The American Society

*U.S.A.* has been variously interpreted as exemplifying the Marxist and Anarchist philosophies, as well as the teachings of Veblen and Gibbon or combinations of these. The influence of Whitman is also sometimes suggested. Actually, this chapter partakes of all of the “isms” (Brantley, *Natural* 55) and philosophies suggested above because the author himself probably had not consciously subscribed to one viewpoint to the exclusion of all others. In one sense, the novel is the gathering of materials on which to base an opinion. In another sense, Dos Passos is here tracing the development in the twentieth century of the peculiar set of economic and social institutions or “machines” which arose in this country between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the century: it is the harvest of what was planted in the Gilded Age that he is here recording. In following the development of these institutions, Dos Passos is particularly interested in the relation of man as an individual to the “machines” which are created by the political, economic and social forces of his time.

Eleanor Stoddard’s cold-blooded shrewdness and passionate appetite for refinement or J. Ward Moorehouse’s unconscious charlatanry is presented entirely in terms of things. And when these commonplace individuals, who have first been presented to the reader independently of one another, are finally brought together, they take on a further significance. One can realize that what has been witnessed is the making of our contemporary society. Dos Passos can indicate in masterly fashion the shift from one city to another, so that one can understand, without having been
overtly told, the difference between the way people behave and feel in “Chicago and
the way they behave and feel in New York, Washington, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh
and Mexico City” (Wilson “Dos Passos and Wilder” 445).

Dos Passos’s expression of his life-long fascination with the alienated, outsider, beaten and dissenter: the lost and forgotten in American history. Mac, the American Wobbly and drifter at the beginning of trilogy, is as much an expression of what has been sacrificed to American progress as Mary French, the middle class communist, is at the end of the novel. These solitaries, along with the young man endlessly walking America, frame this enormous chronicle of disillusionment with the American promise much as the saints in a medieval painting frame the agony on the cross. The loner in America interested Dos Passos long before he became interested in the American as protester.

The novel U.S.A. goes deeper than this and illustrates the kind of systemic evils of American Society that Dos Passos wrote about in his nonfiction: poverty, unemployment, political, repression, imperialism and the degrading mechanization of work. One can see the destructive effects of “dawg eat dawg” (Rosen 191) values and the psychological damage done to both the rich and the poor by great disparities of wealth. Between 1927 and 1936, Dos Passos experienced an intensification of his radicalism with the one set of the depression, and later, a growing pessimism and disillusionment with the Communist party that led him to search America’s past for a viable radical tradition.

Dos Passos’s description thus more than simply a country or a way of life. It is a condition of death, a wasteland of futility and emptiness. In it, the best and the worst must be defeated; for defeat can be only answer for the inhabitants of a
in which all goals are unattainable and the most powerful gods are corrupt. Yet, although the thing he describes is death, he brings to his description a savage kind of power which saves it from becoming dead too. Through it all, he has consistently hated and condemned and he has expressed his hatred with great strength and purpose. This has given meaning to the meaninglessness of his characters, value to their valuelessness. His style has been the perfect instrument of that meaning, protesting at every step in its development against the horror of the thing it was disclosing.

Dos Passos’s commitment to the kind of outer reality is represented by social history, despite his sympathy with the radical political tradition has persisted throughout American history, he writes neither social history nor political propaganda. Behind his image of American society in the 1920s is an image of human experience as a whole; behind his political dislike of the Big Money is a despair of the human situation itself that justifies Malcolm Cowley’s description of The Big Money as “a furious and somber poem” (Mizener 191). If his wonderfully particularized, brilliantly organized portrait of America in the boom years of the twenties shows us what the Big Money has done to simple, hopeful Americans, it also suggests what organized society does to all such men in all times.

Dos Passos portrays the disillusionment and dehumanization resulting from the war. He also attempts to capture the regional differences among American soldiers from California, Indiana and Virginia. He is creating the characters from different part of the country and recording their distinctivemanners and styles.

In 1920 Dos Passos finished his second novel, Three Soldiers, which received fourteen rejections before Doran accepted it. Arguments over its frank language
again ensued, but despite sore outraged critics the novel was a success in America when it was published in September 1921. It was the first significant war novel to emerge from the generation of writers who served in World War I. The bitterness, rage and disillusionment he felt during the war are reflected in the novel. Although the central character is clearly the artist figure. John Andrews, the *Three Soldiers*, from different social backgrounds, combine into one composite soldier, representative of the American enlisted man in World War I.

John Dos Passos ranks among the important American writers of this century. Critically, however he is appreciated more in France than he is in America. He is not, perhaps, as Sartre declared in 1938, “the greatest writers of our time,” (Sartre, “American Novelists in French Eyes” 13) but as political novelist and chronicler of American civilization from 1900 to the Great Depression Dos Passos has an established place in American literary history. His reputation as a technical innovator has not diminished and his art is inextricably interwoven with his view of American history.

The *Three Soldiers* brought his capacity for registering experience into play on a broader and more comprehensive scale. It was timely, and its success was immediate. There had never been a war novel like it. To a large extent it set the pattern of realistic war novels for the next thirty years, until relief from the grimness of war was sought by demonstration of its absurdity, the focus from men at war to war itself.

Three elements in this early novel point forward to the matured works. But significant is the use of the contemporary songs, documentary in that they are what the soldier sang, but also broadly evocative of time, place and feeling. More
important is the novelist’s control of dialogue. Each soldier speaks his particular kind of language, cleaned up a bit but very accurate. Most important of all is the fact that the major characters tend to be types rather than individuals. They embody characteristic states, or attitudes, rather than significant particular responses. At this point in his writing Dos Passos was not yet committed to the precise kind of characterization he wished to employ. He started with stereotypes but allowed John Andrews to become an individual. Yet overall we can discern a disposition not to render characters fully but to give them the outlines and functions of figures in a painted decoration.

**Dos Passos’s Own Views**

The artist embraced his alienation from society, defined himself as artist precisely by that alienation, and proclaimed the absolute autonomy of art and artistic values. The artist provided society with images of its own repressiveness and destructiveness, and, by so doing, implicitly or explicitly pointed the way to social reformation. The artist who pursued the first course, one which in the end led to the doctrine of art for art’s sake, unhesitatingly followed his private vision to the total disregard of any kind of collective or public reality. He was committed, in other words, to the cultivation of the self, the individual sensibility. The artist who followed the second course, the prototype of the committed writer of the thirties, also pursued a private vision; only to realize it he became deeply and centrally engaged, not with individual experience in itself, but with the collective experience of the public world. Neither course resolved the problem of linking private and public
worlds, the inner world of the individual sensibility and the outer world of collective social experience.

Dos Passos is one of the few writers in whose case an equation can accurately and easily be drawn between social beliefs and artistic accomplishments. When he writes individualistically, with backward glances toward imagism, vorticism and the insurrection of the word, his prose is sentimental and without real distinction. When he writes as a social rebel, he writes not flawlessly by any means, but with conviction, power and a sense of depth, of striking through surfaces to the real forces beneath them. His political ideas have given shape to his emotions, and only the Camera Eye remains as a vestige of his earlier attitude, is not only the best of all his novels; it is a landmark in American fiction.

In the art novel, the emphasis is on the individual, in the collective novel it is on society as a whole, but in both one can get the impression that society is stupid and all powerful and fundamentally evil. Individuals ought to oppose it, but if they do so they are doomed. If, on the other hand, they reconcile themselves with society and try to get ahead in it, then they are damned forever, damned to be empty, shrill, destructive insects like Dick Savage and Eleanor Stoddard and J. Ward Moorehouse.

There were some critics who saw weaknesses in Dos Passos’s art moresignificant and potentially more damaging than any weaknesses in his political thinking. Bernard De Voto believed Dos Passos’s vision of human experience was too constricted, too narrowly pessimistic, crabbed and humourless. The characters lacked depth enough “to engage one’s sympathies,” (Carr, _Demise_ 365) and the rigorous behaviorism made them act “like mental illnesses.” The incident proved to be a crucial one, for it marked the final break between Dos Passos and the radical
left. He usually translated his political experience into fiction, and this time was no exception. He was by and large correct about the situation in Spain, but so were the critics about this latest novel. He seemed less interested in art than in defending his politics.

Many of the most important critical issues regarding Dos Passos’s work, the political ideology behind the novels, their completeness and accuracy as social history the depth of character development were raised and debated in the contemporary response. But despite many excellent monographs, book chapters, and journal articles which have since taken up these issues, some remain unresolved. The most crucial unresolved questions concerning Dos Passos’s works are by and large questions of genre. He wrote in many genres, but the distinction between, for example, the novels and the histories, he is a difficult one to draw, because the former’s offer the better histories of the periods they cover. The meaning one can derive from the novels depends a great deal upon how we choose to read them, as realistic fiction, for example, or as satire, or as social history.

The U.S.A. lavishly reproduces the immediately felt experiences of its twelve characters, in diction and rhythms and ways of thought appropriate to them. Dos Passos learnt this mode from Joyce, but he uses it here with great authority and flexibility, especially when he enters the minds of women and children. The characters who dominate the trilogy toward the end are types already familiar from Manhattan Transfer, nervously ill wives and mothers, unmarried career women and dabblers in the arts, men of power corrupted by success, unsuccessful men who become mere drifters. Everybody is on the move, socially and geographically.
Even more than *Manhattan Transfer, U.S.A.* dramatizes American mobility. Sex as a driving force, a nervous release, adds to the general restlessness. But profound and sustained love, like profound religious or creative excitement, is totally absent.

The other view, emphasizing the machine and the elaborate technology which made it possible, he said that America represented a stage in historical evolution, “progress” (Ward 53) and that America’s fulfillment lay in the development of a powerful and complex society. The meaning of America lay in the past, for the other in the future. The American ideal was an escape from institutions, from the forms of society and from the limitations society imposes upon the self. The American ideal was the elaboration of the complex social institutions which make modern society possible, an acceptance of the discipline of the machine and the enjoyment of its advantages, the achievement of the individual, not alone, but as a functioning part of society.

**Dos Passos and the New Liberalism**

Dos Passos’s relationship to the new liberalism lies more in what he has rejected than in what he has embraced. Communism, native fascism, and centralized bureaucracy are all unacceptable to him, for he sought in the American past, during the forties, a definition of individualism that would be viable in the present. That crisis arose as the result of the breakdown, in the long view, of nineteenth century democracy and freedom. In the more recent past it is the product of totalitarianism, with its corrupting power, its plan-less regulation, and its abrogation of democratic culture (Eslinger 118).
It is the result, in this country, of a failure in democratic planning, he represented by the New Deal (118), which threatened the survival of human responsibility and individualism. In the spirit of the new liberalism Dos Passos turned from the left, away from the centralized, social service state and the planned society. In the spirit of a new Americanism he turned toward a Jeffersonian conception of individualism, seeking in the past his solutions to that crisis. His nostalgic and sometimes sentimental effort to revivify the American heritage in the twentieth century, drawing upon the Jeffersonian conception of power and equality, the mystical transcendental faith in the people, separates him from the New Liberalism. His sense of quest for individual and political fulfillment identifies him with it.

The Camera Eye is a series of impressionistic views of Dos Passos’s life describing events which have helped determine his opinions, presenting experiences upon which he has drawn in writing *U.S.A.* and earlier works, and containing significant clues to his personality. Here Dos Passos appears to present accurate, though not all embracing or coherent autobiography. Sometimes he gives details without regard for time sequence or seems to omit details and explanations to safeguard individual’s privacy (Landsberg 190). Selectivity is nowhere more apparent than in the fact that he mentions Spain only fleetingly. Perhaps he believed that talk of his love for Spain might needlessly complicate for the reader and his concern with the United States.
In *The 42nd Parallel* the “Camera Eye” sections, a little like Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, focus on the growing consciousness of the writer, and in them, DosPassos records an increasing awareness of the social and economic problems besetting the nation. They range from a description of an encounter with a young bum to the disgusted rejection of the cold culture of Harvard. In “The Camera Eye” sections present a steady progression of impressions from war, to the Armistice, to the consciousness of such radical philosophies as anarchism and communism.

In *The Big Money* the Camera Eye sections show a gradually increasing interest in the conflict between forty nine and fifty, both of which deal with Sacco and Vanzetti. The first pertains to the years preceding the executions when Dos Passos worked on the defense committee, and the second follows immediately after a Newsreel containing the headline, “Sacco and Vanzetti Must Die.” These two Camera Eye sections are of central importance to the theme of *The BigMoney* because Sacco and Vanzetti are human personifications of the failure which Dos Passos illustrates through the lives of his fictional characters. They are the ultimate victims. In *Facing the Chair*, Dos Passos had written, “If they die what little faith many millions of men have in the chance of justice in this country will die with them.” In the last Camera Eye dealing with Sacco and Vanzetti, he writes “all right we are two nations,” and then concludes, “We stand defeated America” (BM 462).

Dos Passos has the current reluctance of writers of fiction to mix in his story with sentimental commentary and moral. But he cannot altogether evade the challenge of these natural questions. He has chosen to insert in the narrative a series of flashes called the Camera Eye, which by fleeting hint and impression suggest the
character of the artist whose work it is, his own involvement in the social structure, the conditions that moulded him, and his aims and motives in his work.

The focus of the novel falls upon the histories of noted personalities and traits of characters except the Camera Eye and the Newsreel sections. Camera Eye sections are none other than the life history of Dos Passos’s life till his thirties. Newsreel sections have jumbles of newspaper items and headlines quotations from popular songs and other brief of the period all set down upon the page in the same kind of confusion in which they existed in contemporary minds.

Biographies are, twenty five sketches of persons prominent in the American life of the time ranging all the way from Wilson to Valentino. These are influenced by the pattern of the struggle, labour leaders, politicians, artists, journalists, scientists and business leaders. The fictional characters represent average men and women moulded by the complex forces about them.

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’s 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.

Most important, it brings down the curtain on Dos Passos’s remarkable effort throughout his literary career to convey the panorama of twentieth-century society. His later novels are partly right wing polemics, but anyone wanting to dismiss Dos
Passos should remember that he was not a crank, but an intelligent, thoughtful man of letters who agonized about his politics.

Like many twentieth-century fictional masterpieces, *Ulysses*, for example, *U.S.A.* seeks to portray a culture in both historical depth and social breadth by means of modernistic techniques. There is thus a modern epic convention, to which *U.S.A.* belongs, in which the traditional aim of the epic to make manifest, the history and values of a culture is achieved, not by conformity to a prescribed set of epic rules, by the author’s individual adaptation of the complex fictional devices that have arisen in the twentieth-century for the depiction of the interaction of self and society.

*U.S.A.* is a kind of cubistic portrait of America, one in which the effect isof a multiplicity of visions rendering a single object, with every angle of vision related both to the object and to every other angle of vision. It is Dos Passos’s relentless pursuit of juxtapositional relationships in the seemingly disparate and fractured modal ordering of the trilogy that is largely responsible for the integral vision of American life in *U.S.A.*

In addition to these four major involvements there were two particular predilections of John Dos Passos that helped to direct his thought and to determine the way he would synthesize his experience. He was from an early age a nonstop traveler and avoided reporting what he saw. Also controlling his observation of social structures and events was a political-philosophical bias that may most simply be identified as Jeffersonian.

The general search for order and definition was at the centre of Dos Passos’s quest for his father. Given his rootless background, with scarcely an identifiable human connection except his mother, his search for pattern and form took, perforce,
a social direction. His primary need was to forge his own link in the human chain. He was not alone, of course, either in his feeling of a pressing need for order, or in its social emphasis.

Although Dos Passos’s nature and the conditions of his personal life alone could have been responsible for his artistic temperament; he was certainly subject to the external forces which affected so many of his generation. Those influences emphasized in two ways the relation between his social needs and his need for form. The want of harmony in the lives of others became a part of his life, and a satisfactory order for him became dependent on a larger social order. Also, the external forces of his time created a community of men similarly engaged in the pursuit of form, so that an artistic career became in a limited way a step away from loneliness.

Society, however, if differentiated from humanity, became a particular entity with certain distinguishing patterns and forms. These might become obscured, or they might break down almost entirely, but they would have to be reorganized into similar or new patterns if the society were to survive as such. Born on the edge of American society, though geographically almost in its centre, Chicago Dos Passos had at first no chance even to become aware of the social entity.

Some critics have attempted to interpret Dos Passos’s literary and political expression primarily as the product of this early, painful relationship to an idolized but frightening and often absent father (Rosen 4). He at least felt very much an outsider when young, and more than a little doubt about the world of financiers and politicians that his father moved in.
**His Society and the Individual**

A chapter in the moral history of modern American writing coming to an end with Hemingway and the lost generation, and nowhere can this be more clearly seen than in the work of Dos Passos, who rounds out the story of that generation and carries its values into the social novel of the thirties. For what is so significant about Dos Passos is that though he is a direct link between the postwar decade and the crisis novel of the Depression period, the defeatism of the lost generation has been slowly and subtly transferred by him from persons to society itself.

It is society that becomes the hero of his work, society that suffers the anguish and impending sense of damnation that the lost-generation individualists had suffered alone before. For him the lost generation becomes all the lost generations from the beginning of modern time in America, all who have known them to be lost in the fires of war or struggling up the icy slopes of modern capitalism. The tragic “I” has become the tragic inclusive “we” of modern society (Kazin, *Native* 341).

The conviction of tragedy that rises out of his work is the steady protest of a sensitive democratic conscience against the rule and the ugliness of society, against the failure of a complete human development under industrial capitalism. It is the protest of a man who can participate formally in the struggles of society as Hemingway and Fitzgerald never do. To understand Dos Passos’s social interests is to appreciate how much he differs from the others of his generation, and yet how far removed he is from the socialist crusader certain Marxist critics once saw in him. For what is central in Dos Passos is not merely the fascination with the total operations of society, but his unyielding opposition to all its degradations.
It is in this concern with the primacy of the individual, with his need to save the individual from society rather than to establish him in or over it, that one can trace the conflict that runs all through Dos Passos’s work, between his aestheticism and strong social interests. His profound absorption is the total operations of modern society and his over-scrupulous withdrawal from all of them. He hammered out the iron, satirical prose and the youthful lyricism in

*U.S.A.*

Dos Passos is the greatest strength as “his range of close acquaintance with American types, groups and classes” which was “probably wider than any other well-known American novelist.” He noted, however, as others had previously, that some of the characters never emerged as individuals instead they embodied a “set of sympathies.” He also believed Dos Passos’s portrait of America was too pessimistic (Maine, *Critical* 73).

**America can Break your Heart: *U.S.A***

In social and historical terms, America is two nations: although Dos Passos does not make this fact explicit until much later in *U.S.A.*, it supplies much of the energy that distinguishes the work. The political colouration here is central. But it is present in a specific manner, as an artistic treatment of the subject matter, not as blunt instructive. Michael Milgate has remarked that Dos Passos employs socio-political categories to show the distribution of the author’s sympathies. But to call *U.S.A.* “a Marxist epic” (Colley 66) or to read its main intention as directly political is to miss the essence of his work. The author’s sympathies, and his use of a political
rhetoric to serve his literary concerns, do not amount to a principled revolutionary creed.

**His Visions and Revisions**

Dos Passos’s, 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 apparently 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 character appears on the scene. Dos Passos is a poetic speaker who is different from the impersonal narrator and who for practical purposes must be identified with that unique individual 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 States in the twentieth-century.

The youth undergoes crisis when it discovers that the maxims, the official verbal formulas, on which it has been developed 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 middle of apparent disintegration of value. In simplistic terms they chart the making of a radical.
Camera Eye Sections

Dos Passos here mines his own experience with virtually no resort to invention. The twenty-seven 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 are brought together in the opening section, along with the experience of a soldier’s life. These experiences are described as the closing of one book and the beginning of another, “the first day of the first month of the first year” (Becker, *Visions* 67) of a new existence.

The first Camera Eye describes insecurity in a foreign city. The second is doubly thematic, expressing a patronizing attitude toward Black people. The third section echoes this class consciousness: “workingmen and people like that labourers travailleurs greasers.” This theme comes up again in the seventh: in reference to muckers, who “put stones in their snowballs write dirty words upon walls do dirty things up alleys their folks work in the mills,”(67) 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, 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 roughly into a patrol vehicle” (68), and growing awareness of the evil of war, “up north they were dying in the mud and the ditches but business was good in Bordeaux” (68), chart the sensitivity of the speaker.
With this character established, it is possible to limit the range of the Camera Eye sections in the other two novels. Those in 1919 Dos Passos’s experiences of war 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 occasions, 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 triumph 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: he is ashamed of himself for dreaming and not acting, he wonders “what influence might pry the owners loose from power and bring back 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 “king killers and haters of oppression.” Camera Eye fifty, 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” (69).

If the question is asked 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. His development is 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 network of the twentieth-century, and they provide a standard by which to measure the twelve fictional characters that are the major exhibits of the novel.
**U.S.A: A Collective Novel**

*U.S.A.* in the group 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 centre 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, simultaneity is not possible, except in brief passages. The reader must keep the various characters in suspension until he can weigh them as a group.

The Spanish-American war was over. Politicians with moustaches said that the United States was now ready to lead the world. Mac McCreary was a printer for a fly-by-night publisher in Chicago. Later he worked his way to the West Coast. There he got work as a printer in Sacramento and married Maisie Spencer, who could never understand his radical views. They quarrelled, and he went to Mexico to work in the revolutionary movement there.

Janey Williams, growing up in Washington, became a stenographer. She was always ashamed when her sailor brother, Joe, showed up, and even more ashamed of him after she became secretary to J. Ward Moorehouse. Of all Moorehouse’s female acquaintances, she was only one who never became his mistress. J. Ward Moorehouse’s boyish manner and blue eyes were the secret of his success. They attracted Annabelle Strang, the wealthy nymphomania he later divorced. Getrude Staple, his second wife, helped to make him a prominent public relations expert. His
shrewdness made him an ideal man for government service in France during World War I. After the war, he became one of the nation’s leading advertising executives.

Because Eleanor Stoddard hated sordid environment of her childhood. Her delicate, arty tastes led her naturally into partnership with Eveline Hutchins in the decorating business and eventually to New York and acquaintanceship with J. Ward Moorehouse. In Europe with the Red Cross during the war, she lived with Moorehouse. Back in New York in the 1920s. She used her connections in shrewd fashion and became engaged to a member of the Russian nobility. Charley Anderson had been an aviator in the war. A successful invention and astute opportunism made him a wealthy airplane manufacturer. He married a woman who had little sympathy for his interest in mechanics. In Florida, after a plane crash, he met Margo Dowling, an actress. Charley Anderson’s series of drinking binges ended in a grade crossing accident.

Joe Williams was a sailor who had been on the beach in Buenos Aires. In Norfolk, Virginia, he met Della, who urged him to give up seafaring and settle down. Unable to hold a job, he shipped out again and almost lost his life when the ship he was on was sunk by a German submarine. When Joe got his third mate’s license, he and Della were married. He was ill in the East Indies, arrested in New York for not carrying a draft card, and torpedoed once more of Spain Della was unfaithful to him. Treated coldly a few times he looked up his sister Janey, he shipped out for Europe once more. One night in Saint Nazaire he attacked a large Senegalese man who was dancing with a woman he knew. Joe’s skull was crushed when he was hit over the head with a bottle.
Teachers encouraged Dick Savage in his literary talents. During his teens, he worked at a summer hotel and there slept with a minister’s wife who shared his taste in poetry. A government official paid his way through Harvard University where Dick cultivated his aestheticism and mild snobbery before he joined the Norton-Harjes ambulance service and went to Europe. There some of his letters about the war came to the attention of censorship officials, and he was shipped back to the United States. His former sponsor got him an officer’s commission, and he returned to France. In Italy, he met a relief worker named Anne Elizabeth Trent, who was his mistress for a time. When he returned to the United States, he became an idea man for Moorehouse’s advertising agency.

Eveline Hutchins who had some artistic talent became Eleanor Stoddard’s partner in a decorating establishment in New York. All of her life she tried to escape boredom through sensation. Beginning with the Mexican artist who was her first lover. She had a succession of affairs. In France, where she was Eleanor’s assistant in the Red Cross. She married a shy young soldier named Paul Johnson. Later she had a brief affair with Charley Anderson. Dissatisfied, she decided at last that life was too dull to endure and died from an overdose of sleeping pills.

Anne Elizabeth Trent, known as Daughter, was the child of moderately wealthy Texans. In New York, she met Webb Cruthers, a young anarchist. One day, seeing a police officer who kicks a female picketer in the face. Daughter attacked him with her fists. Her night in jail disturbed her father so much that she returned to Texas and worked in Red Cross Canteens. Later she went overseas. There she met Dick Savage. Pregnant, she learned that he had no intention of marrying her. In
Paris, she went on a drunken spree with a French aviator and died with him in a plane crash.

Benny Compton was the son of Jewish immigrants. After six months in jail for making radical speeches. He worked his way west through Canada. In Seattle, he and other agitators were beaten by deputies. Benny returned east. One day, police broke up a meeting where he was speaking. On his twenty third birthdays, Benny went to Atlanta to serve a ten year sentence. Released after the war, he lived for a time with Mary French, a fellow traveller in the Communist Party.

Mary French spent her childhood in Trinidad where her father, a physician, did charity work among the native miners. Mary, planning to become a social worker, spent her summers at Jane Addams Hull-House. She went to Washington, as secretary to a union official and later worked as a union organizer in New York City. There she took care of Ben Compton after his release from Atlanta. While working with the Sacco-Vanzetti Committee, she fell in love with Don Stevens, a fellow Communist party member. Summoned to Moscow with a group of party leaders. Stevens returned to New York with a wife assigned to him by the party. Mary went back to her committee work for worker’s relief.

Margo Dowling grew up in a run down house in Rockaway, Long Island, with her drunken father and Agnes, her Father’s mistress. At last, Agnes left her lover and took Margo with her. In New York, Agnes became the common law wife of an actor named Mandeville. One day, while drunk, Mandeville raped the girl. Margo ran off to Cuba with Tony, an effeminate Cuban guitar player, whom she later deserted. She saw a cheque for five thousand dollars on his deathbed. In Hollywood, she met Sam Margolies, a successful producer, who made a star of her.
Jobless and hungry, a young hitchhiker stood by the roadside. Overhead droned a plane in which people with the big money rode the skyways. Below, the hitchhiker with an empty belly thumbed cars speeding by him. The have and the have-nots that was the United States in the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Dos Passos’s statement at the beginning of *U.S.A.* that the country is, more than anything else, the sounds of its many voices, offers several insights into the style and content of the trilogy. The style, for example, reflects the author’s attempts to capture some sense of characteristically American voices, not only in the idiomatic narration of the chronicles but in the Newsreels, Biographies and the Camera Eye as well. While these sections reflect, respectively, the public voice of the media and popular culture, and the personal and private voice of the artist, the most important voices in the trilogy are those of the chronicles in which Dos Passos introduces a cross section of American voices ranging from the blue collar worker to the professional and managerial classes, and representing a variety of regional and ethnic backgrounds. Like Walt Whitman, who profoundly influenced him, Dos Passos takes the entire nation as his subject matter as he tries to capture the meaning of *U.S.A.* through the sounds of the many voices that characterize its people and institutions.

Many people have associated the social, political and economic views expressed in *U.S.A.* with Marxism leftists in the 1930s liked to believe this important author made common cause with them. But it is really the American economist Thorstein Veblen, rather than Karl Marx. He seems to have shaped Dos Passos’s thinking about the economic and political situation in the United States during the first quarter of the twentieth century. In *The Big Money*, Dos Passos offers a
'Biography' of Veblen in which he summarizes this economist’s theories of the domination of society by monopoly capitalism and the sabotage of the workers human rights by business interests dominated by the profit motive.

According to Dos Passos, the alternatives that Veblen saw were either a society strangled and its workers destroyed by the capitalists insatiable greed for profit or a society in which the needs of those who do the work would be the prime consideration. Veblen, writing just at the beginning of the twentieth century, still held out hope that the workers might yet take control of the means of production before monopoly capitalism could plunge the world into a new dark age. Dos Passos goes on to develop the idea that any such hope died with World War I. That the American dream of democracy was dead from that time forward.

Against the background of Veblen’s ideas, *U.S.A.* can be seen as a documentary chronicling the growing exploitation of the American worker by the capitalist system. As well as a lamentation of the lost hope of Veblen’s dream of society, it would make producers the prime beneficiaries of their own labour. The best characterization of the blue collar worker is Mac, a rootless labourer constantly searching. For some outlet for his idealistic hope of restoring power to the worker, certainly one of the most sympathetic characters in *U.S.A.* Mac dramatizes the isolation and frustration of modern workers. They are only human cogs in the industrial machine, unable either to take pride in their work or finally to profit significantly by it.

Other characters as well fit within the pattern of the capitalist system as Veblen described it. Like Mac, revolt against the injustice of the system. There are the exploiters and the exploited, and there are a few, such as Mary French and Ben
Compton. He makes opposition to the system a way of life. Equally prevalent are those characters who dramatize Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption by serving as playthings or promoters for those who control the wealth and power.

Throughout the trilogy, the essential conflict is that between the business interests who control the wealth, and the workers who produce it. Yet Dos Passos is almost equally concerned with the way in which the system of monopoly capitalism exploits and destroys. Even those of the managerial class who seem to profit most immediately from it. Dick Savage for example starts out as a talented young writer only to be corrupted by the system. Charley Anderson, who early could be seen as typifying the American Dream of success through ingenuity and imagination, dies as much a victim of the system as any of its workers. J. Ward Moorehouse, on the other hand, makes nothing and produces nothing. But he is the talent that can parlay nothing into a fortune and the mentality that can survive in the world of *U.S.A.*

The two national historical events to which Dos Passos gives most attention are World War I and the execution of the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti. As Dos Passos saw it, the war, under the pretense of making the world safe for democracy, gave the capitalists the opportunity that they needed to solidify their power by actually crushing the democratic spirit. For Dos Passos, democracy had died in the United States with World War I, and the Sacco and Vanzetti case proved it. The death of these two immigrant Italian radicals on a trumped up charge of murder was, in Dos Passos’s eyes. The ultimate demonstration of the fact that Americans traditional freedoms were lost and that monopoly capitalism had usurped power, when, in his later and more conservative years.
Dos Passos was accused of having deserted the liberal positions of his youth. He maintained that his views had not shifted from those he argued in *U.S.A.* The evidence of the novel would seem to bear him out. The *U.S.A.* trilogy is a more nostalgic than revolution of any work. It looks back to that point in American history before the options were lost rather than forward to a socialist revolution. His finest work shows Dos Passos as a democratic idealist rather than as a socialist revolutionary.

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

This chapter has brought out the pessimistic approaches of Americans as portrayal by Dos Passos. The subsequent chapter analyses The Satirical Portrait of American Society.