INTRODUCTION

The American Social Novelists and American Society

In English social novels, almost without exception, society is presented in terms of human relationships, not patterned by an abstract concept. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at least, there have been a few examples of the “moral fable” in English fiction, and English novelists, broadly speaking, have approached society in the three principal ways. Some of them have undertaken a close and comprehensive examination of society, acting on the unspoken assumption that society is interesting for its own sake, as the way man lives: Dickens and Thackeray did this in Our Mutual Friend and Vanity Fair. Other English novelists have presented society mainly as a background or setting for the action of their novels. Often a careful and lengthy description of the social scene in the opening pages serves to establish it for the whole book, in subsequent chapters “society” is something that can be assumed, taken as read. George Eliot uses this method in The Mill on the Floss, and D.H. Lawrence in The Rainbow (Millgate 195). Finally, there are those novelists whose sense of society and its sanctions is so integral a part of their whole conception that it is almost impossible in their work to separate out any presentation of society.

The American Novel and its Tradition

The titles of the English social novels are likely to be more factual, less metaphorical and romantic; Hard Times, and The Man of Property. With good reason, then, Richard Chase spoke of “great practical sanity” (195) as a characteristic
feature of the English novel. The gradualness of change in England, the relative permanence of the basic social structure, the background of a long and comparatively settled history, have all made it possible the English novelists to take society more or less for granted: this is to say, he has been able to assume that he and his readers share a large area of common knowledge about the structure of society, the nature of social relationships and so on. For the American novelist, this has not been possible to anything like the same extent, and to this fact can be traced a great many of the differences between the English social novel and the American.

It is not difficult to see some of the reasons why American novelists have lacked assurance in their treatment of society: the insecurity of the society itself, the extreme self-consciousness of the whole American experience, the part played by the novel in developing America’s awareness of herself as a nation. American writers have repeatedly been worried, confused or angered, rarely amused, by the irreconcilability of American ideals and American experience, and one result of this sense of the gulf between the ways things are, has been a readiness to regard the novel as a political instrument. In seeking to achieve radical alterations in society, they have not directly sought mass support; in fact, much of their attention has been directed problem of restraining popular unrest and of guiding it into the most profitable channels.

In addition to these narrowly political writers there have been many novelists of social protest. Early in the century there were the “muckrakers” (Frank 262) such as Winston Churchill, Allen White, and Robert Herrick. Later came Anderson, Dos Passos, Steinbeck, the “proletarians,” and Norman Mailer. For all the differences between them, such novelists of social protest have at least one thing in common:
they approach society not in a responsive or sensitive way but with their minds already made up; they come armed not only with their talents but with a theory. It is of the essence of the novelist’s job that he should impose a pattern upon his material, but these novelists impose a pattern not of art, in the broadest sense, of politics.

It is often a very simple pattern. In Churchill and Poole, in Howells, Anderson, and Dos Passos, more recently in such novels as Norman Mailer’s *Barbary Shore* (1951) and David Karp’s *All Honorable Man* (1956), one can recognize again and again the clear outlines of pastoral, morality, parable, or polemic, for the American social novel has frequently taken the form of the “moral fable.” The limitations of the moral fable are equally apparent, however, in such important novels as *U.S.A.* and *The Naked and the Dead*. Dos Passos and Mailer are not so much responding to the social fact as trying to fit the social fact to their particular social “idea” (Arnold 18). Dos Passos especially shows a marvelous knowledge of American life in breadth and in detail, but one can see that his overall portrait of America suffers severely from political stylization and that, as in *The Naked and the Dead* the stylization is actually underlined by the introduction of intrusive structural devices.

Such novels are particularly obvious examples of an extreme self-consciousness about society which has led American writers, again and again to undertake some sort of large cultural statement about American society as a whole. American social novelists have commonly failed not because of their confidential in the face of society but because of their temerity. Refusing to work within the social area they know, they attempt to encompass American society as a whole (19).
Most American social novelists have lacked a sense of proportion in their treatment of society, and, one may relate this to the extraordinary importance in the history of the American novel of “realism” and in the non-philosophical, literary sense of the term, of “naturalism” (Trilling 33). In America the novelist’s use of “realistic” techniques has often represented a self-conscious attitude towards society rather than a genuine understanding; their preoccupation with a realistic presentation of the social surface, in which everything tends to become equal importance, may often disguise an essential ignorance of deeper social realities. Such is undoubtedly the case with many “muckraking” novels, with most of the “proletarian” novels of the 1930s and with a large proportion of contemporary “tough” or expose novels about such subjects as politics, business, the entertainment industries, and advertising.

The proper function of social description in a novel must be to define and illuminate the human predicament. This is something which English novelists seem almost automatically to have accepted. As a result many American novelists have not accepted it, and they have often misused their powers.

In the preface one can refer to Lionel Trilling’s observations, from “Manners Morals and the Novel” (34), on the poverty of American social fiction. I could now suggest that the social novel may be more common in America, and commonly more distinguished, than Trilling allows, and that whatever the limitations of the American social novelists, they have been greatly successful in evoking, recreating, and investigating many different areas of American society. Scott Fitzgerald’s extraordinary achievement was that he created a novel of manners out of the material offered by a society in a state of extreme flux. In the American novel of manners, the
values of society are almost invariably rejected and the defaulter becomes the hero.

Arthur Miller writes:

The fact remains, however, that nowhere in the world where industrialized economy rules—where specialization in work, politics, and social life is the norm—nowhere has man discovered a means of connecting himself to society except in the form of a truce with it. (6)

Although Arthur Miller is speaking of all industrialized societies, not only of America, this sense of radically disturbed modern society seems peculiarly strong in American writers. Almost all American novelists have presented the relationship between the individual and society as a struggle between irreconcilables, and it has often been noted that American literature is rich in images of Isolation and escape.

One cannot be surprised, then to find the novel of manners poorly represented and the sanctions of society rejected. Richard Chase’s observation that “the American social scene has not been so interesting, various and colourful as the European” (Chase 395) may be true of the vertical cross-section through society, which principally interests the novelist of manners, but it hardly applies to the horizontal sweep across the land as a whole, which might be expected to appeal to the picaresque novelist. Although Whitman was the first writer to point out one’s richness of these horizontal contrasts of American life, Mark Twain was really the first novelist to exploit them.

A few American writers, who have seen man and society in properproportion, and who have had the power to realize their vision in terms of the novel, seem to have chosen two principal methods of coping with the peculiar difficulties presented by the vastness, newness, shapelessness and instability of
American society and by their own inescapable self-consciousness about it. Dos Passos in *U.S.A.* might be said to have attempted a development of this second method by putting down a series of sample borings all over the surface of America.

One can expect much from social novelist, at the same time, not so he should reflect our view of society, but that he should make us see society his way. In admiring the novels of George Eliot, one needs to remember that what seems to us the accuracy of her social observation is in some degree an indication of her greatness as a novelist, of her power to make us accept the image of society she presents (Chamberlain 134). American social novelists have been especially concerned with the development of bureaucracy and institutionalism and with the implications of this development for the individual and for society as a whole. It is a development which has profoundly affected the world of business, as it has every area of the national life. Walter Prescott Webb has observed:

The rugged individualists of the late nineteenth century . . . were in perfect harmony with the society in which they operated because every individual in that society was acting as they were, and hoping to follow their examples. The rugged individualist has now disappeared within the business corporation. (133)

For earlier social novelists, the business theme was not simply available but almost inescapable. American writers, with their extreme self-consciousness about their society, have been haunted by the archetypal figure of the “American-as businessman” (Elias 164). In the American novel, business characters are barely ever comic or humorous. English novelists, taking society and its values more or less for granted, have tended to see the big business man, with his illustrious, his
offences against moderation and the social order, as an object of satire. American novelists, lacking a developed sense of the social order, have lacked assurance and a sense of proportion in dealing with the businessman.

In the work of Howells, Sherwood Anderson and Dos Passos, for instance, one can discern a firm underlying commitment to traditional American values best described as but for all agrarian, their moral indignation, their social criticism is blunted by the limitations inherent in the agrarian position and by its lack of relevance to the problems of an urban industrial civilization (Mizener 171).

The American Social Fiction

The American social novelists Theodore Dreiser and Richard Wright differed increasingly in the decades of the twentieth century. They depicted a different society with new social and political attitudes. They had a tendency to present either a small businessman as hero or a villain with all kinds of social and economic pressures or a minor employee of a large organization nominally a free individual, subtly shaped and conditioned by the circumstances of his job (Belkind 13). In this regard, the fullest exploration and documentation of the transition appeared in the novels of Dos Passos.

In the novels of Dos Passos, the fate of individuals becomes ensnared in the complex transformations of American society and politics. Indeed, the fierce of change and its oppressive influence on people bring Dos Passos to the brink of determinism: His characters seem incapable of bucking these coercive trends. The most successful characters adapt to change, allowing their principles and
temperaments to be guided by the fluctuations of fashion. The present study focuses on social and political consciousness in the novels of Dos Passos.

In 1925, Harper published *Manhattan Transfer*, a city novel in which Dos Passos first began to use the experimental techniques fully contributing to American fiction. His characters are again representations of several American social orders, and the themes of the novel are typical of Dos Passos’s work: alienation, loneliness, frustration and loss of individuality. His cinematic techniques, his sensuous details of the urban scene, and his portrayal of New York, in the first two decades of the twentieth century make the novel.

**Dos Passos as an American Novelist**

Dos Passos is an American novelist, essayist, poet, and journalist. He is best known for his social and political novels of pre-World War II America (Leavis 102). His central concerns are social injustices, the failure of the American Dream, the exploitation of the working class, the loss of individual freedom, and the injurious emphasis on materialism in American society. Detail and realism are important elements in his work, often emphasized through such innovative means as his “Newsreel” and “Camera Eye” techniques, and the inclusion of bits of “biography.” Strongly social and political, he moved from his early, leftwing revolutionary philosophy to a later conservatism. The *U.S.A.* trilogy is considered to be his masterpiece.

Dos Passos’s characters are singularly lacking in piety. He is depicting a society unaware of what it takes to make a society. He is one of the few lived American writers who are of world popular. His books are sometimes cited as
criticisms of American capitalism and as novels which expose American claims and propaganda. His reputation really was established with his novel of post-war disillusion in *Three Soldiers*. It remains one of the very best of twentieth century American war novels and it describes the ordinary soldier trapped in the army machine, one of the instruments of the state grown healthy in war. Here, we find the theme of bigness, bigness in which the individual is lost, developed as a cause of disillusion (Farrell 119). From the soldier caught in the gears of the big army machine of World War I, he has pursued the themes of liberty and bigness through to the present, his fading celebrity slips back into a life of commonness.

Like the novels of Thomas Wolfe, Dos Passos novels were best read when one was young (Kriegel 486). They offered the youthful reader the illusion that his own life had been touched by the modern. The appeal of *U.S.A.* was not political but aesthetic. He captured what then seemed an advanced sensibility and placed it in the service of what then seemed an advanced writing technique. His politics, even for someone who sympathized with them, were beside the point. What one valued in *U.S.A.* was its modernism, which was easy to absorb, and its pessimism, which seemed generational.

Dos Passos proves to be the only one of the novelists of this generation who is concerned with the large questions of politics and society; and he has succeeded in this work in bridging the gap, which is wider in America than anywhere else and which constitutes a perpetual problem in American literature and thought, between the special concerns of the intellectual and the general pursuits and ideas of the people.
"U.S.A." looked like a Marxist book to many of its contemporaries, but it is not. It is an American book in the agrarian tradition, which sees the defeat of America in the victory of a mechanized society worshipping power and money over a society of simplicity devoted to the needs of human beings and individual felicity. (Ward 51)

Dos Passos’s early novels are neither masterpiece nor are they pure examples of the art novels. The world was always real to him painfully real; it was never veiled with mysticism and his characters were rarely symbolic. Yet consider the plot of a novel like *Three Soldiers*. A talented young musician, during the war, finds that his sensibilities are being angered, his aspirations crushed, by society as embodied in the American army. He deserts after the Armistice and begins to write a great orchestral poem. When the military police come to arrest him, the sheets of music flutter one by one into the spring breeze, and we are made to feel that the destruction of this symphony, this enthusiastic song choked off and dispersed on the wind, is the real tragedy of the war.

Some years later, in writing *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos seemed to be undertaking a novel of a different type, one which tried to render the colour and movement of the whole city. But the novel, as it proceeds, becomes the story of Jimmy Herf and Ellen Thatcher, and the poet is frustrated by the world: he leaves a village party after a last drink of gin and walks out alone, bareheaded, into the dawn. It is obvious, however, that a new conflict has been superimposed on the old one: the social ideas of the novelist are now at war with his personal emotions.

The real hero of *The 42nd Parallel* and *1919* is society itself, American society as embodied in forty or fifty representative characters who drift along with it,
struggle to change its course, or merely to find a secure footing, perhaps they build a raft of wreckage, grow fat on the refuse floating about them. While always the current sweeps them, onward toward a new social horizon. In this sense, Dos Passos has written “the first American collective novel” (Cowley 76).

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 (80). 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 trace 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 we 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 beempty, sharp and destructive insects like Dick Savage and Moorehouse. “Dos Passos has revealed the falsity of the unity of action. He has shown that one might describe a collective event by juxtaposing twenty individual and unrelated stories” (Sartre, Dos Passos 91).

In U.S.A. technique is wholly integrated with and at the service of a forceful expression about society. It is “mostly the speech of the people” despite Dos Passos’s avoidance in his broadcast of the ideological content of his novel,
U.S.A. is more than just “a highly energized sort of novel” (Chametzky 392). It is jangling headlines; public and private banalities; corruption in speech, thought, action; histories of lives of tragic desperation, betrayal, martyrdom, futility and bitterness.

U.S.A. is less a demonstration of historical determinism and the futility of Man’s efforts to free him from a vast social, political and economic mechanism which controls his destiny, than it is a bitter indictment of a nation’s collective failure to make the machine run the way it ought to. It illustrates the qualities of the country it takes as its theme: energy, ceaseless movement, dazzling techniques, admiration of quantity, and an irresistible tendency to sub-serve individuals to the social process. The trilogy is a metaphor for its subject (Gurko 43). The hardness behind U.S.A. is an idea, not a feeling; it is an esthetic proposition about style in relation to the contemporary world (Kazin 5).

Dos Passos was considered one of the foremost writers of his generation when the novels of the trilogy appeared in the 1930s exceeding the promise of his novels. In that embattled decade this was the supreme political fiction; his lifelong theme of the individual’s struggle with the system developed in a portrait of the United States from the turn of the century to the beginning of the Great Depression. His first novel, Three Soldiers was widely praised for realistic exposure of army life or condemned as a desecration of the recent American war effort.

Robert Garham Davis once said that Dos Passos writes “Social novels without sociology.” His theme has always been individual liberty. He sees things with the clarity and coolness of the Camera Eye, which accounts for one of his faults: his two-dimensional vision tends to create types, defeating the creation of
characters with any true individuality, characters with “a strong subjective reality” (Wilson, “Dos Passos and Wilder” 445).

According to Gifford, Dos Passos asserts that “personal freedom and individual liberty constitute the highest good, and that this good is under attack by evil in the form of institutional authority in mass society (big government, big labor, big business, etc.) and in the form of (Communism, liberalism, conformism, etc.) Finally, the theory asserts that the individual must “struggle against oppression and the daily exploitation of everything take the leap of faith” (Allen 145).

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. 1919 is an ironic contrast between the idealistic promises 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 disaster 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 a habitual state of mind directed at exaggerated or imaginary dangers. “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” (Becker, Critical 133).
Dos Passos: Technique and Sensibility

*Manhattan Transfer* and the *U.S.A.* trilogy are not novels in the usual sense of a selection of characters that influence and define one another by interaction. The novel in that sense was a by-product of biological science and as such persists today only among book-club practitioners. The novel as it has been concerned with the problems of “character” (McLuhan 154) and environment seems to have emerged as a pastime of the new middle classes who were eager to see themselves and their problems in action. Remove from these novels the problems of money and the arts of social distinction and climbing and little remains.

The Gullivers of Dos Passos

*Three Soldiers* is mainly an “art novel,” (Mizener 192) the story of a young man too sensitive and esthetically aware to endure the crude world, who is defeated by that world; it is only incidentally the exposure of the Army in the First World War, which gave it its initial reputation with a decade very much concerned to come to terms with the war.

Probably, this fiction deserves our attention, in any case, for the novel which deals with topical political matters has not had an illustrious history in the United States. In a study whose pedestrian quality is no doubt partly the result of its subject, Gorden W. Milne has surveyed “The American Political Novel” (265) among which he includes few works of the ability of Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* While asserting that “the American political novel has enjoyed a long and lively history.” Political philosophies are slighted, while rhetoric and propaganda replace thematic depth and subtlety.
In looking for a tradition of American political fiction, one is immediately struck by the fact that there is so little serious fiction which raises political issues. Political life, on a local, state, or national level, forms the backdrop for many novels, yet few of our most thoughtful writers have tried to deal with political issues in a fictional form. (Ludington, Twentieth 16)

The Idea of the Political Novel

Much popular United States fiction with political subject matter is limited in number, hence we might wonder if this is the reason for its weakness. Probably not, at least if we can take the 1930’s as an example. In that decade more than any other in the nation’s history artists and writers committed themselves to an ideology: Communism in its various forms; and if these people did not actually become Communist Party members, they were dedicated fellow travelers. But the result was not political fiction of a higher order, which is not to say that there were nogood political novels, at least in the broad sense in which I conceive of the term. Obvious example is U.S.A. Nevertheless, the political and social questions are that jogged the minds of writers in the 1930s.

Dos Passos, Hemingway, Lewis, Dreiser, Steinbeck, and Wolfe, made use of politics but were not overwhelmed. But the lesser writers committed to the leftist ideology, those under the discipline of the Party, were engulfed by the political cause. Objection may here be made that this is choosing one moment in history and one political doctrine noted not for its encouragement of aesthetics, but for its demands for disciplined adherence and its insistence on social realism.
Why did the writers of United States by and large fail to meld political ideology with the qualities of superior fiction? Howe asserts, through his observation:

Political ideas in America have never been as crystallized as in Europe. They have not had to be. The pressures of political choice have seldom closed in upon sensitive minds in America as inexorably as they have in Europe. And it has been part of our good-tempered egotism to suppose that these advantages, made possible by a unique though perhaps temporary joining of historical circumstances, were actually elements of communal wisdom, choices testifying to our moderation and maturity. In his provoking little chapter he points to those “social conditions” which have prompted the French to a passion for ideology, and the absence of which has allowed the Americans to make the suspicion of ideology into something approaching a national creed.

(227)

But political doctrines as one can tend to define them attitude in a national culture are not essential to the creation of serious political fiction. As he defines the political novel means, “any novel Howe wishes to treat as if it were a political novel, though clearly one would not wish to treat most novels in that way.” His idea of the political novel is simply one in which “the relation between politics and literature” (227) merits consideration. He struggles to find a definition narrow enough to be meaningful yet broad enough to encompass fiction beyond the doctrinaire or merely topical. Ultimately he settles on calling the political novel one “in which one can take to be dominant political ideas or the political milieu, a novel which permits this assumption without thereby suffering any radical distortion” (Ludington 403).
For him the political novel borders on the social novel, he cites the work of Jane Austen and Stendhal as creators of the latter type fiction in which the “idea of society” has permeated the minds of the characters and they think in terms of “coherent political loyalty and ideological identification.” Yet to remain novels, these works of fiction must “contain the usual representation of human behaviour and feeling” (Bradbury, “Inside U.S.A.” 508) while blending politics and ideology, broadly defined. However, the play and complexity of life must remain unhampered with. Political ideas cannot become the entire basis of the work.

The political novel need not accomplish only one thing, of course and does not. In the United States it does not encompass political doctrine as does the European work, but it includes the politics of isolation. It does other things as well, and in the reminder of this discussion the researcher would like to suggest two of these, and then close by suggesting the forms political fiction is now taking.

As examples, consider Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Warren’s *All the King’s Men* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (Ludington 444). Each of these is a fine example of the political novels as the researcher understands it; calls them novels of engagement as Ellison refers to his work. Each in some fashion treats the theme of isolation. Ben Compton at the end of *The Big Money*, the last volume of the trilogy, for example is isolated from the party to which he had devoted his life; Jack Burden is broken off from almost everything after the death of Willie Stark in *All the King’s Men* from family, friends, and politics; while the Invisible Man is the most isolated of all, huddled as he is underground, occasionally lashing out at the world above him, but alienated,
enraged, and bewildered about how to escape back into the American society that had rendered him and all other blacks invisible.

**The America of Dos Passos**

*U.S.A.* is far more impressive than even its three impressive parts of the three novels, might have led one to expect. It stands as the important American novel of the decade, on the whole more satisfying than anything else one can have. It lacks any touch of eccentricity, it is startlingly normal, at the risk of seeming paradoxical one might say that it is exciting because of its quality of cliché: here are comprised the judgments about modern American life that many of us have been living on for years.

Over a period of forty years, in some thirty published volumes, Dos Passos has carried on a romantic, constantly disappointed love affair with the United States. His novels, crowded with personal experiences and historic events, there are at once celebrations, indictments, and pleas for reform. Yet though his passionate complaints seem always to be set in political terms, his own political attitudes have swung in a large arc from left to right. Obviously something deeper than politics is at work.

Dos Passos was not the first to have tried encompass in fiction the whole history of his time. In France Alfred De Musset is writing after the glory and defeat of Napoleon, discovered postwar generations, especially “lost” ones, as literary material. Balzac, conceiving a social generation as “a drama with five or six thousand leading characters,” (Davis 5) thought that the novelist, “by making a selection from the chief social events of the time and composing types made up of traits taken from several homogeneous characters,” could go deeper into social
reality than historians had. Emile Zola took the next step by treating social institutions, the church, the army, department stores, farms, and mines, as super human beings with lives of their own.

**The Lost Humanist Republic of Dos Passos**

In his introduction to *U.S.A.* his description is melancholic for a page. Because he takes about insufficiencies of his own individualism, which had only led him to the discovery that “one bed is not enough, one job is not enough, one life is not enough,” (Hicks 35) but then he switched determinedly over to describing the social, communal alternative, for a writer, to one bed, one job, one life.

It was not the alternative of political activist, but that of recorder, recorder of the stories and speech of family and tribe.

*U.S.A.* was his study of social process, and the study kept finding that individuals were ground up in the process. As the trilogy went on the exploited ones in it began to be exploited by the communists too. Also, the exploited ones began to lose their once recoverable personalities, and become as brutalized as the exploiters. The battleground became not a battleground of the Marxist dialectic, but a battleground like World War I, a battleground where everybody lost except a tiny group of conspirators and betrayers, a battleground that was a steady education in the dehumanizing effects of the treadmill.

However, the depression made possible a new way of understanding American history and society, a new kind of historical fiction. Not only did the crash coincide with the celebrated return of the expatriate artists, the “exile’s return”
Malcolm Cowley chronicled, but many of them took up American subjects and themes, laboring with the inheritance of the continent.

The Fiction of Dos Passos

_Three Soldiers_ is generally recognized as Dos Passos’s first real novel, certainly it reveals a broadening of scope and a more matured style. In it the theme is still more explicit than implicit, but the author’s technical skills are otherwise considerably improved. The first section of the novel relates the introduction to the army of Dan Fuselli and John Andrews and he describes Fuselli’s experiences as he goes through a Port of Embarkation and across the ocean on a troop ship.

In part two, the story is continued from the viewpoint of Fuselli, relating his progress to a Medical Unit well behind the lines. Fuselli is promoted to Private First Class and is made temporary Corporal when the regular Corporal goes to the hospital. Fuselli meets Yvonne and falls in love with her, but he eventually loses her to the Sergeant to whom he has introduced her. Then, when the regular Corporal comes back to the unit, Fuselli loses all hope of promotion. The unit is ordered to the front, but because he is afraid, and because he has been disappointed about promotions, Fuselli wrangles a last-minute transfer to the permanent cadre of the post.

The third part is told entirely from the viewpoint of Chrisfield, whom Fuselli and Andrews meet at the training camp. Andrews is with Chrisfield through the section, but the viewpoint never shifts to him. Their unit is moved to the front soon
after Fuselli’s old company is moved up. Throughout the novel, Chrisfield has a running quarrel with a man named Anderson, for whom he develops a deep hatred. The quarrel, entirely provoked by Chrisfield, intensifies as Anderson is gradually promoted through the ranks to Sergeant. After his unit has gone into combat, Chrisfield gets lost and stumbles on the wounded Anderson, now a lieutenant and Chrisfield kills him.

Part four begins with Andrews being wounded and going to a hospital. Although the war is over by the time he recovers, Andrews is ordered back to his division, but he applies for and gets a transfer to the student detachment at the University of Paris. He settles down to a routine of hard work on his music, a love affair with a girl named Jeanne, an occasional evening with some sophisticated, hard-drinking friends. He encounters Fuselli, who has been put into a labor battalion. He finally stops seeing Jeanne and begins seeing Genevieve Rod, who can talk to him about music, but he foolishly goes to the forefront to visit her and is caught by the military police that put him in a labor battalion without a trial. He deserts and goes to Paris where he meets Chris, who has deserted because he thinks that someone in the company has learned that he killed Anderson.

Some of Andrew’s friends try to persuade him to rejoin his detachment, but he refuses. Instead, he goes to Genevieve’s country home, but she “fails” him because he is a deserter. Then his money runs out, and the military police capture him and take him away as the wind scatters his music manuscript around his empty room.

The novel *Three Soldiers* is incomparably tighter and more unified than the novel of *One Man’s Initiation 1917*. The novel develops in two major ways. First,
the novel contains the stories of three men and develops a central theme of the conflict that each has with the army. The three men are obviously representative characters: Fuselli represents the lower class of San Francisco, Chrisfield is a farm boy from Indiana, and Andrews is intellectually, if not financially, of the upper class of New York City. This arrangement gives both a geographic and a cultural cross section of the United States.

Using his representatives in *Three Soldiers*, Dos Passos shifts the angle of narration from the consciousness of one to another through the various sections of the novel. Fuselli is used to portray the enlisted man going through induction, being a part of troop movements and working behind the lines during the time of war.

Chrisfield portrays the enlisted man during training and combat. Andrews, is “the only one who could verbalize a moral attitude towards war,” (Gelfant 140) he is used to portray induction with Fuselli in the first section; he is present as interpreter of events with Chrisfield during most of Chrisfield’s experience, and Andrews alone is used as focal point for the post-war sections. There is some structural imbalance, however, the portions related through Fuselli are almost twice the lengths of those related through Chrisfield, and those related through Andrews are more than twice the length of those related through Fuselli. Over half of this “war” novel, then, is devoted to action which occurs after the armistice.

One important structural element derived from the use of three distinct view points, is a separate climax for the narrative of each of the three men. Each of the men brings to the conflict his own inherent weakness, each is destroyed by the “machine” because of that weakness, and the denouement for each of the three is tragic to a degree proportionate to the struggle each makes with the “machine.” The
second major structural element is the use of metaphorical section headings which define the sections and relate them to the theme of the novel. “Making the Mould,” “The Metal Cools,” “Machines,” “Rust,” “The World Outside” and “Under the Wheels” (Brantley, Natural 24) express insistently the machine-like quality of the army and the uniformity required of the men in it. Fuselli is the point of view for most of the first two sections, Chrisfield for the third, and Andrews for almost all of the last three. To underline the metaphor of the section headings, Dos Passos often has a character expressing an idea which repeats the metaphor of that section.

The war itself is ominously present in the background, but even in Chrisfield’s section, violence and death never come very near, Andrews is wounded by shrapnel in the most impersonal of all possible ways. But the army, a vast and powerful “machine,” is ever present; it intrudes constantly into the minutest details of the lives of the characters and absorbs most of their thoughts. The army is the antagonist, the “machine” in the lives of the three men. It is the destroyer of liberty, individuality and initiative, it operates on the lives of the men through its regulations which are as certain is the laws of the nature and through its officers and non-commissioned officers who are as unbending as the regulations they must obey.

American Literary Naturalism

John Dos Passos is a tremendously significant figure in the development of naturalism, particularly as an end-point in the evolution of naturalistic forms. One has looked at many of the ways, in which the writer struggles to force his materialistic philosophy into a fictional structure that will represent it adequately
while it permits him also to explore his characters, and one can see one from after another discarded because it has brought obvious inconsistencies or taken the vitality and inwardness away from the characters. Dos Passos is a culmination and an endpoint of the dark matter dominated trends which have been explored in this novel, he has written almost as if he intended to carry these tendencies to their extremist possibility.

His early novels embody and demonstrate the fractured lives and fractured values of the twentieth century. He writes a kaleidoscope, a pattern that always changes and never repeats, because the possible combinations and arrangements are endless, and this novel perfectly states its meaning. It is a picture of chaos, a blind, formless, struggling and frantic world moving in so many directions at once that it would be impossible for anyone to imagine an intelligent control of its energies. In this whirling chaos the characters work on their destinies, they do not work them out, and the reader is interested in the quality of their experiences, as he shares the energy and variety of their lives. Here is a perfect naturalistic flavour, in which the envelope of chaos contains, physically and metaphorically, the busy powers of the individuals who move back and forth to wave its web. This form renders a picture of chaos: there is no suggestion that any event is demonstrated as inevitable, because the picture does not consider a purposeful form in the world. That premise is not apparent.

**Later Trends in Form: Dos Passos**

In *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos is just leaning toward these effects. The title depicts the form, which is a sort of musical chairs. Characters appear and are
described to the point where the reader begins to see them as people, only to be set aside while other characters are introduced and partially developed. As new people are introduced, the earlier ones fade into the background, and some of them disappear, so that there seem always to be about the same number involved in the game. In another figure, it is as if a wave passed over Manhattan carrying three or four characters across the Island and picking up half-a-dozen others whom it abandons successively as it picks up still others in its path.

The central characters, Jimmy Herf and Ellen Thatcher, have a hard time of it, whereas others become big-time mobsters, politicians, businessmen and operators. The effect of the continual shift of scene and character is to fix them in a series of positions, one can accept these positions as evidence of their fates, but one cannot follow in detail the steps by which they come to be. Here is clearly a device that eliminates the will and shows the characters riding along on or under the wave of time and even that sweeps over the city.

Psychologically, it depicts persons who are not persons but a succession of reactions to stimuli. The fragmented presentation suggests that life is not integrated by purpose or order, that it is a flow of sensation, that man is controlled by his basic physical responses. Since we do not like to think of ourselves in such purely physiological and mechanistic terms, the effect of the book is bewilderment.

It cannot be accident that many of the characters have father fixations. At the bottom of this emblem is Bud, from Cooperstown, who has killed his father with a hoe in revenge for many beatings with a chain, and fled to New York. Ellen has a full-scale Oedipus complex. She drifts from man to man and does not “love anybody for long unless they are dead” (Walcutt 282). Hovering in the background is her
father with whom she had a relation so close as almost to displace the mother whom they both rejected.

Jimmy Herf too breaks away from a widowed mother who oppresses him with her morbid devotion. Ellen for a while is a beautiful and successful actress, married to a homosexual, while Jimmy watches her with dog-like devotion from a distance. After a divorce, and a couple of her affairs have faded away, she marries Jimmy and has a child, but then Jimmy loses his job, and when Ellen goes back to work she drifts into a new affair with an old friend. Presently she divorces Jimmy to marry this rising politician, and Jimmy stumbles off somewhere into the country. Harried people waver from disillusion to despair; the very successful are not much less desperate than the failures.

Nobody seems to help or to care about others. Starvation, abortion, crooked finance, hijacking, money panics, and general aimlessness fill this portrait of a city, and the tone is as grim as it is sensational. The idealism of the American dream is present as indignation and bitterness at the conditions which have thwarted that dream, but this is so only if the reader deduces it from the ironic juxtapositions and from the overtones of Dos Passos’s language, which shows the city always incredibly bright and polished, while its lives are dull and morally sterile. Traditional values may be scorned, both by the characters and their author, but there is no feeling here that science has the answer. A mad world of finance, sex, crime, and personal search is not a background against which the idea of scientific progress glows brightly.

*Manhattan Transfer* went through numerous editions in a few years after its publication. It owes a very great deal to Joyce’s *Ulysses*, from which it takes the
method of showing the life of a city by flash after flash of incident and personal experience. Dos Passos is more sentimentally aware of his people than Joyce: he shows their agonies and fears and defeats in passages of considerable force, as when Ellen is preparing herself to accept George Baldwin, for security, after she has set Jimmy Herf aside: “She made up in her mind. It seemed as if she had set the photograph of herself in her own place, forever frozen into a single gesture . . .” (Walcott 283).

He is also sampling a larger city than Joyce’s Dublin, over several years rather than a single day. Although Ulysses is tremendously complex, its Dublin is friendly and intimately familiar, whereas Dos Passos’s Manhattan is a screaming turmoil of machines and people a clouded vortex in which the characters are arrested for painful moments and then disappear again into the whirling background. Yet there is an improbable amount of interplay among them.

Joyce, who is neither cold nor sentimental in Ulysses, had much more to say and a much more intimate control of his material. Aimlessness, whirl, and coincidence, expressed in the form of Manhattan Transfer, do not add up to a novel that says much, although its frantic picture is vivid and sensational. What it says is that social and personal chaos weave a pattern that is no pattern but rather an unstopping movement, back and forth, in and out, up and down, whether it is in transit, sex, business or life. It is a movement of agony, of a society in its death efforts.
The Works of Dos Passos

*U.S.A.* attempts to trace the political fortunes of the American people overmore than three decades of United States history, from the failure of the populist revolt, described in a cutting aside on Bryan, to the defeat of the proletarian challenge and the ascendance of the trusts to a position of dominance in American life. It is not surprising, therefore that the homeless should figure large in the plan of the work. Throughout much of this period the Industrial Workers of the World represented a force to be reckoned with in American political life and the membership of the Industrial Workers of the World (Feied 42).

It is Dos Passos’s thesis that the economic power of the trusts was undermining the very basis of political democracy, and as the chief antagonist of the trusts the Industrial Workers of the World possessed for him significance far out of proportion to its numbers. From the opening section of *The 42nd Parallel*, tracing the development of Mac, the traveled worker, to the concluding profile of the anonymous “Vag,” (Chamberlain, “John Dos Passos” 16) it is to the story of the hoboes’ fight against the trusts that Dos Passos reverts again and again, seeing it as critical for the future development of American society.

The theme of the political hobo is carried forward in the story of Ben Compton; the second of the fictional hobo heroes of *U.S.A.* Ben first goes on the road after taking part in strike against a construction boss who was cheating the workers. Thereafter most of his homelessness comes about for primarily political reasons, though the economic motive is often present and intermingled with politics.

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

In *U.S.A.* Dos Passos made clear that his intention is to interpret history. “The only excuse for a novelist,” he wrote in a “Statement of Belief,” “aside from the entertainment and vicarious living his books give the people who read them, is as a sort of second class historian of the age he lives in.” He asserted that “the best kind of narrative” would combine fiction and history, and that was his aim. The series of reportages was to be “a contemporary commentary on history’s changes, always as seen by some individual’s ears, felt through some individual’s nerves and tissues” (Passos, “The Art of fiction” 164).

Dos Passos wrote more than forty works during his lifetime, including poetry, plays, travel books, political tracts, histories and biographies. He is better known, though for this novels and best of all for the documentary style fiction he wrote during the twenties and thirties. The researcher has limited the documentation of his critical reception to the novels he is best known for, and to those others which are representative of a period in his career or of a change in political or stylistic direction. Though it is certainly true that no American writer has been more subjected to political judgement than Dos Passos has, the history of the critical response shows that what made him the most promising American writer of the thirties and a much less respected writer later on, he had as much to do with his art as with his politics, if indeed the two can be separated. A critical reception never stops developing, and neither does historical consciousness ever fully reveal itself in openly stated principles or propositions.
Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* is a monumental socialist text, he was not a Marxist
Henrick Ibsen once complained that his play, *A Doll’s House* was not, as so many
believed, a feminist play but a “humanist” one (Rosen 192). The same logic might be
applied to Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* and his early social philosophy in general. His friend
Hutchins Hapgood summed up Dos Passos’s humanist views with a sample but
telling a story:

An incident . . . happened the other day when he was talking about a
neighbor. This man is a lawyer and has no radical tendencies, but Dos likes
him very much because he is, Dos said, “a good human being”. This might
not appear significant, except for the habit among our radicals to sneer at any
one who doesn’t hold their views, and to have nothing to do with such a
person. Dos, however, is not only a good man himself, but sees that the
objective of all our social activities is to make a society of good men.
(Hapgood 398)

Jean Paul Sartre once called Dos Passos “the best novelist of our time”
(Sartre, “Media and Newsreels in Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.*” 181). The critical reputation
Dos Passos achieved in the twenties and thirties still acts as a buffer against some of
the stinging criticism he has lately received. Alfred Kazin wrote that Dos Passos’s
triumph of style, the *U.S.A.* trilogy, provided “a machine prose for a machine world.”
Society appeared as its hero, and the work became an epic, “a study in the history of
modern society, of its social struggles and great masses; but it is a history of defeat”
(Kazin, *Native* 341).

Dos Passos asserts that “personal freedom and individual liberty constitute
the highest good, and that this good is under attack by evil in the form of institutional
authority in mass society” and in the form of “the prescriptions of doctrine.” Finally, the theory asserts that the individual must “struggle against oppression,” against “the daily exploitation of everything take the leap of faith” (Gold 32). Dos Passos, most considerable figure in contemporary American literature, presents the evils of contemporary American society and in his novels.

**Later Trends in *U.S.A.***

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

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

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

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

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

**His Three New Technical Devices**

Dos Passos has introduced three technical devices in his novels. The three devices are the Camera Eye, Newsreels and Biography. The three devices which interrupt the central narratives and “formalize” (Walcutt 285) the confusion depicted represent the ultimate stylistic expressiveness of the naturalistic movement. The Newsreel introduces a section with bits of headlines, advertisements, feature articles and phrases of news, interwoven with lines of poetry which presumably represent some of the emotions, usually popular and sentimental, being experienced at the time. Superficially, it represents a world of fraud and sophistication, violence and treachery, it is a backdrop of hysteria behind which the serious business of society, if such it can be called, is concealed, for high finance and international relations continue to control the world while the public is engaged with sentiment and sensation.

The Biographies there are twenty-five of them scattered through the three volumes, are condensed records of typical public figures of the time, from the fields of business, politics, technology, labour and the arts. Such figures as Carnegie, Hearst, Insull, Valentino, Duncan, Bryan and Debs constitute a sampling of specific figures that dominate the stage and also move the properties and scenes of our time. They are set forth ironically and bitterly, for the businessmen are selfish and dishonest, the entertainers are victims of their public as well as panders to its lusts and vanities, the liberal politicians are confused by their ambitions and the
inadequacies of their idealism and the efficiency expert F.W. Taylor is an inhuman machine that dies with a stop watch in his hand.

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

The Camera Eye is Dos Passos’s subjective and rather poetic commentary on this world. It occurs fifty-one times through the trilogy, it is revealing the character, interests, and life history of the artist how he came out of Virginia, went to school abroad and at Harvard, drove on ambulance during the war, was disillusioned by the Versailles Treaty and the violent way of materialism which followed it, and he lived as a newspaper reporter and radical through the big money days of the early twenties. He is an oversensitive and fastidious intellectual, recoiling from the dirty masses and yet seeing in them the backbone and heart of America, which the great sweep of his novel shows, being corrupted, debauched, and enslaved by the forces of commercial rapacity. He sees America through the lens of a poetic tradition of Whitman and Sandburg. The tradition impels him to identify the physical elements of America with the dream of greatness and individual realization that it has always embodied for the transcendentalist.
The fourth, fifth and sixth chapters elaborate, how these three technical devices are employed by Dos Passos in his select novels. The researcher has examined in depth and reported about the relevance of these devices and how far he has identified himself with the character. The characteristics the novelist has attributed to American idealism when it breaks away from its scientific discipline and control, of unfocused idealism and uncontrolled protest, become increasingly evident in the notions that virtue is in the people, waste is the natural expression of the exploiters, and wealth is in a long-term conspiracy to disruption labour and destroy our resources. It is perhaps not extravagant to identify the perfectly expressive form of this work with the final division of the great stream of American idealism.

Thus this chapter has elaborately dealt with American society as visualized by Dos Passos. The next chapter analyses the first three decades of twentieth century American society.