from the way Moorehouse greets her, "that she was used to running the show in that room."

Eleanor has a confusing and disappointing love life, and she ends up marrying a Russian prince, not for love, but for the title and money involved.

Anne Elizabeth Trent

Called "Daughter" by her family, Anne Elizabeth Trent grew up in Dallas, the darling of a wellto- do Southern family. She is a tomboy, quirky and energetic, and though she's somewhat tamed and taught to act like a lady, underneath her dressedup exterior she's still a wild child. She goes to Europe to work with the Near East Relief near the end of the war and is bored by the staid, conservative, and proper women with whom she works. She falls in love with Dick Savage; they have an affair, and she gets pregnant. She wants to keep the baby and to marry Savage, but he's not interested and urges her to have an abortion. Heartbroken, she decides to die. She meets an airman, gets drunk with him, and talks him into taking her flying and doing loopthe- loops. Of course, he's not sober enough to do this safely, and the plane crashes, killing them both.

Janey Williams

Janey Williams and her brother Joe grow up in the Georgetown area of Washington, D. C., then an area of working-class families. When her brother Joe enlists in the navy and leaves town, Janey gets a job as a stenographer, despite her mother's objections that it isn't ladylike for girls to work. Janey doesn't care; she feels that there is "a great throbbing arclighted world somewhere outside" and she wants to be part of it. She

moves up to working at Dreyfus and Carroll, patent lawyers, and becomes worldlier, "kidding" with men and being proud of being a "bachelor girl." After her father dies, her mother takes in boarders, giving Janey the chance to move out on her own. She's proud of being educated and making good pay and feels embarrassed about her brother, who is "so rough and uneducated." She learns to bleach her hair, use makeup, and play bridge, all marks of the "smart set" she wants to be part of.

As World War I progresses, Janey becomes uncomfortable working for Dreyfus, who according to rumor is a German spy, so she quits. After being out of work for several months, she ends up working for J. Ward Moorehouse, who impresses her with his obvious wealth and smooth style: "Everything had a well-polished silvery gleam." He talks importantly of "powerful interests in manufacturing and financial circles" who are "watching these developments with the deepest interest" and mentions the president among them. She's thrilled to be so close to such an obviously powerful man, and she develops a crush on him; in her mind, he can do no wrong. She spends the rest of the trilogy as his faithful secretary. She never marries or has a full life. Dick Savage sees her as "a tiredlooking sharpfaced blonde." Eleanor Stoddard remarks, "She's a treasure. Does more work than anybody in the whole place," but this has a patronizing air. Most people who meet her feel vaguely sorry for her.

Joe Williams

Joe is a wandering seaman who can't keep a job and who always seems to be on the outs with authorities. He is emotionally flat and limited, not educated, not imaginative, and doesn't think about his life much. He loves his sister Janey, but they are separated by her ambition and her growing embarrassment at his uneducated, low-class speech and behavior and by his lack of desire to better himself.

As a child, Joe is "an untalkative sandyhaired boy who could pitch a mean outcurve when he was still little." He is active, swimming and diving in the C & O Canal, and wants to be a streetcar motorman when he grows up. His father, who works in the Patent Office, often beats him for being too noisy, leading both Joe and his sister Janey to hate their father. When their mutual best friend, Alec, is killed in a motorcycle accident, Joe escapes his pain by enlisting in the Navy. However, he deserts in Buenos Aires after punching out a petty officer. He's traveled all over the world but has little appreciation for the things he's seen; his lack of education prevents him from understanding them.

He gets a counterfeit certificate saying he's an "Ablebodied Seaman" and eventually winds up in England, where he's arrested for not having a passport or other documents, which he lost when he skipped out on the Navy. They send him back to the States, and after more bumming around and more hapless adventures, he visits Janey, who is embarrassed to be seen with him. She asks him why he doesn't get a different job. She means an office job, but he says, "You mean, in a shipyard? They're making big money in shipyards, but hell, Janey, I'd rather knock around . . . It's all for the experience, as the feller said when they blew his block off." He also tells her, "All my future's behind

me," and "The whole world's crooked from start to finish." As an example, he notes that the Germans don't torpedo any of the French Line boats because if they do, the French won't secretly sell them munitions, which they use to blow up other French people. "All those babies are makin' big money . . . while their own kin are shootin' daylight into each other at the front," he says.

He gets a legal third mate's license and marries a girl named Del but immediately ships out to France. On the way home, his ship is torpedoed, but he survives, only to find he won't get paid because of "some monkeydoodle business" about the ship's owners changing while the ship was en route. He gets on to a fruit ship and bums around the world some more. When he comes to New York again, this time he can't even reach Janey. She is J. Ward Moorehouse's secretary and is "out West on business." He bounces around some more, in and out of work, to Europe and back, and on one visit finds his wife with another man. Eventually, he heads back to Europe on yet another ship, and in a bar on Armistice Day, he gets into a fight over a woman. Someone smashes a bottle on his head, killing him.

Themes

Materialism

As Dos Passos writes in a Newsreel toward the end of the book, "America our nation has been beaten by strangers who have turned our language inside out who have taken the clean words our fathers spoke and made them slimy and foul." Moorehouse, as a supreme practitioner of bending words to his will and manipulating people with them for his own profit, is a supreme example of this statement. He has taken the vast opportunities America once offered and made a great success out of phoniness, selfishness, corruption, and greed.

Throughout the trilogy, characters comment on materialism. Behind the scenes, the wealthy wheel and deal, making arrangements to make more money even as the hapless recruits die at the front. The Peace Conference is marred by corporate interests, which make sure their interests are served. The characters who are the most financially successful and respected by others□Moorehouse, Margo Dowling, and Eleanor Stoddard□are those who are the most greedy, superficial, and materialistic. Those few who are altruistic, such as Ben Compton and Mary French, live in poverty.

Exploitation of the Working Class

The plight of the working class is frequently discussed in the book. Mac McCreary, Joe Williams, and even Janey Williams (despite her exalted position as Moorehouse's secretary) are working people, eaten up by the system. Janey is a particularly sad example of this since she thinks it's a great honor merely to serve Moorehouse. She's completely indoctrinated into the capitalist system and, in the end, gets little from it. J. Ward Moorehouse and Margo Dowling profit from the gullibility and lack of sophistication of the working class□Moorehouse because they produce and buy the products he advertises and Margo because they go to see her films. Ben Compton and Mary French try to improve things for the workers but don't succeed. Charley Anderson and Dick Savage try to become profiteers but don't survive the Darwinian winnowing of the system. In addition, the lengthy exploration of the workers' cause in the "Mary French" chapters and the depiction of the Sacco- Vanzetti trial in *The Big Money* further show how the system is arranged to crush the workers.

The disparity between the owners and the workers is also dramatized in many of the biographies, particularly those that deal with wealthy and powerful men□Carnegie, Keith, Morgan, Wilson, Hearst, Taylor, and Ford□and those that describe the opponents of capitalism□Haywood, Debs, La Follette, Reed, Hibben, Everest, and Veblen.

Just as the workers are corrupted and limited by capitalism, in the end, so are the wealthy. To be sure, they may have lives of ease and pleasure, but they are no happier than the poorest poor and, in some cases, more miserable. No one is served by the

system in the end. The book's wealthy and powerful characters do not come to any better ends than its most downtrodden workers.

Decay of Traditional Values

Although most of the characters in the novel come from traditional families, none of them end up with healthy families, or even healthy relationships, of their own. "Free love" is a fashionable concept, and the story line is filled with one-night stands, visits to prostitutes, unplanned pregnancies, abortions, divorces, and sexual scandals. The male characters use sex as they use alcohol, to numb the senses and the mind rather than to awaken them, and many of the female characters use sex in the same way, as well as to feel better about themselves: finally, someone wants them. Once a liaison occurs, they share an undefined and inarticulate longing for marriage, fueled not by love for the man, but out of some sense that this is what they "should" do. In many cases, the women end up pregnant, and, urged on by their male partner, have an illegal abortion. Many of the men contract sexually transmitted diseases, as do some of the women. Dos Passos never portrays sex as mediating an emotional, spiritual, or intellectual connection between people; it's always mindless, mechanical, repetitive, and unsatisfying, like the lives of his characters as a whole. Even Ben Compton and Mary French, his two most sympathetic characters, miss their chance to have a healthy family and realize too late what they've missed.

In addition, most people in the novel are impressed by money, flashiness, phoniness, and greed—all aspects of J. Ward Moorehouse's character. It's no surprise that he is the most financially successful and widely respected individual in the book: he embodies the flaws of his age, which people saw as desirable and impressive traits.

Drunkenness appears frequently in the book, often occurring along with sexual encounters, and it's never depicted as simple social drinking but as a wish for oblivion, for a dullness of the senses, for a total loss of thought, a blotting out of the senses. Often, during drunken sex, children are conceived, but they are not wanted, another symptom of what Dos Passos viewed as the emotional shallowness and corruption of the times.

Style

Experimental Techniques

A notable feature of *U.S.A.* is its experimental sections, the "Camera Eye," "Newsreel," and biography sections. The Camera Eye sections offer a disjointed collage of headlines, story fragments, song lyrics, and other scraps, almost like what one would have heard while walking down the street in a busy town during the period. The scraps are carefully chosen to reflect, amplify, or comment on the material in the fictional chapters; for example, an early chapter about Mac McCreary portrays his realization that the fine traveling sales in publishing jobs he's found is a scam and his boss is a con artist and a crook. The chapter ends with Mac running for his life from a farmer with a shotgun, followed by a Newsreel that begins "IT TAKES NERVE TO LIVE IN THIS WORLD." After this comes a piece of a story about an anarchist plot and the lyrics of a song about the simple rural life—ironic since Mac has just fled from a farm. More fragments portray the difficulties of workers, a commentary on his situation, since he is now out of a job.

In another example, a chapter about Joe Williams describes his ship being torpedoed, and this is followed by a Camera Eye piece about the author swimming in the Marne River while serving during World War I, "with that hammering to the north pounding the thought of death into our ears," and notes, "the winey thought of death stings in the spring blood." Joe is too blunted and inarticulate to be moved by thoughts of war and death when his ship goes down. This fragment offers an oblique reflection on his experience, and on the author's.

Narrative Voice

Dos Passos's style in *U.S.A.* is deliberately rambling, repetitive, and unselective, as he meant to give the effect of real people talking, real people thinking about their lives. The text is cluttered with one event after another, some leading to other things, some not relevant at all in the long run.

In addition, in each chapter, Dos Passos adapts the voice to that of the character whose story he's telling. For example, chapters about Joe Williams are told in the rough, down-to-earth voice of a sailor: "In the afternoon, Joe's watch got off, though it wasn't much use going ashore because nobody had gotten any pay. . . . Joe was thirsty for a beer but he didn't have a red cent." Joe's chapters contain very little reflection, no commentary on thoughts, hopes, or feelings; he is usually reacting to things outside himself, rarely making conscious decisions or planning for his future.

In the first chapter about Anne Elizabeth Trent, known as "Daughter," Dos Passos adopts the breathless, bragging voice of a child who has been told her state and her people are the best:

The Trents lived in a house on Pleasant avenue that was the finest street in Dallas that was the biggest and fastest growing town in Texas that was the biggest state in the Union and had the blackest soil and the whitest people and America was the greatest country in the world and Daughter was Dad's onlyest sweetest little girl.

Chapters about J. Ward Moorehouse, who is skilled with words and in using them to flatter and influence people, are written in a puffed-up, euphemistic style similar to his speech: "But the financial situation of his family was none too good, his father said, shaking his head." This is in great contrast to chapters about Joe, who is commonly "flat broke" or "without a red cent" but who would never be described as having a "financial situation" that is "none too good."

The people seem recognizable, the voices familiar, ones that readers might hear on any street corner, in any bar. Because the style is personalized for each character, the stories work their way into the reader's psyche. The familiar voices and seemingly endless proliferation of details about these characters' daily lives make them seem like people one has always known: friends, relatives, coworkers.

Emotionally Flat Characters

The characters in the trilogy rarely reflect on their fate, and when they do, they seem helpless to change it. Their understanding of their own lives is fragmented, and they seem like sleepwalkers, never questioning what they value or why they value it. The exceptions to this are the activists, Mary French, Ben Compton, and, in the early part of his life, Mac McCreary, who don't like what they see and work to change it. However, their work is ineffectual and ultimately they don't succeed.

All of the characters are alienated to some degree from their families, from their wives or husbands, boyfriends or girlfriends. No one in the book ultimately has a lasting or satisfying relationship with anyone else.

This alienation reflects the alienation Dos Passos saw in society: contemplation was not valued, but action, however mindless, was. In addition, he saw society as superficial, interested in money and power and flash, not in any inner qualities of the individual; esteeming people for their morals, education, or character had become out of style, allowing people like the unctuous Moorehouse and the flashy Margo Dowling to succeed.

Historical Context

The Wobblies

The Industrial Workers of the World was founded in 1905 in Chicago at a convention of two hundred socialists, anarchists, radicals, and trade unionists from all over the United States. Its purpose, according to Bill Haywood, who opened the convention, was:

> the emancipation of the working-class from the slave bondage of capitalism. . . . to put the working- class in possession of the economic power, the means of life, in control of the machinery of production and distribution, without regard to the capitalist masters.

The members of the IWW, or "Wobblies," as they came to be known, believed that workers and employers had nothing in common and were fundamentally enemies. The Wobblies aimed to organize all workers in every industry into one big union, which would not be divided by gender, race, or skills. They also believed that negotiating with the owners was a mistake because it often sidetracked workers from their goals. They advocated direct action by the workers themselves, rather than negotiation by "labor misleaders" or "scheming politicians." An IWW pamphlet explained "direct action" as "the worker on the job shall tell the boss when and where he shall work, how long and for what wages and under what conditions."

Naturally, this militant attitude was powerfully attractive to some workers and powerfully frightening to industry owners. Although the IWW never had more than five thousand to ten thousand members at any one time, it was feared, detested, and attacked by various authorities: newspapers, courts, police, military, and ordinary people. Workers were often arrested simply on suspicion of being Wobblies, and when the Wobblies demonstrated or went on strike, they were frequently the targets of police brutality and illegal arrests. Some were shot, and at least one, Frank Little, was tortured and hanged.

Wobblies spread their ideas by writing, speaking, and singing about them. A well-known song was "The Preacher and the Church," also known as "Pie in the Sky," in which a poor man asks a preacher what he can eat. The preacher offers no help but says, "You'll get pie in the sky when you die."

The Versailles Peace Conference

By the end of the First World War, there were endless new fields of gravestones across Europe. Nine million people had died in the war, and those who survived swore it would never happen again— it had been "the war to end all wars."

At the Versailles Peace Conference, held in 1919 at the French palace of Versailles, President Woodrow Wilson promised that that new peace would be held securely by the new League of Nations and by disarmament of the aggressors in the war. The League of Nations was supposed to allow nations to discuss their disagreements and resolve them through negotiation so that international conflicts would no longer escalate to war.

The Treaty also required that Germany pay reparations to the countries it had attacked, and it set out borders for new nations: Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Poland, carved out of the old Germany. This, of course, left Germans bitter, and their bitterness increased as the burden of paying reparations affected their economy. Inflation skyrocketed, spreading poverty throughout the country.

The United States did not join the League of Nations; Congress refused to ratify it. Most Americans believed that America was far away from Europe and that Americans didn't need to become involved in European problems or negotiations. This isolationism, of course, would not last. By the Second World War, it would become apparent to Americans that they could not separate themselves from the rest of the world.

The Trial of Sacco and Vanzetti

In 1920, Italian anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were arrested in South Braintree, Massachusetts, near Boston and were charged with killing a shoe factory paymaster and his guard. Vanzetti was also charged with a previous attempt at robbery, and this lesser crime, in which no one was hurt, was tried first. Although Vanzetti had a strong alibi, many of the witnesses in his defense did not speak English well. At the time, prejudice against Italians and other immigrants was strong, and the Italian witnesses' testimony failed to convince the American jury that Vanzetti was innocent. In addition, Vanzetti did not take the stand in his own defense because he was afraid of revealing his anarchist activities. His silence hurt his case, and he was found guilty. He was sentenced to ten to fifteen years, a much harsher sentence than usual.

The harshness of this sentence made the two men think that the authorities might have a political or hostile bias against them. They hired Fred H. Moore, a socialist lawyer. He agreed that they were known to the authorities as anarchist militants who were involved in labor strikes, political agitation, and antiwar protests. At the time, the authorities were deeply afraid of any socialists, anarchists, or activists and punished them severely.

In the trial for the Braintree robbery, both men initially lied about their involvement in radical politics. This only raised the authorities' suspicion that they were guilty. Moore's defense focused on exposing the prosecution's prejudice against their politics and establishing that they had been arrested because they were known radicals, not because they were guilty. Moore enlisted the help of labor unions, international groups, and the Italian government and distributed thousands of pamphlets about the case throughout the United States. All this publicity made the trial into an international workers' cause. After a six-week trial, however, the two men were found guilty of robbery and murder, on July 14, 1921. The defense continued to struggle for a new trial

until 1927, when the two men were sentenced to death. By this time, they had come to represent social justice and freedom of speech to many people who believed they were innocent.

To this day, their actual guilt or innocence is still in question, and the case is still of interest because of what it reveals about how political and social attitudes may potentially pervert the purity of American justice.

Critical Overview

According to Daniel Aaron in *American Heritage*, the publication of *U.S.A.* "secured John Dos Passos's place in American literary history." However, Aaron remarked, eventually his reputation "faded, and his rowdy, acrid masterpiece petrified into a 'classic.' " Despite this, Aaron noted, "no other novelist of his times had so ingeniously evoked the scope and variety of the United States."

Many critics have commented on the book's pessimistic nature, but most have found this pessimism a necessary part of Dos Passos's style and message. Perry D. Westbrook wrote in the *Reference Guide to American Literature* that the book is "disheartening," remarking that:

[The book] inevitably leaves the reader with the sense
of profound loss, a feeling of ideals and values betrayed.
Yet the fervor with which Dos Passos wrote
indicates that he believes the loss might not be irretrievable.
He wrote from imagination and outrage
perhaps, but not total despair.

In *John Dos Passos: Politics and the Writer*, Robert C. Rosen wrote that the book may appear to be "a self-defeating novel of protest: characters are so degraded they seem incapable of full human development in any social order; there is nothing to be saved." However, he noted, some of the characters do have personal will and determination, and their choices, as well as "the tension between naturalism and the intense moral indignation" that pervade the novel, provide much of the novel's energy. He commented, "Its bleak vision of nearly universal defeat demands radical social change."

Joseph Warren Beach, in the *Sewanee Review*, noted that although some readers might be repelled by "the inconclusiveness of the story, and by the little meaning and little value in the lives presented," this is exactly Dos Passos's point: "his main impression of contemporary life is of ordinary people caught in the mechanism of a soulless society, and exceptional cases would be irrelevant to the point he is making." In the end, he noted, Dos Passos "has given us the most comprehensive and convincing picture of American life in certain highly characteristic phases that is anywhere to be found."

George J. Becker remarked in *John Dos Passos* that because of Dos Passos's skill as a writer, the novel "comes close to being the great American novel which had been the aspiration of writers since the turn of the century" and commented that it's ironic that "when the great American novel did arrive, it turned out to be condemnatory and pessimistic rather than a celebration of the American way."

Some critics have remarked on Dos Passos's use of the Camera Eye and Newsreel pieces, as well as on his insertion of biographies of real people into the text. Although

the Camera Eye and Newsreel pieces were praised when the book first came out, some readers since then have found them difficult to get through. For example, in *Commonweal*, Edward T. Wheeler wrote that as a younger man he found the book's experimental passages impenetrable. However, he wrote, "the passage of time has cleared up the nature of Dos Passos's masterpiece. I wish the book had been longer!"

Jean-Paul Sartre wrote about the experimental techniques in *Literary and Philosophical Essays* saying, "Dos Passos has invented only one thing, an art of story-telling. But that is enough to create a universe."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6
- Critical Essay #7

Critical Essay #1

Winters is a freelance writer and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In this essay, she considers Dos Passos's depiction of women in his novel.

At first glance, it might seem that Dos Passos's depiction of women is sexist or negative—after all, most of the women in *U.S.A.* are superficial examples of various stereotypes of women: the devoted secretary, the coarse but successful showbusiness woman, the jealous wife, the career girl, the dedicated social worker, as well as countless one-night-stands, prostitutes, and simple girls who think a man will marry them if they get pregnant but are proved wrong. Most of the main female characters become pregnant one or more times and, when they don't have a miscarriage, opt for abortion; in fact, sexual liaisons, inevitably followed by pregnancy, occur frequently throughout the trilogy. At times, this pattern is varied when characters become ill with venereal disease, making the sex seem even more distasteful.

Dos Passos's depictions of women characters are all flat, but what must be remembered is that Dos Passos's depictions of *all* his characters—male or female—are flat. There is no love in the book, no humor, nothing light or flighty, and nothing religious or spiritual. His characters do not dream, wish, or hope. They live solely and solidly on the physical plane, and any emotions they do have are simple reactions to physical events around them: fear, greed, lust, triumph, anger, frustration, jealousy. Confusion is perhaps the prime emotion many of them feel, as the world seems to be moving too fast for them, leaving them no time to reflect.

This somewhat shallow presentation of characters may seem to be a flaw, but this was simply Dos Passos's point: he believed that American culture was becoming increasingly shallow, materialistic, and crass, leading either to shallow, materialistic, and crass people, or to the destruction of those who did not fit into this mold or who were used or abused by the materialists. The most successful people in the book are the most greedy and self-serving, such as Margo Dowling and J. Ward Moorehouse. Significantly, both have mastered the art of manipulation, giving people what they think they want, using appearances to impress. Both act important, respected, and wealthy, and because people believe in this false front, they succeed.

Dos Passos's characters are not individualists; most of them want to belong to a group or be admired by a group. Even those who buck the system by becoming labor activists are buoyed up by their sense of being part of a sweeping movement. Joe, perhaps the biggest loner among them, is also the biggest loser; and he is not a loner by choice but simply because he is out of step with the times. Trusting, clever with his hands but not his head or heart, he is being left behind in the new America, where "working stiffs" like him are bound to fail. Another loser is Janey, who desperately wants to belong to the "smart set" and feels deeply honored simply to be Moorehouse's secretary; she never dreams of rising farther but is relieved to have a place where she belongs.

Although Dos Passos vigorously describes the oppression of working people, he offers no overt comment on the oppression of women in society in the fictional portions of the trilogy. In addition, of the twenty-seven short biographies appearing in between the chapters, only one, that of dancer Isadora Duncan, describes the life of a woman.

However, perhaps Dos Passos is not as sexist as these facts might at first imply. His presentation of only one women in twenty-seven influential people could just as easily be seen as a commentary on the fact that women were not allowed to hold influential positions during the time span covered by the trilogy.

In addition, in the fictional part of the trilogy, half of the main characters are female, and of all of them, the one who is most admirable is Mary French, the social activist. Although many of the other women characters are presented as shallow and limited, the presentation of their stories suggests that Dos Passos was indeed aware of their oppression. For example, he shows how Anne Elizabeth Trent, who begins as such a bright, tough tomboy, is brought low by the limited opportunities available to her and by the continual social pressure on her to "behave" and attach herself to a man. When she finally does, she chooses Richard Savage, who uses her and then dumps her, and she eventually commits suicide by flying with a drunk pilot and urging him to do loop-the-loops. If she had lived in a more open society, where she was able to use her energy and drive productively, it's doubtful that such a strong woman would have resorted to this desperate measure.

In addition, Dos Passos shows, through his depictions of women characters through the course of the trilogy, how women's roles were changing as the decades progressed. In *The 42nd Parallel*, Eleanor and Janey are both leery of men, vaguely frightened of them and their power, believing they're "out for one thing." Both eventually develop careers of their own, but these are fueled by the career of a man who has power: Janey is J. W. Moorehouse's secretary, and Eleanor is his quasimistress. Without J. W., or some other man, they could not succeed, and even with him, they're limited: it's unthinkable that they could be wheeling and dealing like he is, running a company, or bossing anyone, because they are women.

Later, in *The Big Money*, women are still not free but have made some strides. Mary and Margo are both strong women who are able to have careers of their own, independent from the careers of men, and influence large numbers of other people.

Perhaps Dos Passos's most obvious commentary on the status of women occurs in the Newsreel portions of the trilogy, where women are frequently degraded or depicted as occupied with trivial matters; for example, in between fragments about the sinking of the *Titanic* is a frivolous description of a bride's dress; and in between a series of fragments describing the ominous and violent events leading to World War I are pieces of romantic songs, fashion columns, and commentaries on debutantes. This juxtaposition continues throughout the trilogy, emphasizing the difference between the dreamy, childish world occupied by women and the real world occupied by men, where people were killed in labor riots and wars.

In *1919*, fragments of accounts of women being raped, harassed, killed, and committing suicide increase in the Newsreels. These are juxtaposed with pieces about military conquest and comments that, because of the war, marriages and births have declined. The few mentions of women in the Newsreels become increasingly bizarre: "Tattooed Woman Sought by Police in Trunk Murder," "Army Wife Slashed by Admirer," "Piteous Plaint of Wife Tells of Rival's Wiles." In the last Newsreel of the book, a woman tells how her first husband, second husband, and son were all killed while crossing train tracks. These all add up to provide a sense of futility and loss for women of the time.

In *The Big Money*, more stories of suicide appear in the Newsreels. A headline about a Russian baroness committing suicide is followed by a song line: "the kind of girl that men forget / Just a toy to enjoy for a while." This echoes the earlier story of Anne Elizabeth Trent, who committed suicide when Richard Savage abandons her. However, along with the violent pieces, the fragments also show women becoming active in labor disputes, voting, and being involved in military events, reflecting their changing role in society. Newsreel LI presents a long list of jobs for women, available because so many men were killed in World War I. However, along with this, it also presents less savory job offers and symbolically includes stanzas from "St. James Infirmary," a song about a dead, cold woman lying on a hospital table. This implies that even while women were enjoying increased economic freedom and opportunity, there was a dark side to this, and their economic freedom did not necessarily mean that they were socially equal to men. The job ads reflect this, noting "a good opportunity for stylish young ladies," echoing the obsession with style and fashion even in the face of horror that was presented in the Newsreels of *The 42nd Parallel*.

Because Dos Passos selected these fragments from the wealth of headlines, news clippings, songs, and advertisements of the era, it's clear that he's shaping a pattern and presenting a message about the times. He provides commentaries on war, on fads of the time, on politics, and on the fate of working people. Along with these commentaries, the continuing thread of pieces about women in the Newsreels makes clear that he is aware that women are abused, that their talents are wasted and their energies misdirected, that they are overlooked and exploited just as workers are. The Newsreels invoke a variety of mixed emotions: anger, sadness, a sense of incongruity, and a feeling of bewilderment and despair.

Source: Kelly Winters, Critical Essay on *U.S.A.*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Wrenn explores the themes of memory, language, tragedy, and doubt and affirmation in U.S.A.

Critical Essay #3

U.S.A. is first of all a book of memories. These memories, all relating to the United States during the first third of the twentieth century, are presented and developed contrapuntally in autobiography, history, biography, and fiction. The form is that of the associational process of memory itself, by which perceptions are established in the mind and later recalled. And the purpose of the work is equivalent to the function of the memory: to establish in the mind perceptions which, in association with other perceptions from experience such as those of pleasure or pain, develop into attitudes toward certain kinds of experience, frames of reference, or standards by which we judge today.

Dos Passos' intent was to establish for himself and his audience a broad and pertinent framework of memory. This required a maximum selective recall of his own experience, supplemented by the general experience and that of other individuals recorded in documents of the times. It also required an imaginative organization of these materials into a mnemonic unity which could suggest appropriate attitudes toward related kinds of past, present, and future experience.

If he could get a sequence of enough memories, or even a characteristic segment of them, into focus in his camera's eye, he could develop it, edit it, and give it artistic form. Then he could run it through again, stop the motion for a moment if he wished, and present a close-up or a flash-back: "Now who was that, could that have been me in that funny hat?" He could also give a tune or a speech on the sound track. The viewer might even leave the theater wiser than when he went in; at any rate, a few people might risk a nickel to see it. It would probably be misleadingly advertised as one of the "exclusive presentations of the Mesmer Agency" containing comments on "the great and near great" and "a fund of racy anecdotes"□as Dos Passos later satirized the bally-hooing of his books in *The Prospect Before Us* (1950). But for himself, he would present it only as one man's attempt to "add his nickel's worth."

When it was ready, some risked their nickels; and almost the first thing they saw was the producer- director as a little child flitting across the screen, like Alfred Hitchcock sneaking into his own films. As autobiography Dos Passos presented his own story directly in the Camera Eye sequences, in stream-of-consciousness□or more accurately, stream-of-memory□narration. His story in *The 42nd Parallel* is almost entirely separate from the rest of his history of the country in the early years of the century; but, as the novel progresses through the three volumes, there is a continuous tightening in the relationship of its several parts□narrative, Camera Eyes, Newsreels, biographies□as the narrator becomes one with his subject.

In *1919* the autobiography of the Camera Eyes begins to merge with the fictional story of Dick Savage, especially at Harvard and in the war. Toward the end of the final volume, *The Big Money*, Camera Eyes Forty-nine and Fifty include indirect biography of Sacco and Vanzetti; and in between those two sequences Dos Passos' story merges with the fictional story of Mary French in her work for the Sacco-Vanzetti defense and

with the history of the time as outlined in Newsreel LXVI. Finally, within the last twenty-five pages of the trilogy, the fictional Ben Compton (the prototype of Glenn Spotswood in his next novel, *Adventures* and of Jay Pignatelli in *Chosen Country*), expresses, peering "through his thick glasses," Dos Passos' relationship to the Communist Party: "oppositionist . . . exceptionalism . . . a lot of nonsense." And in the final sketch, "Vag," of the last two and a half pages, the Camera Eye has become the biography o the depression vagrant, a distinctive phenomenon of the times. It is also very nearly the picture of Jimmy Herf hitchhiking west out of Manhattan.

In *U.S.A.* Dos Passos placed himself securely within the history of his country in his time. But he emphasized the history above the importance of his relation to it. As an historian, he did not need to be told that his country's own brand of idealism was "democracy"; the problem was to discover what the word meant. It seemed to have pretty much lost its meaning at about the time the United States had fought a war to make the world safe for it. Taking the word at its pre-war value, Dos Passos devoted his trilogy to a history of the struggle for industrial democracy in America.

As a critic Dos Passos has always been principally interested in the effects of phenomena upon individual men and women. This interest helped to make him a novelist; and it□and not simply his training as a novelist□focuses all of his histories upon personalities and traits of character. The focus of *U.S.A.*, therefore, is upon the twenty-six *actual* persons engaged in the struggle and the twelve principal *fictional* persons also engaged in it and affected by it. The actual people of the biographies are those who influenced the pattern of the struggle □labor leaders, politicians, artists, journalists, scientists, and business leaders. The fictional characters represent average men and women molded by the complex of forces about them.

The fictional characters illustrate more than anything else the dissolution of the once central cohesive institution in American society (the one Dos Passos first achieved with his marriage in 1929, as he began *U.S.A.*), the family. Although most of them come from fairly secure family units, they are unable to form them for themselves. The fictional narrative is filled with pathetic promiscuity, perversion, vague temporary alliances, divorces, abortions. Ben Compton, again, sums up the need at the end of *The Big Money*. Speaking to Mary French, who is one of the most sympathetically portrayed of the principal characters and whose maternal instincts have made her a devoted worker for the oppressed, Ben says, "You know if we hadn't been fools we'd have had that baby that time . . . we'd still love each other."

In Dos Passos' picture of the U.S.A., it was essential to reinstitute the family; but neither of the two larger institutions in which the forces of the times had become polarized□*laissez-faire* capitalism and Stalinist communism□appeared to permit its free growth. Until people achieved a social system which would give the average man a sense of participation□of responsibility for and pride in his work□the smaller more vital social units would be ineffective. To achieve that system, the meaning of the old mercantile-agrarian democracy and its libertarian phraseology□liberty, equality, pursuit of happiness□must somehow be restored in the scientific, urban-industrial present.

The makers of that present and those who hoped to remake it are the subjects of the biographies. Toward each of the principal fictional characters, each of whom is seen as a child, the reader shares Dos Passos' affection, which turns to scorn or pity as they become mere cogs or pulp in the capitalist or communist machines, or to indignation as their individualism leaves them crushed and dead□like Joe Williams and Daughter, both killed by accident in France in the aftermath of the war□ or stranded and alone like Ben Compton. Toward the biographies, however the reader's reaction is principally a sharing of the burning indignation with which most of them were written. Of the twenty-six, not counting the two portraits of the anonymous Unknown Soldier and "Vag," fourteen are sympathetic and twelve are not.

The criterion of judgment of them as of the fictional characters is the courage or will of the individual to maintain the faith that most of them were born to in the untarnished meanings of the democratic creed. By this criterion we recognize them as friends or strangers whatever their births or origins or ends. If their work is intended to uphold the dignity of the individual man and woman and the integrity of their language as Americans, they are friends. If they are scornful or even like Edison and Henry Ford merely "unconcerned with the results of [their] work in human terms," they are "strangers" of Camera Eye Fifty, "who have turned our language inside out who have taken the clean words our fathers spoke and made them slimy and foul."

Dos Passos is not at all mysterious as to his purposes; he even states them directly in Camera Eyes Forty-seven and Forty-nine of *The Big Money:* ". . . shape words remembered light and dark straining to rebuild yesterday to clip out paper figures to stimulate growth Warp newsprint into faces smoothing and wrinkling in the various barelyfelt velocities of time." Or again, reporting his reporting of the Sacco-Vanzetti case: "pencil scrawls in my notebook the scraps of recollection the broken halfphrases the effort to intersect word with word to dovetail clause with clause to rebuild out of mangled memories unshakably (Oh Pontius Pilate) the truth." Here is the meaning of the terms "straight writing" and "architect of history."

Yet the architect of history works not only "to rebuild yesterday" as the foundation of today, but to build of today a sound foundation for tomorrow. By straight writing and with the materials of contemporary speech, the writer provides contexts of meaning for today's speech, which will be the basis of tomorrow's memories. Dos Passos achieves his contexts through the use of dialogue and even of direct narration phrased in the colloquial language appropriate to the character he is treating. The reader sees and hears the speech in conjunction with actions and through the consciousness of the character concerned. We participate in the individual's attitudes toward events.

Further than this, Dos Passos has the reader share, at least for the moment, the attitudes of quite different individuals toward the same or similar events. We see the affair between Dick Savage and Daughter (Anne Elizabeth Trent), for instance, through the eyes and feelings of each of them. To Dick it is simply an affair which becomes awkward and threatens to embarrass him in his career when Daughter expects him to feel some responsibility for her pregnancy. To her it is a tremendous event which results in tragedy. The reader also sees and experiences a variety of attitudes toward business,

labor, government, the war, the Sacco-Vanzetti case, and many other institutions and particular events. Since he cannot sympathetically entertain at the same time two opposing attitudes toward a single phenomenon, he is forced to choose, to criticize, to formulate standards.

As a realist Dos Passos reveals his characters in the historical framework of time, place, and social milieu which help to form them. These backgrounds, usually presented through the memories of the characters themselves, are various enough to provide a representative cross-section, geographically and socially, of American society. In the "Introduction" to *Three Soldiers*, Dos Passos remarked that "our beds have made us and the acutest action we can take is to sit up on the edge of them and look around and think." In describing his characters' beds, Dos Passos is an objective reporter of existing phenomena. But in portraying the individuals themselves and their attempts to sit up and look around and think, he is a selective critic. He controls our choice of attitude by creating characters with whom we must at first sympathize, for their beds and their wants are ours. We continue to sympathize as they struggle to express themselves and to satisfy their needs; but we become indignant at the Procrustean forces that chain them prone in their beds or at the individuals as they lose the courage to struggle, refuse to think, or prefer to crawl back under the sheets within the security of the familiar narrow limits of their bedsteads.

Critical Essay #4

Half of the fictional characters of *U.S.A.* and nearly half of the subjects of the biographies have a special facility with the tools of language, the means with which to build or to restrict human freedom. Of the fictional ones, most are poor or careless keepers of their talents. J. Ward Moorehouse becomes a public-relations executive□a propagandist for big business who exploits language for profit; Janey becomes his expert private secretary and an efficient, warped old maid; Dick Savage degenerates from a young poet to Moorehouse's administrative assistant and contact-man□a sort of commercial pimp. Mac surrenders his principles as an itinerant printer for the labor movement and succumbs to the security offered by a girl and a little bookstore of his own in Mexico; Mary French and Ben Compton become pawns of communist politics. Only Ben emerges at the end, though rejected and alone, still looking around him and thinking.

In contrast, only three of roughly a dozen subjects of the biographies seem to misuse their gifts of language: Bryan, "a silver tongue in a big mouth"; Woodrow Wilson, "talking to save his faith in words, talking . . . talking"; Hearst, whose "empire of the printed word . . . this power over the dreams of the adolescents of the world grows and poisons like a cancer." Most of the heroes of Dos Passos' biographies are chosen from among the heroes and martyrs of the working-class movement: men who looked around, thought critically, and developed their abilities in an effort to restore the meanings rather than to exploit the phraseology of American democracy. They were men like Eugene Debs, Bill Haywood, La Follette, Jack Reed, Randolph Bourne, Paxton Hibben, Joe Hill, Thorstein Veblen.

Dos Passos' own handling of the language can be demonstrated in an example from his fictional narrative in *1919*. Dick Savage at the end of the war is still in Paris; Daughter, spurned by her "Dickyboy" and carrying his child, goes off alone in a taxi Dick, now captain but angling for a public relations job after the war, goes to bed with a hangover; but he cannot get to sleep:

Gradually he got warmer. Tomorrow. Seventhirty:
shave, buckle puttees . . . Day dragged out in khaki. . .
Dragged out khaki days until after the signing of the
peace. Dun, drab, khaki. Poor Dick got to go to work
after the signing of the peace. Poor Tom's cold. Poor

Dickyboy . . . Richard . . . He brought his feet up to
where he could rub them. Poor Richard's feet. After
the signing of the Peace.

Dick is a Harvard graduate; he had intended to become a writer. He has nearly lost our sympathy because of his attitude toward Daughter. Here he gives up the struggle to sit up and think as he climbs literally and figuratively into bed, self-indulgent, self-pitying.

"Poor Tom" suggests his subconscious awareness of his disguise□in part the uniform of an officer and a gentleman, in part his role of a dedicated poet; and it also suggests the contrast of his character with that of Edgar in *King Lear*. "Poor Dickyboy" reveals the transfer of his pangs of conscience into self-sympathy. "Poor Richard" indicates his falling from critical awareness into the thoughtless selfishness of the old American cliché of success (Franklin's Poor Richard and Horatio Alger's Ragged Dick), as he resumes the foetal position because he lacks the courage to think and to doubt; he has, in the vernacular, cold feet: "By the time his feet were warm he'd fallen asleep."

The picture is at once comic and pathetic and somewhat revolting. Up to about this point we have been sympathizing with Dick as another struggling, wanting human; suffering with him; and enjoying his occasional successes as our own. In this passage, Dos Passos' method prevents our suddenly ceasing to participate. We must share Dick's experience □after all a rather ordinary one, already familiar to us□at the same time that we reject it. We share from within his consciousness; we observe and reject from outside it. By the multiplication of such experiences Dos Passos attempts to establish in the reader something like what T. S. Eliot called the objective correlative of the work of art; but another name for it is a critical standard or part of a frame of reference. Once established, it exists outside of, even independent of, its original source. If Dick Savage's retreat from responsibility, for example, is established as symbolic of all retreat from responsibility, and if we are made to reject it here, then we must reject it whenever we encounter it.

This process Dos Passos once explained in a little-known "Introductory Note" to the first Modern Library edition of his *42nd Parallel* as the destruction and reconstruction of stereotypes. He was aware that it would probably lose him readers "People feel pain when the stereotype is broken, at least at first." But it was the necessary method of the architect of history. The reaction from the reader is similar to the "grin of pain" that Dos Passos described as the essential response to satire in his essay about George Grosz in 1936.

Yet the reader's reaction to Dos Passos' novels is only remotely and occasionally one of mirth. To *U.S.A.* it is more nearly a grim realization of the sores and weaknesses of our culture which cry out for repair. To some readers, doubtless, it is too bad that Dos Passos is not more nearly the satirist than he is. Perhaps a leavening of humor that could change a grimace to a grin would make him more palatable to both readers and critics and, therefore, presumably more effective because more widely read. But Dos Passos' intent is vitally serious. He does not write to entertain but to communicate, to inform□in brief, to educate. He has always been too close to his materials, too involved personally, to be able to attain the special kind of detachment demanded of the satirist. Like Swift indeed, he heartily loves John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth; but he can by no means manage a principal hate and detestation for that animal called man.

Critical Essay #5

Rather than satire—or rather including the satire and including also his naturalism—Dos Passos' method in *U.S.A.* is that of tragedy, a method based on an ironic attitude toward the past. *U.S.A.* is a great agglomerate tragic history. The protagonist, obviously enough, is the real U.S.A. in the first third of the twentieth century. Its tragic characters are the real subjects of the biographies: Debs, Luther Burbank, Bill Haywood, Bryan, Minor Keith, Carnegie, Edison, Steinmetz, La Follette, Jack Reed, Randolph Bourne, T. R., Paxton Hibben, Woodrow Wilson, and the rest. Merely to read their names is to sense the tragedy of their era: so much talent, ambition, love—all frustrated or misdirected or drained away into war, profits prohibitions, intolerances, and oppressions.

In the background of the novel, democractic individualism and reliance on the future (pursuit of happiness) are the characteristics which gave the U.S.A. its greatness. A too narrow individualism, a too great reliance on the future—a loss of memory —and a warped interpretation of happiness in purely material terms: these are the characteristics which brought on its apparent downfall in the years Dos Passos wrote of. They are the tragic flaws of the society which rejects its best men. But its failures and its worst men have their own equivalent flaws—Bryan's "silver tongue in a big mouth," Wilson's "faith in words," and the overweening ambition of the Morgans, Insull, and others.

The fictional characters—like the anonymous "Vag" and the Unknown Soldier and the narrator— have not the stature of tragic characters. They are the extras, the *demos* or ordinary citizens like ourselves, or the members of the chorus with whom we can participate as they work and suffer in the shadow of the struggle for industrial democracy. Yet, while we participate, we also watch; and for our capacity as objective audience, there is the more formal chorus of the Newsreels, in which the past provides its own ironic commentary about the past and reveals our recent idiocies to ourselves.

Many Americans in the audience have been unwilling to sit through Dos Passos' documentary tragedy. If they have come to it for entertainment or escape, they have been disappointed. But those who have stayed to see and hear have been exposed to a unique dramatic experience. This experience is one of participating satire; for, as Dos Passos said of the painter Grosz, he "makes you identify yourself with the sordid and pitiful object." This identification, in turn, provides the catharsis, "a release from hatred"—in part because the reader or spectator cannot wholly hate himself and in part because the hatred is already expressed more adequately than most could express it through vitriolic portraits of the villains, real and fictional. The uniqueness, however, is in the partial nature of the catharsis: it might be said to be both catharsis and anti-catharsis. The reader is purged only of the selfindulgent emotions of hatred and self-love, which allow him to forget. He is denied complacency and forced to remember. The tragedy he has witnessed is that of the unfulfilled potential of the individual, including himself, in a society dedicated, ironically, to the possibilities of its fulfillment. He is left with a feeling of incompleteness.

Part of the reason for Dos Passos' unpopularity is probably his lack of sufficient self-esteem for the reader to share. His contemporary, Hemingway, for example, had it both in himself and in his characters. Even in Swift the reader can climb to the heights of satire with the author□Gulliver being only an alter ego, the equivalent of some of the fictional characters of *U.S.A.*□and look down on the puny mass of men with the possibility of selfgratulation that he is not among them. But in Dos Passos' participating satire even the author is satirized; if the reader indulges in any identification (which he can scarcely avoid), he must lose not only his self-esteem but also his complacency.

Dos Passos' self-esteem is almost wholly of the abstract "self," the essential *I, you, me, he, she* of the tragically unfulfilled individual potential. In fact, it is almost the sole object of his esteem. So where another writer□and particularly another autobiographical writer such as Hemingway□might appear to caress his characters, possibly because they contain so much of the author, Dos Passos scorns his, partly for the same reason. He scorns them also because they are not true individuals and because it is not his fault, but theirs. He cannot help them; for, if they are to achieve their individuality, to fulfill their potentials, they must do it themselves. The most he can do is to help define the problem and some of the conditions of its solution. Yet Dos Passos is thoroughly sympathetic, especially towards the fictional men and women who give their names to the narrative sections of *U.S.A.* He shows a pervading pity for his characters, real and fictional, which is evident even in his most acidulous biographical portraits; an example is his quoting from the pathetically presumptuous will of the first J. P. Morgan in his biography of "The House of Morgan" in *1919*.

Both the scorn and the pity come through to the reader. Since one can properly scorn only inevitable weakness or meanness, the reader is left at the end of the tragedy with a sense of awe not so much at the power and authority of the destructive or restricting external forces as at the potential beauty and unity of the thing destroyed, the free personality. Bernard De Voto felt it in "the gusto and delight of American living" whose absence in *U.S.A.* he so deplored.

Yet this sense of incompleteness in the reader□the feeling of having been cheated of some of the ideal goods of life and that something should be done about it□is precisely the reaction that Dos Passos, the architect of history, desired. Unfortunately for his purposes, many readers have felt only the incompleteness and have missed the further implications of his criticism that something can be done about it, but that each individual must do it himself.

Critical Essay #6

Perhaps one reason for the failure of his message is related to the fact that he has had one. As a novelist his chief concern has been, as he wrote in "The Business of a Novelist" for the *New Republic* in April, 1934, "to create characters first and foremost, and then to set them in the snarl of the human currents of his time, so that there results an accurate permanent record of a phase of history." Yet as a man with a message, his chief concern has been with its recipients; and his characters, despite the sympathy of his portrayal, he has left deliberately underdeveloped. Similarly, he has always aimed at discomforting his readers□at stirring them into fresh thought and action by destroying the stereotypes from which they viewed the world. The great antagonist of *U.S.A.* is complacency. Probably most of the adverse criticism of the novel could be traced, like De Voto's, to the critics' protests against Dos Passos' attack on one or another of their complacencies. "When complacency goes," Dos Passos concluded his critical appreciation of Grosz, "young intelligence begins."

The essential first step to the freedom of intelligent action was to doubt. Yet some compromise between doubt and acceptance must be made before real action can begin. Until the early thirties Dos Passos' compromise was in the acceptance of immediate goals: in broadening the range of his own experience and in satisfying chiefly through travel his eager curiosity about the world around him; in participating directly in behalf of the obviously oppressed such as Sacco and Vanzetti, the Scottsboro boys, and, later, refugees from Europe; and in endeavoring to stimulate doubt in others. Then sometime before the fall elections of 1936 he reached the climax of his own doubting: his doubt turned inward upon itself.

The struggle of this moral crisis can be read in Camera Eye Forty-six early in *The Big Money:* "if not why not? walking the streets rolling on your bed eyes sting from peeling the speculative onion of doubt if somebody in your head topdog? underdog? didn't (and on Union Square) say liar to you." From this point on, the reader can trace the development of his Everlasting Yea, which begins with his condemnation of both the capitalistic and communistic viewpoints in *The Big Money* and his enthusiastic vote for Roosevelt in 1936 and which culminates in his novel *Chosen Country*, in his appreciative study of Jefferson, and in his two recent histories of the founders of the republic, *The Men Who Made The Nation* (1957) and *Prospects of a Golden Age* (1959).

In his probing into the meanings of the democratic phraseology and their bearings on his country in his time, Dos Passos found what he sought in an appreciation of the dynamics of his society. From his study of the history of his country and his awareness of the forces of history in action□ particularly in the increase of despotism abroad□ he came to realize that, for him, the U.S.A. *was* the last, best hope of men.

"The shape of a piece of work should be imposed, and in a good piece of work always is imposed, by the matter," Dos Passos wrote in his "Introductory Note" to the first Modern Library edition of *The 42nd Parallel*. The conscious, organized incompleteness of

U.S.A. was not merely a device to stimulate the reader; it was the artistic form imposed by the organic necessity of the artist's materials. His study of his matter, American history, had finally revealed to him the secret of form in his society: that the pattern of American society lay where he had intuitively recognized it in the individual□in its potential and incompleteness. Sometime during the composition of his trilogy, Dos Passos became aware of a resurgence of what must have been a still-existing fluidity and dynamic potential in the American social structure. In such a society a man, if he would, could give meaning to his life.

Having intellectually grasped the pattern□or at least one which was satisfying and meaningful to him□and realized its form in his art in *U.S.A.*, Dos Passos had accomplished his major task as an artist. His materials for *U.S.A.* were all historical□ the products of his study of the nation's past, his awareness of significant events acting about him, and a mass of painfully remembered detail from his own life. By the effort of his imagination, he constructed from these materials an organic unity which revealed the nation which he had made his own. By his own efforts he had carved out his niche and made himself a citizen.

Believing above all in the responsible and purposeful action of the free individual, Dos Passos was not a man to waste in inaction the freedom he had taken forty years to acquire, or to take lightly the duties of citizenship. However, having achieved the form he sought in his life and in his art, his energies could now take a slightly different direction. History in the service of art had completed the pattern. Henceforth Dos Passos' efforts would be more nearly historical than artistic. Art in the service of history should confirm the pattern and maintain the flexibility of the form.

Source: John H. Wrenn, "*U.S.A.*," in *John Dos Passos*, Twayne, 1999.

Critical Essay #7

In the following essay, Becker examines the pessimistic tone of U.S.A. *and Dos Passos's use of "newsreels" and "biographies" to provide supplementary background information.*

By its intricacy and by its comprehensive sweep the trilogy *U.S.A.* comes close to being the great American novel which had been the aspiration of writers since the turn of the century. It is one of the ironies of our times that when the great American novel did arrive, it turned out to be condemnatory and pessimistic rather than a celebration of the American way. Yet there is an underlying affirmation in Dos Passos' denial. The American dream, battered and corrupted by men of ill will, or little will, still manifests itself□though in anguish □not completely stifled by the trappings of empire and the machinations of self-interest that the author describes.

What first aroused the enthusiasm of readers and critics was the technical virtuosity of the work. Dos Passos was clearly the heir of Balzac, Zola, and Galdós in his attempt to mirror contemporary society□as he was the competitor of Jules Romains, whose *Hommes de bonne volonté* was appearing during the same span of years. It is equally evident that the idea of multiple perspectives is something he owed to *Ulysses*. But the techniques he employed and the balance of elements he achieved are his own and stamp him as the last of the great inventors in the field of the social novel. He welded together four separate, even disparate, types of material, each of which is necessary to the statement the novel ultimately makes. He spoke of this as his "four way conveyer system," which is apt enough, since four kinds of ore are being mined simultaneously.

One of the problems of the novelist attempting to mirror social actuality is how to include a sufficient body of data to give the basic tone or temper of the times as background to the necessarily particular experience of fictional characters. Balzac, Zola, and Galdós did this largely by repetition; that is, within the loosely associated novels of their series they subjected characters from various walks of life to the same basic determining and limiting forces. They were generally content with only a brief suggestive notation of public events. Even though change was their subject, there was something relatively static about their social backdrop. Later novelists, like James T. Farrell and John Steinbeck, attempted to remedy this deficiency. Steinbeck, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, by means of intercalated chapters which are poetic or rhetorical rather than directly documentary, both sets the social background and incorporates change as one of the dimensions of that background.

Dos Passos meets the problem by an invention that he calls the "Newsreel." There are sixty-eight such sections fairly evenly distributed among the three novels of the trilogy. These sections are a mixture of newspaper headlines, fragments of news stories, and bits and pieces of popular songs. They rarely run over two pages; a few are very short. They are typographically arresting with their headline type and their inset lines of verse. Their function is threefold: they precisely date the narrative action; they arouse a feeling for the time in question; and they frequently have a thematic or ironic impact.

In each volume of the trilogy the first and last Newsreels are of particular importance for all of the reasons just stated. *The 42nd Parallel* (1930) opens with a proclamation by way of headlines that the new century has begun. The repetitive banality of these statements becomes ludicrous, a tone that carries over to Senator Albert J. Beveridge's claim that "The twentieth century will be American. American thought will dominate it. American progress will give it color and direction. American deeds will make it illustrious." In counterpoint there is obvious triviality: "Society Girls Shocked: Danced with Detectives," and venality: "Officials Know Nothing of Vice." Then follows an ominous note of prophecy with mention of the disastrous Boer War and the nascent American empire: a jingle from the Cuban campaign; a headline: "Claims Islands for All Time"; and finally a song from the Philippine campaign, bits of which appear throughout the section, culminating with a warning of the cost of empire:

There's been many a good man murdered in the
Philippines Lies sleeping in some lonesome grave.

The final Newsreel of the volume is shorter and less complex. The declaration of war in April 1917 is announced in headlines; there are lines from the popular song "Over There," reference to the fact that the Colt Firearms Company has increased profits by 259 per cent, and two headlines: "Plan Legislation to Keep Colored People from White Areas" and "Abusing Flag to Be Punished." The long-range implications of war are set down without comment.

The opening theme of *1919* (1932) is one of a capitalistic system both intoxicated by opportunity and frightened by lurking dangers: the New York Stock Exchange is now the only free market in the world; vast quantities of money are pouring in from abroad; but "Europe [is] reeking with murder and the lust of rapine, aflame with the fires of revolution." The concluding Newsreel is savage: "the placards borne by the radicals were taken away from them, their clothing torn and eyes blackened before the service and ex-service men had finished with them." "Machineguns Mow Down Mobs in Knoxville." Juxtaposed to this violence is the phrase "America I love you." The war is over. Its fruits are becoming known.

In *The Big Money* (1936) the first Newsreel comes after a narrative section. It contains much less detonative material than the foregoing: a line from "The St. Louis Blues," headlines about a daylight robbery, observations about automobiles and social status. Though the word is not used, this is President Harding's "normalcy." The contrast provided by the final Newsreel is dramatic: "Wall Street Stunned" (the stock market crash); "Police Turn Machine Guns on Colorado Mine Strikers Kill 5 Wound 40;" "Rescue Crews Try to Upend Illfated Craft While Waiting for Pontoons." All this is interspersed with lines from the saga of the illfated Casey Jones, whose locomotive is hell-bent for destruction. Finally there are the hollow soothing words of the President at the dedication of the Bok carillon in Florida, a scene of peace and promise already denied by the headlines: "Steamroller in Action against Militants," "Miners Battle Scabs."

Some of the content of the Newsreels is just plain fun. Advertising slogans such as "Itching Gone in One Night," the whole fulsome sequence of headlines about Queen Marie of Romania's visit, saccharine songs juxtaposed with serious events, all of these give a sense of the human comedy and also bring a powerful evocation of the past to the reader who has lived through it. Intellectually he may be aware of triviality and folly, of stultifying forces that controlled his life, but his emotions discount all that. It is his past, a poor thing but his own.

The present-day reader has to ask himself what is the enduring value of these sections, what kind of impact do they have on people who have not lived through the time portrayed? In general, popular songs wear themselves out by repetition; they rarely reappear to stir the emotions of another generation, though certain ballads like "Casey Jones," certain fighting chants of the IWW and other leftist groups, and hardcore revolutionary anthems like "The Marseillaise" and "The Internationale" do have long-term currency. The problem is even more evident when it comes to headlines and excerpts of news stories, many of which are extremely hard to pin down with the passage of time. It takes an effort of will, and some luck, to be able to recall that "Peaches" was Peaches Browning, that "The Sheik" was Rudolph Valentino, or to be able to piece together the details of the Hall-Mills murder case. Perhaps the relative inaccessibility of these materials does not matter. The author operates on the scattershot principle: some of the shots are sure to hit.

The second of Dos Passos' conveyor belts, the short biographies of actual persons, is also highly original. Living people have been used before as touchstones in novels, as objects of glorification or as objects of scorn. What is unusual here is the number and variety of the biographies and the encapsulated way in which they are presented. There are twenty-seven of them equally distributed among the three novels. They direct attention to both success and failure in the first third of the century and to major social currents of that period. By the selectivity evident in their choice it is clear that the author has here cast aside his role of objective observer and has actively intervened to influence the reader's judgment. A completely different statement would emerge if the cast of living persons were different.

There is no easy formula for classifying these figures, though, as has been indicated, they fall broadly into groupings of good guys and bad guys, heroes and villains, constructive and destructive human beings. But the sketches are so imbued with irony that the reader does not know what to expect in advance. He is obliged to examine each sketch in its context and to be ready for an ironic twist which will upset his expectation. The initial biography, "Lover of Mankind," is of Eugene V. Debs, the first nationally celebrated labor leader. This choice, and the tone in which the biography is written, constitutes an unambiguous manifesto. Debs' aspiration is for "a world brothers might own where everybody would split even." The section ends with the ringing quotation: "While there is a lower class I am of it, while there is a criminal class I am of it, while there is a soul in prison I am not free." The authorial voice betrays partisanship when it asks where were Debs' brothers in 1918 "when Woodrow Wilson had him locked up in Atlanta for speaking against war." The central issue which is gradually to become clear in the course of the novel is implicit in this biography: there are two

nations, men with a sense of brotherhood like Debs and "the frockcoats and the tophats and diamonded hostesses," the wielders of power who "were afraid of him as if he had contracted a social disease, syphilis or leprosy."

Two other biographies in the first volume reinforce this statement. "Big Bill," that is, Big Bill Haywood the IWW leader, dreamed of "building a new society in the shell of the old"; he was the victim of the mentality of the men who "went over with the A.E.F. to save the Morgan loans" and "lynched the pacifists and the pro-Germans and the wobblies and the reds and the bolsheviks." Another idealist and victim is "Fighting Bob" La Follette, the reformer who made Wisconsin a model state, who fought corruption and big business and "the miasmic lethargy of Washington." He was "an orator haranguing from the capitol of a lost republic."

The Luther Burbank sketch raises important questions. America is a hybrid, promising a brave new social organism, but it is threatened by intolerance of ideas, something which did not destroy Burbank but left him "puzzled." Edison's fame is undercut by the fact that he worked with men like Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone, "who never worried about mathematics or the social system or generalized philosophical concepts," and put his inventions at the service of these analphabetic masters of the capitalist system. Likewise Steinmetz, a hunchback and a genius and a socialist whose mathematical discoveries are the basis of all electrical transformers everywhere, was merely "a piece of apparatus belonging to General Electric," which indulged him in his socialist dreams but did not allow him to interfere with the stockholders' money or the directors' salaries.

Alongside these men manipulated by the system we see three of the manipulators. The most openly attacked is Minor C. Keith, builder of railroads in Central America and creator of the United Fruit Company. Andrew Carnegie, like Steinmetz an immigrant, worked hard, saved his money, and "whenever he had a million dollars he invested it . . . whenever he made a billion dollars he endowed an institution to promote universal peace always except in time of war." The most ironic sketch of all is that of William Jennings Bryan, "the boy orator of the Platte," whose silver tongue chanted indiscriminately of pacifism, prohibition, and fundamentalism; the leader of the people's crusade who became the clown in the courtroom at the monkey trial in Dayton, Tennessee, who became a barker selling real estate in Coral Gables, Florida.

This pattern is repeated in *1919* but in *The Big Money* the biographies have a different orientation. They are illustrative of the anti-human, anti-cultural wasteland of the Twenties: Frederick W. Taylor, the inventor of the system of industrial management that reduces workmen to the status of machines (to the point of emasculation, one of the fictional characters observes); Henry Ford, chief architect of the new society produced by the automobile, whose social outlook belonged to the horse-and-buggy age; and William Randolph Hearst, a manipulator of men's minds and a vulgarizer of ideas. In Isadora Duncan and Rudolph Valentino are summed up both the inanity of pseudo-art and the vacuous enthusiasms of a vulgar public. Three biographies only are touchstones of what is useful and admirable: Thorstein Veblen, who saw through the glittering facade of conspicuous consumption and became an academic pariah for his pains; the Wright Brothers, who with single- minded devotion pioneered man's entry into

the space age; and Frank Lloyd Wright, whose vision of a humane functional architecture was one of the few creative achievements of the age.

These twenty-seven portraits are in general a cruel and unsparing debunking, less cantankerous than H. L. Mencken's parallel effort but more deadly. They demand a reassessment of reputations in terms of a constant vision of a good society; they strip away the window-dressing of factitious public image. Underlying all of them is a basic question: Who were the great men of the new century? This question cannot in fact be answered until valid criteria of greatness are established. Dos Passos leads us to those criteria in a negative manner for the most part. The reader is brought to see the hollowness, the sterility of many men of popular reputation and is forced, often painfully, to reassess unpopular personalities whom he had assumed to be beyond the pale. For all the cool, precise succinctness of these biographies there is nothing impersonal about them. They constitute the most brilliant writing Dos Passos ever did, but that brilliance is one of polemic thrust under the cloak of objectivity. Not only do they set up a general value system for the novel; they act as reflectors for the fictional personages, as in the case where the narrative of Margo Dowling is interrupted by a biography of Valentino.

The third device invented by Dos Passos, the "Camera Eye," is the most interesting because the most difficult to pin down as to its function. There are fifty-one of these sections, over half of them appearing in the first novel. Whereas the approach of all the other elements in the work is public and ostensibly objective, the Camera Eyes are private and subjective. Their style is lyrical in contrast to the dry factual presentation of the rest. Through them an unexpected persona appears on scene, a poetic speaker who is different from the impersonal narrator and who for practical purposes must be identified with that unique individual John Dos Passos. This individual is both representative and unique. He is the sensitive protected being who must emerge from the safety of childhood and come to an understanding of the harsh realities of adult life. There is a strict parallel between his experience and that of the United Skates in the twentieth century. Youth undergoes crisis when it discovers that the maxims□the official verbal formulas□on which it has been nurtured do not square with reality. Two courses are open to meet this crisis: a cynical capitulation to the way things are, or a radical reassessment of traditional values and a determination to sweep away all that is not valid at whatever cost. In other words, the Camera Eyes provide a core of belief and value in the midst of apparent disintegration of value. In simplistic terms they chart the making of a radical.

Dos Passos here mines his own experience with virtually no resort to invention. The twentyseven Camera Eyes in *The 42nd Parallel* carry the speaker through childhood and adolescence to his post-Harvard trip to France in 1916. Curiously enough, the definitive end to childhood is deferred to the beginning of *1919*, when the deaths of mother and father (separated in fact by several years) are brought together in the opening section, along with the experience of a soldier's life (largely imaginary). These experiences are described as the closing of one book and the beginning of another, a *Vita Nuova*, "the first day of the first month of the first year" of a new existence.

The first Camera Eye describes insecurity in a foreign city. The second is doubly thematic, expressing a patronizing attitude toward Negroes and windy patriotic hyperbole. The third section echoes this class consciousness: "workingmen and people like that laborers travailleurs greasers." This theme comes up again in the seventh: in reference to muckers, Bohunks and Polack kids who "put stones in their snowballs write dirty words up on walls do dirty things up alleys their folks work in the mills," an attitude that is undercut in the next Camera Eye by the intolerance, cruelty, and dirty words at the speaker's own select school. As the novel continues, sex, patriotism, social consciousness (the Lawrence, Massachusetts, street car strike), an account of a New York radical meeting where "everybody talked machineguns revolution civil liberty freedom of speech but occasionally somebody got in the way of a cop and was beaten up and shoved into a patrol wagon," and growing awareness of the evil of war□"up north they were dying in the mud and the trenches but business was good in Bordeaux" □chart the sensitivity of the speaker.

With this persona established, it is possible to limit the range of the Camera Eye sections in the other two novels. Those in *1919* parallel Dos Passos' experiences of war and differ very little from the passages in his war novels and in his autobiography. They are not soapbox oratory against war□rather they are poetic epiphanies□but they do raise uncomfortable questions about the waste of lives and the denial of free speech to those who dissent. Commentary on the May Day 1919 celebration in Paris is less a paean to revolution than to the utopia that it promises. In *The Big Money* the emphasis is on the promise and denial of basic freedom in the United States. The speaker ruminates about wealth and poverty: "why not tell these men stamping in the wind that we stand on a quicksand?"; he is ashamed of himself for dreaming and not acting; he wonders "what leverage might pry the owners loose from power and bring back (I too Walt Whitman) our storybook democracy." Protest rises to a peak with the Sacco-Vanzetti case, contrasting the fate of these immigrants in Plymouth with the original settlers, who were "kingkillers haters of oppression." Number 50, which states "they have clubbed us off the streets they are stronger they are rich," reaches the anguished conclusion, "all right we are two nations."

If we ask the question, What makes a man of gentle rearing, artistic and intellectual taste, and abhorrence of violence turn to the revolutionary left? the answer has been chronicled in the Camera Eyes. We see his development through experience of war, of capitalistic dehumanization, and of repression of dissent. The Sacco-Vanzetti case is the catalyst which purifies him of uncertainty and commits him to the cause of the downtrodden and the dispossessed. The Camera Eyes suggest, without arrogance, that this is the path a man of good will must follow through the iron labyrinth of the twentieth century, and they provide a standard by which to measure the twelve fictional characters who are the major exhibits of the novel.

U.S.A. in the jargon of some critics has been called a "collective" novel. The term is unfortunate in its ideological implications and fails to convey the central fact that this is a novel without a protagonist, one in which no single life provides a center of interest and meaning. This work exhibits multiple parallel lives on a scale never before attempted. Its form is radial; that is, each spoke has the same importance as the others, all converging

on a common center. If the reader's mind could, indeed, focus on all these characters at once he would perceive that unity. But since the experience of the novel is temporal, not spatial, simultaneity is not possible, except in brief passages, and the reader must keep the various characters in suspension until he can weigh them as a group.

These fictional personages fall into three categories: the twelve exemplary characters who are given major billing by having narrative sections bear their names; a limited number who turn up at various points in the work as they relate to some of the above but for whom no substantial background is provided; and incidental ones who, however prominent, relate to only one of the major figures, fleshing out his life, acting as foils on occasion, but in themselves not under examination for their own sake.

The way the narratives of the twelve major characters are woven into the novel is varied, though they can be counted on not to appear as a block. The story of Mac, the first one we meet, is told in seven episodes uninterrupted by other narratives. Then three other characters appear and 167 pages later there is a final Mac section, after which he disappears from the novel. Janey Williams, J. Ward Moorehouse, and Eleanor Stoddard have name sections only in the first novel, though they reappear in the other two. In *1919*, five characters have name sections, three of them completely new. Two of them appear only in this volume. Joe Williams' career comes to an end in a barroom brawl; Daughter dies in an airplane accident. The other, Dick Savage, continues to be important in *The Big Money* along with Charley Anderson, who appeared in the first but not the second novel. Finally, in *The Big Money* two characters, Mary French and Margo Dowling, occupy much of the narrative. This lack of pattern lends an air of random verisimilitude, though with the exception of Mac all twelve are interconnected and nine of them do proceed to the end.

It is important to note that when name sections for a given character cease, he is not necessarily downgraded. J. Ward Moorehouse and Janey Williams are ubiquitous in *1919*. Eleanor Stoddard and Eveline Hutchins are in view through all three novels. Ben Compton, who has only one name section (in *1919*), is occasionally on scene in the following work. Sometimes the same events are told from two points of view, especially in the case of Janey and Joe Williams and of Eleanor Stoddard and Eveline Hutchins. Sometimes the interconnections of the major figures seem forced, and indeed unnecessary. Nothing is gained by having Mac encounter J. Ward Moorehouse (and George H. Barrow, a continuing secondary character) in Mexico. It is amusing but of no importance that Joe Williams is the sailor whom Savage and his friends meet in a bar outside of Genoa. At the very end there is irritating contrivance when at Eveline Hutchins' party Mary French, Margo Dowling, Dick Savage, and G. H. Barrow are all brought under the same roof. Indeed if one is to fault Dos Passos' handling of the intricate counterpoint of so many lives it is in respect to the unnecessary tightness of relationships, which casts doubt on the randomness of his sampling.

The actual narrative, while more conventional than the other dimensions of the novel, does not lack technical interest. In comparison with *Manhattan Transfer*, *U.S.A.* makes very little use of dialogue and dramatic scene. What gives the various life histories impact is the use of summary stream of consciousness in language appropriate to the

character. Within the limits permitted, Janey Williams or Dick Savage or Mary French comes alive because we are aware of how each perceives experience through the very language he uses. This may degenerate into formula: Eveline Hutchins' catchphrase "It's all so tiresome;" but usually the language is flexible, employing slang, profanity, simple or mannered vocabulary as they are appropriate. Because of Dos Passos' acute ear for nuances of speech, language is a refined instrument of characterization. We hear his people better than we see them, and we hear them not only in regular dialogue but in so-called narrative passages as well.

When we consider whether this cast of characters is representative, we must concede at once that it does not present an adequate cross section and that the selection is clearly and deliberately slanted in the direction of vacuity and failure. These lives may be exemplary, but most readers agree that they are exemplary of only one aspect of human endeavor. The very fact that these are hollow men and women whose course is downward constitutes an inescapable indictment of American life and institutions in their time.

If we apply criteria for success and failure in simplified terms, we must see Mac as a radical who settles complacently into the comfort of middleclass existence, Joe Williams a working stiff incapable of living beyond the moment, Janey Williams a person who achieves identity only in symbiotic relationship with the boss, Daughter an unruly youngster who flees responsibility, and Margo Dowling the synthetic product of a synthetic industry. Ben Compton exists more as horrible example, a pathetic and feckless victim of the repressive forces of society as he goes off to a twenty-year prison term at the age of twenty-two. Five of the remaining six fail even more egregiously: J. Ward Moorehouse peddling words as a public relations expert and selling himself with words as empty as his own character; Eleanor Stoddard taking refuge in a sterile elegance; Eveline Hutchins, a pursuer of pleasure who finds it all so boring that she commits suicide; Charley Anderson, a simple man who is good with engines but is destroyed by high living and high finance; Dick Savage, potentially a man of sensibility, who pursues the main chance and loses his own soul. Only Mary French, who has genuine compassion for the underdog, plods resolutely ahead to a worthy goal. She will not reach it because she has no defense against being used by others, but we admire her for her ability to subordinate herself to the needs of others.

These major characters nearly all come from homes that are in some way broken, without normal security and love, and none of them is capable of achieving a satisfactory marital existence. Over and over we see sex drives as a source of exploitation and enslavement. The two working stiffs, Mac and Joe, are trapped by nice girls who use sex first as a means to marriage, then as coercion to insure a materially safe existence. Janey sublimates sex in adoration of J. Ward Moorehouse. Eleanor Stoddard, a potential lesbian, has an occasional meaningless affair. Eveline Hutchins sleeps around, marries Paul Johnson and soon divorces him. Daughter is seduced by the sexually ambivalent Dick Savage, who refuses to marry her when she becomes pregnant. Mary French accepts the free-love doctrines of her radical friends and is let down by Don Stevens, her communist lover. Whoring comes naturally to Margo Dowling; she uses her body first to escape poverty, then to rise to stardom. J. Ward

Moorehouse enters into two marriages for money, sleeps with Eleanor Stoddard and Eveline Hutchins, and is happiest submitting to the ministrations of call girls. Charley Anderson can leave neither women nor booze alone and is taken for all he has by his calculating wife in Bloomfield Hills, as he would have been a second time by Margo Dowling if he had lived. Dick Savage sleeps with girls without much enthusiasm; at the end we see him prey to blackmailing homosexuals in Harlem. For these people sex is Robert Penn Warren's "great twitch" with a vengeance and a major strand of the determinism of the novel. Their unsatisfactory sexual lives are damning evidence of a basic sterility in human relations.

Another curious limitation of the group chosen is what we may call a vocational inertia. They are all untrained (except Janey Williams) and drift into jobs rather than coming to adulthood with definite purpose. To be sure, Dick Savage finishes Harvard, emerging as a promising minor poet, vintage 1915, and Mary French has a couple of years at Vassar before she drops out, while Eveline Hutchins and Eleanor Stoddard have desultory interludes at the Chicago Art Institute. It must be admitted that Moorehouse teaches himself French and that Joe Williams studies to get a succession of licenses. Even though lack of advanced schooling is the norm for the generation Dos Passos is portraying, these people strike us as undisciplined, opportunistic, and drifting. A more representative cross section would show some people at least setting up and achieving goals, using their minds in a disciplined way and subordinating their egos to the demands of some profession.

Still another aspect of their lives, so prominent as to constitute a major theme, is an ineradicable inhumanity, an intolerance toward people and ideas in any way offbeat. There is snide disparagement of all who do not belong to the category of nice people. Pejorative terms like "bohunk," "guinea," "shine," "greaser," and the host of others vulgarly used to refer to the non-white Anglo-Saxons are always on the lips of Dos Passos' characters. This is but one of the ways in which he accurately, and painfully, records the speech of the people. There are more developed instances of discriminatory attitude and action. Even Mary French is disturbed because her friend Ada Cohen is so Jewish. Margo Dowling takes pleasure in humiliating her Cuban husband by making him wear a uniform and act as her chauffeur. This class- and race-consciousness separates officers from men, manual workers from white-collar workers, "muckers" of any stamp from the distinguished people in the rotogravure section.

When the chips are down, this automatic consigning of aliens and oddballs to coventry leads to exploitation and violence. Since such people have been tagged as less than human, they are fair game. If a man is a Wobbly, he may legitimately be beaten, castrated, crucified. It is this denial of freedom of speech and action that Dos Passos returns to again and again. He can make fun of social snobbery □witness Eveline Hutchins' party for refugee Russian noblemen; what he cannot abide is persecution of dissenters. The stories of Mac, of Ben Compton, of Joe Williams, of Mary French, and of Charley Anderson in his early years are central to this theme. It is significant that Mac begins and Mary ends the novel. Mac as a boy is arrested for distributing union handbills during a strike; his uncle, a socialist, is bankrupted. Mary at the end is steadfastly trying to break down barriers, pathetically trying to convince her capitalist

stepfather that the striking Appalachian miners are human beings. The three novels use the full gamut of their techniques to emphasize this theme. We see a man being run in in San Francisco for reading the Declaration of Independence to a crowd. We are present with Ben Compton at a riot in Everett, Washington. We are told of the hounding of Thorstein Veblen. The examples are legion. The weakest part of this is the attempt to show in Ben Compton how a revolutionary is made. The lack of psychological depth characteristic of Dos Passos' people is fatal here. It is not enough to see Ben pushed and broken by external forces. We need to feel the generation of internal resolution and an anguished perception that the system is out of joint. The interlarded quotations from Marx that attend Ben's development are not enough, unless indeed the author is already being ironic about the claims of socialist doctrine.

Parallel to the theme of repression of dissent is a second theme, the aggressive and soulless power of wealth. This, as we have already seen, is carried chiefly by the Newsreels and the short biographies. In the narrative proper there are sinister background figures, like a man named Rasmussen, who is present at the Paris peace conference to guard the interests of Standard Oil. The war itself is repeatedly presented as an effort to safeguard the Morgan loans to the Allies. Since of the major figures only J. Ward Moorehouse represents big business □and that in a parasitic way□this part of the novel's statement is weak, suggestive rather than convincingly documentary.

There is a unified progression of ideas as we move through the three parts of *U.S.A.* The first presents a fairly kindly, innocent America, where the ordinary man's aspirations are usually blocked but where he can dream of controlling his own destiny and throwing off the shackles which he feels but does not analyze. The war brings an end to innocence. It is in part a diversionary action to stifle dissent at home. President Wilson becomes the villain of the piece: *1919* is an ironic contrast between the idealistic promises he made to make the world safe for democracy and the actualities of power politics as they are revealed at the peace conference. The third novel shows the fruits of this deception, of the moral and social debacle that the war is seen to have brought. The opportunities for the average man narrow. As he resists, coercion is more and more overt. The hysteria of war years becomes an habitual state of mind directed at exaggerated or imaginary dangers. The Sacco-Vanzetti case is used as the prime example, but the final scenes showing the destitution of the miners and their harsh repression by the police and courts are actually more effective. As Archibald MacLeish wrote, "America was promises." *U.S.A.* is a chronicle of promises betrayed or forgotten, of a diminution of human dignity and liberty, of a basic disregard for human worth.

The overall statement is a pessimistic one. The "American Century" proudly announced in the opening Newsreel turns out to be a fatal misadventure. The swelling imperial theme of the opening leads to military adventures in Mexico and on a grand scale in Europe, where a tremendous expenditure of blood and treasure made the world safe□for international oil. The whole of American might was turned against the aspirations of the common man as expressed in the Mexican and Russian revolutions and the abortive attempts at revolution in war-torn Europe. The novel does not examine the implications of those revolutions; it takes them on trust as consonant with the

traditional American belief in freedom. Thus abroad as well as at home, the American dream has become a nightmare.

U.S.A. is not a depression novel. It lacks the shrill immediacy and ideological confusion of such works as Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* or Robert Cantwell's *The Land of Plenty*. But it was written during the depression, and the mounting anguish of the last volume certainly derives from the author's awareness of the havoc that a third of a century of misdirection has wrought. The reader, moreover, can supply his own scenario of economic and social decay, breadlines, foreclosures, evictions, and riots as they flow from the breakdown of the system. It was inevitable that Dos Passos should become the darling of the left during those years. None of the adherents of the socialist or communist parties could write with anything like his power. None of them grasped the fatal perspective of history, even though they were provided with a ready-made perspective by Marx. Because Dos Passos shared their passion, they allowed themselves to believe that he shared their formula for the eradication of the evils that aroused their passion. They needed his eloquence to communicate their cause. As it turned out, he was forced by his integrity to a decision that he did not need them. Theirs was, in his opinion, a tunnel vision; his compassion had a much wider temporal and spatial sweep.

This disavowal of left-wing orthodoxy is already evident in *The Big Money*. Mary French, the embodiment of radical aspiration, explicitly states that she is not a member of the Communist Party. There is enough evidence of a narrowing concern for humanity on the part of the Russian regime supplied by the Newsreels to enable us to evaluate Don Stevens' opportunism for what it is and to see Ben Compton's expulsion from the Party as a portent of its oppressive practices. Both sides are hardening. The future of genuine freedom is dark because it is threatened from left and right. The novel is in fact even more pessimistic than its critical acclaimers were willing to perceive.

Source: George J. Becker, "Visions . . .," in *John Dos Passos*, Frederick Ungar, 1974, pp. 58-79.

Topics for Further Study

The trilogy ends on the eve of the Great Depression. Find a person who lived through the Great Depression and ask what life was like during that time. Ask about food, jobs, shelter, the general mood of the population, and how people coped with the poverty of that time. Write a short description of the person you interviewed and describe his or her life during the Great Depression.

The power of advertising is a recurrent theme in the trilogy, and this industry has only grown since the time of the book's publication. Count the number of advertisements you see or hear in one day. Don't forget to include billboards, posters on trucks and in shop windows, television and radio advertisements, newspaper and magazine advertisements, and ads on the Internet. Look for ads in sneaky places, such as company logos on T-shirts and other clothing. Are you surprised by what you find? Do you think the spread of advertising in our culture is good or bad? Explain why or why not.

Research a workers' rights group, such as the Wobblies. Write a speech from the point of view of a Wobbly and another one from the point of view of a factory owner who is against the labor movement.

Research the Treaty of Versailles, which redefined the borders of several European countries and created some new nations□some of which no longer exist. Explain how the provisions of this treaty contributed to the tensions that led to World War II.

Compare and Contrast

1938: German dictator Adolf Hitler begins his expansion throughout Europe with his occupation of Austria. In November, 191 synagogues are set on fire, 7,500 Jewish businesses are looted, and thirty thousand Jews are rounded up and sent to concentration camps. Eventually, over 6 million Jews will be killed before World War II and Germany's domination of Europe are brought to an end.

Today: With attacks on the World Trade Center Towers in New York and on the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and with increasing fears about conventional, biological, and nuclear terrorism, the United States may be poised on the brink of yet another war.

1938: Advertisers begin to tap the vast power of radio. More than one-third of the billings at top advertising agencies are for radio ads; other ads are posted in newspapers, magazines, and billboards. Advertisers are beginning to realize that understanding the psychology of consumers is key in successful advertising.

Today: Advertising pervades every aspect of American culture. Advertisers use the Internet, television, and other media to get their message across, and they collect detailed information on consumers to help target their ads more effectively. Some of this information-gathering borders on invasion of privacy; for example, some pharmacies have sold information on what medicines their customers are taking to drug companies, who then mail targeted ads to these individuals.

1938: The Great Depression, which began with the crash of the stock market on October 29, 1929, continues, and only ends when the United States joins the fight in World War II.

Today: After the financial growth of the 1990s, the United States again borders on recession in 2001, which is later worsened by the September 11 terrorist attacks and subsequent drops in the value of stocks in transportation, travel, hospitality, and insurance industries, as well as widespread job layoffs in those industries.

What Do I Read Next?

One Man's Initiation (1917), Dos Passos's first novel, tells about his experiences on the Western Front during World War I.

Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), set in New York City, shows his experimentation with some of the same fictional techniques he later used in *U.S.A.*

Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers* (1921) was considered the best war novel written up to that time.

Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), a depiction of the horrors and abuses in the turn-of-thecentury American meat packing industry, was so influential that it led to the establishment of the Food and Drug Administration, as well as Pure Food Laws.

John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra* (1934) portrays the effects of the coming depression and the increased diversity of America on characters from various parts of society.

Babbitt by Sinclair Lewis (1922) tells the story of a vulgar real-estate man, the total conformist, in this commentary on American commercial culture.

Further Study

Casey, Janet Galligani, "Historicizing the Female in *U.S.A.*: Re-Visions of Dos Passos's Trilogy," in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Fall 1995, p. 249.

This article considers Dos Passos's depiction of the relations between men and women, as well as the effects of capitalism on women.

Dow, William, "John Dos Passos, Blaise Cendrars, and the 'Other' Modernism," in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Fall 1996, p. 396.

This article explores the influence of other authors on Dos Passos, particularly that of the French author Blaise Cendrars.

Ludington, Townsend, "Dos Passos, John," *Reference Guide to American Literature*, 3d ed., edited by Jim Kamp, St. James Press, 1994.

This article provides a short discussion of Dos Passos's life and work.

Magny, Claude-Edmonde, "Time in Dos Passos," in *The Age of the American Novel: The Film Aesthetic of Fiction between the Two Wars*, translated by Eleanor Hochman, Ungar, 1972, reprinted in *John Dos Passos: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Andrew Hook, Prentice-Hall, 1974, pp 128-44.

This article examines Dos Passos's portrayal of time in *The Big Money*, the third book of the *U.S.A.* trilogy.

Tate, J. O., "John Dos Passos: One Man, One Life," in *National Review*, December 31, 1985, p. 68.

This article describes Dos Passos's personality, life, and career.

Trombold, John, "From the Future to the Past: The Disillusion of John Dos Passos," in *Studies in American Fiction*, Autumn 1998, p. 237.

This article explores changes in Dos Passos's political views over the course of his life and career.

Wrenn, John H., *John Dos Passos*, Twayne, 1961.

This book provides a detailed biography of Dos Passos as well as a critical analysis of his works.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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