

## War in the Novel A Thematic Study of the Early Novels Of John Doss Passos

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### Abstract:

For many novelists, there are certain times, or periods, that exert subtle influence and a remarkable significance on their personalities, and later on their literary careers. For the American novelist John Doss Passos (1896-1970) and others of his contemporaries, it was the period which is known as the 1920s in American modern history. This period was one of great and serious change in American society, its manners, morals and life-style. It is the period between the end of World War 1 which was followed by the Versailles Treaty, and the economic crisis of the Wall Street in 1929 which in turn severely affected the entire social and political action of the age.

This period early aroused the novelist's sense and inspired him with many contrasting and conflicting images. This thematic study tries to shed some light on the American modern history (definitely in the 1920s) as depicted and reflected in three of John Doss Passos' early novels: *One Man's Initiation* (1920) *Three Soldiers* (1921) and *US A Trilogy* (1938).

Key words: John Doss Passos , War , *One Man's Initiating*, *Three Soldiers* .

## الحرب في الرواية دراسة في مواضيع روايات جون دوس باسوس المبكرة

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### المستخلص :

يمر الكثير من الروائي ون بحقب زمنية معينة تفرض تأثيراً كبيراً على شخصياتهم وبالتالي على نتاجهم الأداعي مثلما كانت فترة عشرينيات القرن العشرين في التاريخ الأمريكي بالنسبة للروائي الأمريكي جون دوس باسوس ( 1896 – 1970 ) والبعض الآخر من معاصريه . فقد شهد المجتمع الأمريكي تغيراً حاداً في قيمه ومفاهيمه وأسلوب حياته في تلك الحقبة التي تقع بين نهاية الحرب العالمية الأولى – التي تلتها معاهدة فرساي – والأزمة الاقتصادية المعروفة باسم ( أزمة وول ستريت ) عام 1929 والتي كان لها أثراً واضحاً على عموم الفعاليات الاجتماعية والسياسية لذلك العصر . فالحرب – وما يعقبها – تجربة مريرة يصعب نسيانها في تاريخ أي شعب . و لقد لفتت هذه الحقبة مبكراً اهتمام الروائي باسوس والهمته الكثير من الأفكار و الصور المتضاربة التي افاد منها فيما بعد في رواياته بدرجات متفاوتة . تحاول هذه الدراسة الموضوعية أن تلقي بعض الضوء على التاريخ الأمريكي المعاصر ( عشرينيات القرن العشرين بالتحديد ) كما يظهر في ثلاث من روايات جون دوس باسوس المبكرة وهي: بداية رجل ( 1920 ) و ثلاثة جنود ( 1921 ) و ثلاثية الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية ( 1930 ) .

### Introduction

After World War 1, there was a great sense of disappointment among the Americans who felt that they were cheated about the real targets of their participating in the war and their sacrifices, "the peculiarities of American's participation in World War 1 " says the critic Malcolm Bradbury "are of first importance to an understanding of the post - war years"<sup>\*1</sup>. The war had put the foundations of the American dream to a serious test. It had proved to be a "filthy business, in which noble purposes had been less visible than barbarity and cookies". For the returning soldiers, America's ' war to end war ' and the crusade 'to make the world safe for democracy' had proved to be a blasphemy"<sup>\*2</sup>.

As a result, a new wave of experiment appeared in literature,

which can best be explained as a protest, an assault on America old and new, it's policies and manner of life . America is , no more , the attractive ideal or the land of dreams for the new generations . A large part of the emerging literary generation had lost their American dreams and ideals feeling, bitterly , that they had been deceived for a long time . So , they left their ( sweet home ) consciously and expatriated to Europe ( to France and Spain definitely ) in a kind of group migration or withdrawal .

This sense of disillusionment and disappointment was best depicted in the writing of what was called later by literary historians and critics : " The Lost Generation" in American literature in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century . In the novel , the remarkable representatives of this generation were : Sherwood Anderson ( 1876 - 1941 ) , Scott Fitzgerald ( 1896- 1940 ) , William Faulkner ( 1897 – 1962 ) , Ernest Hemingway ( 1899 – 1961 ) and John Doss Passos himself .

Although his published works are more than theirs , Passos was the less famous of the group in the Arab World because of the lack of translation . John Rodrigo Doss Passos (1896-1970) was born in Chicago. He went to Harvard where he contributed to several magazines.

In the World War 1, Passos enlisted in an American ambulance unit ( like his friend Ernest Hemingway ) and served in Italy and France. These experiences provided the background and the realistic material for his first novels: *Type in italics* (1920) and *Type in italics* (1921) . After the war and throughout the 1930s Doss Passos continued his career as a playwright , novelist and political reporter though his major literary effort went into the writing of the three volumes of *Italics* (1930), *Italics* ( 1932) and *Italics* (1936) <sup>\*3</sup>

During and after the Second World War Doss Passos was at work on his second trilogy of novels: *Italics* (1939), *Italics* (1943), and *Italics* (1949), brought together as *Italics* in (1952). Over his long and successful career, Doss Passos wrote forty-two novels as well as many poems, essays and plays <sup>\*4</sup>

## I

Like all other members of the "Lost Generation", the first major traumatic experience of Doss Passos's life, and the most effective and

enduring in his memory, was that of the first World War. His service as a driver with the ambulance unit and the medical corps in France provided the material for two novels: *Italics* (1917) and *Italics* (1921) . The first of these, written on the ship returning to America and published - quickly - in (1920) is obviously the work of a young writer whose fictional tools and visions are still unshaped , full of what Doss Passos was later to call 'twenty-one-year-old rhetoric'. In reading it , one gets the sense of a mind beginning to argue with the larger problems of war and social disintegration, but not coming very close to a deep understanding of them because the novelist himself didn't tackle- and develop - his themes deeply, and falling back on the devices of ironic contrast and vivid impressions. Critics believe that, even when Passos tries to embody longer and deeper ideas in his writing, they are contrived out of a literary aesthetic background <sup>\*5</sup> as the reader may notice in the following scene :

*It was the fifth time that day that Martin's car had passed the crossroads where the cavalry was, some-one had propped up the fallen crucifix so that it titled dark despairing arms against the sunset sky where the sun gleamed like a huge copper kettle lost in its own steam. The rain made bright yellowish stripes across the sky and dripped from the feet of the old wooden Christ, whose gaunt, scarred figure hung out from the titled cross, swaying a little in the beating of the rain ....He started curiously at the fallen jowl and the cavernous eyes that had meant for some country sculptor ages ago the utterest agony of pain. Suddenly he noticed that where the crown of thorns had been about the forehead of the Christ someone had wound barbed wire . He smiled, and asked the swaying figure in his mind. 'And you, what do you think of it? For an instant he could feel wire barbs ripping through <sup>\*6</sup>*

The political and social significance of the events he witnessed did not escape Doss Passos entirely. He could manage to see the growing signs of muting among the front line soldiers and he doubts – like the

others - about the real aim of American intervention in this horrible war. In the political matter, too, he includes a chapter of discussion between various French radicals in which the hero, Martin Howe, is given a speech about the 'dark forces' which are at work enslaving the minds of the Americans. He makes a feeble effort to locate the evil spirits: "America, as you know is ruled by the press. And the press is ruled by whom? who shall ever know what dark forces bought and bought until we should be ready to go blinded and gagged into war? "

It is not easy, and even not clear, to see how the experiences of the hero could have been meaningfully related to the social history and environment of which he was a part, that is because the young writer, Doss Passos, is not able-yet-to perceive and comprehend such a relation. Being inexperienced , he failed to find and employ a narrative form which would allow him to express the war's general significance and huge effects on the whole American life with all its aspects . So that this early novel can hardly serve the purpose of this research . However, after his discharge from the American army , Passos made his way to Spain ( this time like Ernest Hemingway too ) to settle and started his work on his second novel .

## II

*Three Soldiers* is one of the key American war novels of the First World War and is considered a classic of the realist war novel genre. The war , with its consequences , is put as the main theme . The novel had aroused a great deal of praise by critics of the period ,for instance , the American critic H.L.Mencken praised " the bold realism ' in the book saying:

*Until Three Soldiers is forgotten...no war story can be written in the united states without challenging comparison with it.It changed the whole tone of American opinion about war, it even changed the recollections of actual veterans of the war. They saw, no doubt, substantially what Doss Passos saw, but it*

*took his bold realism to disentangle their recollections from the prevailing buncombe and sentimentality* \*7

It is a novel of war and social protest as well. Critics also notice that Doss Passos was attempting to do for the First War what the novelist Stephen Crane (1871 – 1900 ) had done before for the American Civil War \*8 .

Far , in time and place , the novelist could freely control his fiction and develop his themes. One can see Doss Passos in this novel working towards the complexity of structure that gives his next novel *Italics* its great density and fame . He obviously wanted to show the crushing effect of the army upon those who are made , unwillingly , to serve it, at every possible level of their lives. Rather than follow the fortunes of one chosen 'hero' - through the highly sophisticated figure John Andrews - he shows in the first two sections: " Making the Mould" and "The Metal Cools" how a second generation San Franciscan is inducted into the organization and quickly cowed by it. Chris field's section; "Machines" deals with actual warfare in France, and the three sections in which Andrews figures most prominently: "Rust", "The World Out Side" and "Under the Wheels", allow us to penetrate more fully the consciousness of the individual rebelling against the system.

This is a highly interesting structure, and Doss Passos had by this time developed enough skill and literary experience to anipulate his characters and their actions within it . But, here again, Doss Passos is still passionately thinking of the 'dark forces' behind the war an trying to locate them and so he takes refuge in what the critic Edmund Wilson calls his "stubborn sentimentalism" \*9 . That is to say he falsifies and condemned his picture of real life by introducing melodramatic values into it. This results in the creation of three characters who relate to each other and to their common environment only disjunctively, and who come to life as they are made to serve the novel's general theme. Andrews provides the clearest example. He is a composer, or at least plans to be and Doss Passos uses his meditations on music to illustrate and symbolize his spiritual development. One of the first tasks he is given

in the army is to wash windows, and as he performs this mechanical act he discovers his first theme:

*Andrews started at the upper right-hand corner and smeared with soap each pane of the window in turn. Then he climbed down, moved his ladder, and started on the next window...As he worked a rhythm began pushing its way through the hard core of his mind, leavening it, making it fluid. It expressed the vasty dullness, the men waiting in rows on drill fields, standing at attention...he felt the rhythm filling his whole body, from his sore hands to his legs, tired themselves the same length as millions of other legs. His mind began unconsciously, from habit, working on it. He could imaging a vast orchestra swaying with it. His heart was beating faster<sup>\*10</sup>.*

The last image of the novel is that of the sheets of paper containing this work blowing around his empathy, desolate room after he has been dragged back to prison by the military policemen. Andrews' wish was to escape into a world of purely aesthetic values . He is also the first of Doss Passos' characters who judge the present in relation to an idealized, romantic past. But, finally we see him humiliated and frustrated in his losing the fight against regimentation , as he expresses his emotions in long interior monologues.

Crisfield, on the other hand, is a man without any accessible interior life, although under the influence of Andrews he begins to dream of his youth in Indiana. His typical reaction to the army and the war is philosophical on incidents that show the degrading and dehumanizing effects of war ,one of them serves ultimately to empty Crisfield of his conditioned hatred for the enemy: He encounters a dead body of a German soldier in the woods :

*He kicked the German. He could feel the ribs against his toes through the leather of his boot. He kicked again and again with all his might .The German rolled over heavily. He had no face .where*

*the face had been was a spongy mass of purple and yellow and red ,half of which stuck to the russet leaves when the body rolled over .large flies with bright shiny green bodies circled about it .in a brown clay –grimed hand was a revolver<sup>\*11</sup>*

After this ,all his rage is redirected at the man who comes arbitrarily to symbolize the inhumanity of the army as a whole : Sergeant Anderson . Eventually, in the midst of the battle he joyfully seizes the opportunity to blow the man to pieces with a hand grenade . Crisfield , like Andrews, is a recurring type of character in Doss passos's fiction, later to be associated with the violence of evolutionally politics.

### III

The *U. S. A* trilogy is the major work of Doss Passos, comprising the novels *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* (1930) , *Nineteen Nineteen* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936) . The three books were first published together as a one – volume edition in 1938 , to which Doss Passos added the prologue labeled "U.S.A" . The trilogy employs an experimental technique ,incorporating four different narrative modes : fictional realism telling the life stories of twelve fictional characters; collages , newspapers clippings and song lyrics labeled "newsreel " .

Twenty six short biographies of notable characters of the time such as Woodrow Wilson ( President of the United States 1913- 1921 ) and Henry Ford ( The American famous industrialist 1863- 1947 ) , are inserted in the novel in a chapter labeled "Camera Eye" in an attempt to support the general historical accuracy of the whole novel . The trilogy tries to cover the historical development of American society during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

In the realistic sections, the *U.S.A.* trilogy relates the lives of twelve different characters as they struggle to find place in American society during the early part of the twentieth century . Each character is presented to the reader from childhood on in free indirect speech . "The Camera Eye" sections are written in stream-of-consciousness technique. The Newsreels consist of first page headlines taken from

the "Chicago Tribune" for *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* and *Nineteen Nineteen* " and from the "New York World" for *The Big money* as well as lyrics from popular songs of the time . The biographies are accounts of historical figures, the most famous of these biographies is "The Body of an American" that tells the story of a fan unknown American soldier who fell in world war I, which concludes *Nineteen Nineteen* .

The short biographies have , in fact ,a complex function in terms of the novel's overall structure and vision. However , the separation between these narrative modes is rather stylistic than a thematic one. Thus , some critics have pointed out connections between the fictional characters in the novel and the real characters of the time .<sup>\*12</sup>

Each one is a carefully and skillfully composed portrait designed to illuminate one of the faces of American civilization .The biography of J. Pierpont Morgan-for instance- is typical of the way Doss Passos creates an objective correlative for his hatred of finance and financiers . The whole section is composed around a few reiterated images designed to make the great Wall Street money master appear stupid ,crude ,vulgar and ugly. The passage below affectively serves to reduce its subject to a brutal and grasping social climber:

*Every Christmas his librarian read him Dickens' A Christmas Carol from the original manuscript. He was very fond of canary birds and Pekinese dogs and liked to take pretty actresses yachting .Each corsair was a finer vessel than the last. When he dined with king Edward he sat at his majesties right; he liked talking to cardinals or the Pope ,and never missed a conference of Episcopal bishops;*<sup>\*13</sup>

The whole biography ends with a repetition of the central motifs of the novel :

*(Wars and panics on the stick exchange achinegun fire and arson, bankruptcieswarloans,starvation,lice cholera and typhus: Good growing weather for the house of Morgan.)*<sup>\*14</sup>

Such is the case in the use of the Newsreels and Camera Eye sections. They stand in a similar relation connected to each other as do the fact and fiction in the rest of the novel . On the one hand the Camera Eye represents an experience in a pure stream of consciousness:

*Revolution round the spinning Eiffel Tower that  
burns up our last year's diagrams, the dates fly off  
the calendar we'll make everything new. Today is  
the Year I . Today is the sunny morning of the first  
day of spring we gulp our coffee splash water on  
us , jump into our clothes run downstairs step out  
wide wake into the first morning of the first day of  
the first year*<sup>\*15</sup>

On the other hand , the newsreels pile up a montage of unmediated and meaningless dramatic incident ,collected from contemporary newspapers, and interspersed by snatches of popular songs:

*Oh a German officer crossed the RhineHe liked the  
winner and loved the wine Hanky panky parleyvoo  
Wilson's arrival in Washington starts trouble .Paris  
strikes hear harangues at picnic .Cafe wrecked and  
bombs thrown in fiery streets. Parisians pay more  
for meat .Mysterious forces halt a Bolshevist  
march*<sup>\*16</sup>

The random ,indeterminate ,neutral presentation of the bizarre events in the Newsreels reflects obviously a world which in itself is impenetrable ,unalterable and devoid of essential meaning. In short , it is a world just like the social tragedy of America in the nineteen twenties seen in Doss Passos' eyes .

## Conclusion

The American novelists in the nineteen twenties shared the experimental sense of life that belongs to the times .One part of their experimental aim is to capture the new consciousness, the new pace ,the new relationships in their society , especially during and after World War 1. The novelist in whom this intent is most apparent

is John Doss Passos . Several of his novels reflect the modern experience in American society in details. More than any one of his contemporaries( like Faulkner, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald) ,Doss Passos acknowledged the reality of the historical events ,that is to say , he saw history in new ways and found its significance deep in the meaning of the life around him . He saw himself as a member of new generation of modernity that had come into American life ,and it was the relationship to the past, to the American past conceived of as an ideal that concerned him .He lived in the world of the city and machine, the world of finance amidst the war and its bitter experience on human being , its miseries , its disillusionments ,its realness ,its exposure of the "truth" about human nature .

### Notes

- 1- Malcolm Bradbury : "Style of Life ,Style of Art and the American Novelist in the Nineteen Twenties " in *The American Novel and the Nineteen Twenties* .(London, Edwerd Arnold 1981) ,p.14.
- 2- Ibid ,p.15 . It seemed the various American administrations over history used to such an elusive political speech about the real targets of the American wars in different parts of the globe the thing which will cause – later – great miseries like the American campaign in Vietnam and Iraq as well
- 3- [http://wikipedia](http://wikipedia.org) . org
- 4- John H.Warren , *John Doss Passos* (New York,1961) P.9.
- 5- See for instance :John D .Brantley :*The Fiction of John Doss Passos* , (the Hague, 1968),p.112-180
- 6- John Doss Passos , *One Man's Initiation* . (London :Edward Arnold ,1979),p.19.
- 7- [http://wikipedia](http://wikipedia.org) . org
- 8- Brian Lee: "History and John Doss Passos in " *The American Novel and the Nineteen Twenties* , p201.
- 9- Ibid .p.202 .
- 10- John Doss Passos ,*Three Soldiers* (London: Edward Arnold 1979),p.36
- 11- Ibid p.98.

- 12- Brian Lee ,p.203  
 13- John Doss Passos .U.S.A. London :Penguin Books 1991, p.81.  
 14- ,1990,P.181  
 15- Ibid, P.183  
 16- Ibid, p.222

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