

Struggle of the Proletariat and their Shattered American Dream in John Dos Passos's *U.S.A. Trilogy*

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Abstract

John Dos Passos is one of the most eminent writers in the arena of American Literature. He is well known for his creative writing style. His famous *U.S.A Trilogy* consists of three novels: *The 42nd Parallel*, *Nineteen Nineteen* and *The Big Money*. This study aims at an analysis of *U.S.A Trilogy*, basically John Dos Passos's treatment of the struggle of the working class men to get material prosperity and their failure in the process. This paper focuses on the post war scenario which affected the normal life of the common people. This novel consists of almost everything such as love, lust, betrayal, belief, happiness, lawlessness, rich, poor and so on. This work is all about individual quest for money, power and coition which has turned them greedy and appalling in his approach towards life and ends in destruction. Each novel comes up with a different story carrying same characters are the beauty of *U.S.A Trilogy*. The writer focuses on the growing mechanization's impact on the generation and discusses the pros and cons of it. Such as improvement of new inventions of factory and industries gave rise in the field of science but subconsciously inhumanity raises in the society as well. Machines take over men power and men become jobless. Men become materialistically advanced and morally deprived at the end. There is fall in the moral standard and people become spiritually barren. This aggression of achieving everything in a short time becomes the reason of people's moral and physical threat.

Keywords: John Dos Passos, *U.S.A. Trilogy*, American Dream, Discrimination, Betrayal and Capitalism

John Dos Passos is one of the most successful writers in the field of American Literature and he is known for his ingenious class of writings. His celebrated *U.S.A Trilogy* comprises three novels: *The 42nd Parallel*, *Nineteen Nineteen* and *The Big Money*. He condemns the delusion of American people in this trilogy. *U.S.A Trilogy* is the mixture of everything that takes place in John Dos Passos's time. His works present his attempt to set the society free from inequality. He chooses a different technique to give a fine look to his creative works. For which, he received huge appreciation and shower of admiration from readers as well as critics. He has struggled really hard to relieve from the new American threat, destructive modernity. His writings touch the sensitive political issues. The trilogy also focuses on the writer's professional as well as personal issues. His close observation of the entire scenario of that time has made him a legend. He leaves strong impact on the readers. His remarkable works have dealt with the issues of complication which are inherent

in the industrial society. John Doss Passos is a true lover of mankind. He is sympathetic towards the poor and working class people. He rejects the domination of the rich against the poor. This study aims at an analysis of *U.S.A trilogy* so as to bring out John Dos Passos's treatment of the struggle of the working class men to get material prosperity and their failure in the process. This paper focuses on the scenario of the world after the First World War. *U.S.A Trilogy* includes almost everything such as love, lust, betrayal, belief, non-belief, happiness, lawlessness, rich, poor, news, bar, hunger, money and so on. It highlights the inequality among the folks, and it delineates the cost based injustice experienced by the oppressed. It is about the individual's quest for money, power and coition, which has turned him more and more greedy and appalling in his approach towards life. John Dos Passos rejects institutions, especially graded institutions, where he felt that the workers get exploited, dominated and suppressed by the rich people. He focuses on the exploitation of poor people by the rich people who force them to live within an artificial mechanical framework. John Dos Passos is concerned with the development of modern science and new technologies. He highlights both the pros and cons of growing mechanization. Improvement occurs in the field of science, but inhumanity raises in the society. Machines take over man power and people have become jobless. Men are materialistically advanced but spiritually backward. There is fall in their moral standard and people are morally weak in many counts.

The term "Lost Generation" means the generation of people born between 1883 and 1900. They were disillusioned by World War I. In Europe, they are known as the "1914 Generation" or Generation of au feu. It refers to the heart wrenching reality of the generation of people who have lost their identity, moral values and most importantly faith in every aspect. The definition of American Dream varies from one to other as the novelist uses the term to dream high, to become wealthiest and to live a high standard life by any means. The works of John Dos Passos are best examples to justify it. In 1929, John Doss Passos met writer Katherine Smith at Key West, Florida, with whom he tied knot. He spent some good time with his wife Katherine in travelling and exploring life. His friend Hutchins Hapgood, in the work, *A Victorian in the Modern World*, sums up John Dos Passos's humanist views with a simple but touching anecdote:

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 anyone 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 objective of all our social activities is to make a society of good men.
(17)

It shows that John Dos Passos is a sensible writer who has concerned for humanity. He has involved in the social activities and penned down the difficulties faced by common people. The writer deals with the sensitive issues about life of the oppressed people. *The 42nd Parallel* is based on the bare truth of the 1930's generation. The "Introductory Notes" to *The 42nd Parallel* reflects the reality of the Americans. It depicts the life sketch of the author John Dos Passos and it also

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highlights materialistic craze of men. In the changed scenario of the deconstruction of old belief of religion and culture in the modern world, people struggle to understand the reality of life, and the real purpose to serve humanity. For the young generation, religious belief and modernity do not set with each other because the end happens to be allured by vague promises and corruption. With the improvisation of the country, the canker of the American Dream has become an inseparable part of people's life. The American Dream has many facets such as "the dream of exploitation," "the dream of freedom and democracy," and "the dream of being strong and rich" (F. Wang, 2001, 88-99). The real happiness of serving does not exist in the minds of people. It reminds the readers the famous work of T.S Eliot's "The Waste Land," which depicts the emptiness of the land. The barrenness of the land reflects the absence of moral values in the life of the modern man. Modern people experience chaos and confusion of existence due to the decadence of moral values. The loud noise of this roaring modernity captures the heart and mind of men. American Dream of freedom and opportunity has become a dream of material advancement gradually. The desire for wealth and status has become almost virtuous pursuit. Many Americans were born with the American Dream.

The values of the old society are almost rejected and the rich enjoys the modernity. Politics plays a vital role in the life of people. Rich grows stronger than before and poor continues to struggle to make a space to prove their existence. Arthur Miller writes about this imbalance in his work, "On Social Plays":

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)

Arthur Miller speaks of increasing industrialization and its cruel impact on people. Many American novelists have stressed on the relationship between the individual and the society. The individual struggles for his/her space and authority.

The ideology of modern Americans varies from their forefathers. They have different objectives in their life. People travel far and wide, and seek fortune for a better life. They have not got success easily and they are guided by empty promises in the soulless modern world. The post war American was highly influenced by pain, sufferings and helplessness which provoked the young generation to undergo changes and instilled the thought in their minds to become rich in short period. The world has seen the destructive changes occurring among the youngsters. The more these youngsters get influenced towards glittering modernity, the more they get trapped. John Dos Passos has sympathized with the common people who got stuck between the struggle of the human will and social force. The real victims of this development are predominantly the working class people, who have undergone the conflict between morality and modernity. The most frequently used word in John Dos Passos's *U.S.A Trilogy* is money. Money can make a man and destroy even. The most appreciated *U.S.A Trilogy* has condemned the people's desire for amassing wealth by any means. In

the name of modernity, people exploit each other to reach their materialistic goal and it leads to overall moral degradation in the society.

John Dos Passos has planned to write a single novel but it gradually outgrew his expectations. He has spent a decade to come up with these masterpieces. In the *U.S.A. Trilogy* novels the writer brings out the core conflict which takes place between the rich and poor. The novel "*The 42nd Parallel*" is concerned with the oppression of the poor by the rich and the poor's struggle against the wealthy class. "Newsreel" deals with historical background of Passos's time, whereas "Camera Eye" deals with personal experience of the writer. It is a kind of social and cultural discussion. "The Lost Generation" people struggle to lead a peaceful life and money plays an important role in their life. The rich are not happier than the poor and it is one of the major concepts of John Dos Passos's writings. The author highlights the events related to day-to-day life of people and the issues pertaining to their hardships. He has brought out the transformation from the old beliefs of people to modernity which is primarily based on wealth and status.

The capitalists exploit the working class men for their wealth and wellbeing. The author brings out their quest for money, and struggle for power and success. The major themes of *The 42nd Parallel* are alienation, loneliness, death, frustration and loss of individuality. People who are affected by war destruct their lives further by indulging in temporary pleasures without any ethics. Material success makes people insane and spiritually dead. Hence John Dos Passos have adeptly brought out their pathetic scenario. Money is an important source of people's identity. Man with no money has no place in the materialistic society. Astonishingly, people struggle hard to fix themselves in that society where money dominates everything. This is weird to observe how people forget the moral values, spirituality, good beliefs and most importantly humanity to run in the material race. Man becomes restless and earns money illegally without thinking the dire consequences. In the race of quick money making, man has lost the noble values of life. John Dos Passos contends that America is the monopoly of the capitalists who seize all the power from the common people and the free will which they possess. The poor labour class always remains unpaid and deprived from all the facilities and power enjoyed by the wealthy class. The chain of domination is continued from one generation to another. This feeling of being exploited generates extreme anger and frustration among the youngsters which leads to the seeds of revolution.

John Ward Moorehouse is one of the most important characters appeared in *The 42nd Parallel*. He is an intuitive person and he is raised in Wilmington. He belongs to a middle class family that consists of his parents, two brothers and three sisters. There is no doubt that J. W. Moorehouse is a capitalist. Due to his high ambitious attitude, his two marriages have failed. There is no place for emotion in J. W. Moorehouse's life. He is dominated by the thought of wealth. By analyzing Moorehouse's background, one can understand the fact of his cruel, harsh and self-help principles. J. W. Moorehouse is a victim of the cruel destiny. His background is not from a wealthy family. So, his interest of achieving everything (power, money, and coition) is injected to his nerves from his childhood. His father is an alcoholic. His hunger for quick money makes him emotionally dead. His self-help attitude and robotic nature bring him distance from his first marriage with Annabelle Strang. His quest for quick money and stiff nature have created problem in the married

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life. He is a cunning exploiter. He uses his intelligence in a crooked way. Moorehouse not only masters himself in making money but also becomes an opportunist through his manipulative nature. By using wit, he has become close to his first wife and climbed first stage of success and then he targets his second wife Gertrude Staple, who helped him in his career. J. W. Moorehouse acts as a best example to study deeply the “Lost Generation.” He uses women for his own benefit; once he is done with one, he searches for another better target to fulfill his hunger for power, money and coition. He is a workaholic and he always starves for sexual pleasure to get rid of tiredness. He uses his wit rather than his muscle power. The chapter, “Old Glory” concludes with a view of J. W. Moorehouse after the breakup with his first wife Annabelle. He says:

I shall feel that when the divorce is satisfactorily arranged. I shall be entitled to some compensation for the loss of time etc., and the injury to my career that has come through your fault. I am leaving tomorrow for Pittsburgh where I have a position awaiting me and work that I hope will cause me to forget you and the great pain your faithlessness has caused me. (*The 42nd Parallel*, 186)

Moorehouse awaits the moment to wind up his relationship with Annabelle as he has planned many things after reaching Pittsburgh. It shows the lack of emotions in Moorehouse. He takes relationship as granted and focuses more on the act of minting money. In Pittsburgh, J. W. Moorehouse becomes an advertising expert for production of steel. He has developed an idea of winning public favour for his company. His powerful speech with manipulative attitude wins public attention and support. He becomes a good spokesperson of the government and manipulates public for capitalism. He provokes public and gives wrong information about the war. He creates a wrong illusion in people’s mind about the war. He tries everything to satisfy his selfish motif. He understands that the best way to conquer people is to develop their need towards him. He makes others to depend upon him. He uses his power when they approach him. He does it in such a way that his subordinates to seek his help to complete their work. In this way, he establishes his superiority over them. His starvation of success never ends in Pittsburgh as a reporter. His selfishness brings him lack of humanity to sympathize with other fellow beings and his intelligence serves alone for his ambition. Moorehouse with his shrewd nature searches a job which can be more profitable. His smart move makes him as a chief of an “Information Bureau.” For this success, he is awarded with a new marriage to wealthier woman Gertrude Staple, who belongs to a reputed family of Pittsburgh. Success keeps touching Moorehouse’s feet and carries him from the post of Chief Information Bureau to the founder of a new discipline, “Public Relations.” Like a lamp burns high just before it flickers out, Moorehouse’s unlawful material life has brought him power, name and fame just before his destruction. He never works genuinely for working class people, but his sole interest is to raise his own living standard. He is least worried about his subordinates. He becomes money monger and his only ambition is to earn money. He moves like leopard to hunt power, money and coition. The following speech shows his intensity to convince the public with his mesmerizing words:

American business has been slow to take advantage of the possibilities of modern publicity. . . education of the public and employers and employees, all equally

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servants of the public. . . co-operation . . . stockownership giving the employee an interest in the industry. . . avoiding the grave dangers of socialism and demagoguery and worse. It is in such a situation that the public relations counsel can step in a quiet manly way and say, Look here, men, let's talk this over eye to eye . . . but his main importance is in times of industrial peace. . . when two men are sore and just about to hit one another is no time to preach public service to them . . . The time for an educational campaign and an oral crusade that will drive home to the rank and file of the mighty Colossus of American up-to-date industry is right now, today. (*The 42nd Parallel*, 247)

Moorehouse creates a kind of positive impression among workers. He miraculously convinces the subordinates with his intense powerful words, which make them to work hard. He has created his market. It is transparent that the basis of this exploitation is his craving for wealth and power. He runs after wealth blindly with the illusion that it will bring happiness forever. The truth is different which is unavoidable. Short cut way to achieve success could bring miseries and not happiness. Respecting the sentiments of others is an important trait of good human. Unfortunately, Moorehouse has failed in this count. A drop of poison can make entire pure water poisonous, like wise one group of capitalist immoral gang can make the entire surrounding poisonous. Finally, the material sickness gradually destroys the rich. They crave for material success from the moment of their birth. It can be seen in the case of J.W. Moorehouse. After his first marriage, he tries to furnish his capability of exploiting people. Eleanor Stoddard, J. W. Moorehouse's platonic mistress and Eveline Hutchins, Eleanor's friend also come under his influence and they dig their own grave. The novel deals with middle class man's high career ambition and love with excessive sexual desire. Almost every character craves for temporary pleasure and indulges in merry making activities. In support of each other's company, these characters try to reach higher position by hook or crook. Only in Annabelle Strang's company, Moorehouse appears to be soft:

She sat down on the bed and began to take off her dress, a little coolly he thought, but he'd gone too far to pull back. When she took off her corset, she flung it in the corner of the room. 'There' she said. 'I hate the beastly things.' She got up and walked towards him in her chemise and felt for his face in the dark. 'What's the matter, darling? She whispered fiercely. 'Are you afraid of me?' Everything was simpler than Johnny expected. They giggled together while they were dressing. Walking back along the beach to the Ocean House, he kept thinking: 'Now she'll have to marry me.' (*The 42nd Parallel*, 172)

From the above lines, it is clear that he takes advantage of her for his self-benefit. In that context, Lady Annabelle seduces J. W. Moorehouse to fulfill her requirement, which presents the changing trend of American womanhood. The writer discloses how material success gives only temporary pleasure and permanent pain through J. W. Moorehouse. Moorehouse's barren and lonesome life stands as a testimony to the failure of American Dream. He could not get peace. He craves for comfort and consolation for his mind. He has tried to get it from women by indulging in

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promiscuity. Unfortunately, he could not get success in the endeavor. Fenian O' Hara Mc Creary known as Mac is a professional agitator and belongs to a poor family in Chicago. He manages to get job for his skill as a printer. Previously, he has failed many times to get chance to prove his skill and his worth due to his poor background. He has spent his life in selling pornographic books and travelling aimlessly over the country in search of job. He ends up in Mexico finally, when revolution sets up fire. Mac's childhood is presented in terms of acquainted, friendly and innocent connection, with the domain of minorities. He has lost his moral values and virtues to earn power and happiness.

Mac begins his career as a working class man who lives a very simple life. Mac's big ambition turns him to an evil man. His father works as a night watchman in a new Haven factory and after losing his wife, he depends on his uncle Tim along with his two kids. After the demise of his father, Mac decides to leave Chicago in quest of a better life. Mac has grown up under the guidance of his money minded uncle. In his uncle's direction and guidance, Mac comes under the influence of evils of capitalism. His hardship from the childhood as a working class poor boy has made him to have an illusion of materialistic world. His circumstances make him understand the reality of wage system. As a low class labourer, he has experienced a bitter treatment from the hands of high-class people. He makes himself to stand against the capitalism stream. His early life provokes him to have "American Dream." He travels across the continent to California, and indulges in whoring, merrymaking, boozing out and stepping at inappropriate jobs. Meandering over the Goldfield, Nevada, he joins there in the miners' strike and he listens to the inspiring speeches of Big Bill Haywood. He prints provocative flyers for the International Workers of the World (I. W. W). Then he wanders down to San Diego, where he marries Maisie Spencer, who is an ambitious middle-class girl. Maisie works at millinery department of Emporium. She is unable to manage Mac's quick money making attitude, which makes her to stay separate from him. Mac's attitude towards life never changes and his thirst for money, power and a better life drags him towards hell. He fumbles for the clarity to formulate his aspirations. It is evident from his speech:

I feel like hell. . . I wanta study an' work for things; you know what mean, not to get to be a goddam slave driver, but for socialism and the revolution an' like that, not work an' go on a bat an' work an' go on a bat like those damn yaps on the railroad.
(*The 42nd Parallel*, 67)

Mac compares himself to a bat for his variable living place. He travels different places in search of real happiness. After his breakup, he escapes to Nevada to support the local I. W. W. in their struggle against the mine owners. The hunger for success degrades Mac's values and virtue. His dream to become a rich person is shattered. Mac is represented as a pitiful character who suffers from frustration of low wage and isolation. Proletariats have been treated as human cogs to satisfy the capitalists. They are exploited emotionally and physically.

The section "Newsreels" gives a clear picture of capitalism which dominates the labour class people who sweat to create their space and profit. Mac submerges again in compromise. The writer gives wide information about strikes, class warfare and trade union to the readers. Mac is rootless

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worker who is constantly searching for idealistic power but fails to fulfill his ambition. He works day and night but unable to accomplish pride in his work. Charley Anderson, another working classman starts life as an automobile mechanic. He is a son of a boarding housekeeper in Fargo. He is also a victim of labour exploitation. Satirically, here his brother Jim is the exploiter and pays him no money. Although Charley works hard in his garage, but he is not properly paid. Even though Jim is the brother of Charley, in the Lost Generation, blood relationship does not force the owner to rethink to favour the worker. Hence it is clear that the relationship becomes immaterial before the material success. Finally, Charley gets fame as an Aviator during the World War I. He earns money as an investor and a trader in the stock market. Gradually, he adapts corrupt practices to keep a pace with the rotten rich society. He ends up tragically, as he betrays his friend and tries to take advantage of his outstanding illegal profit. He dies in an accident when he is in an inebriated state. His money and status could not accompany his bare body.

John Dos Passos begins *The Big Money* as he has ended the first one *The 42nd Parallel*. Charley Anderson is the central figure of *The Big Money*. Money plays a vital role in Charley's downfall. He craves for huge wealth and ends up tragically. He has become a part of metropolitan life. He goes brothels, enjoys in bar, and drinks alcohol. He experiments with his life and he tries different illegal methods to earn more money. He is transformed as an adequate deceiver. Through his lies, he gains success and indulges in corruption. When he faces a labour dispute at Tern Aviation, his attitude is compounded with self-justification. Putting the management's case to Bill Cermak, he blurts out a kind of illiterate self- history and the defenses of a potential bully:

But damn it, Bill, why can't you tell those guys to have a little patience . . . we're workin' out a profit sharin' scheme. I've worked on a lathe myself. . . I've worked as a mechanic all over this goddam country . . . we've got a responsibility toward our investors . . . if every department don't click like a machine, we're rooked. If the boys want a union, we'll give'em a union. You get up a meeting and tell 'em how we feel about it, but tell 'em we've got have some patriotism. (*The Big Money*, 279)

These lines show that Charley Anderson never hesitates to lie for his selfish motif. He uses all sorts of tricks to manipulate people to get his work done. Charley Anderson makes money and he learns to value it. He dies in an accident occurred in the rail road crossing. Nat Benton is a stockbroker like Anderson. Bill Cermak works under him. After the death of Bill Cermak, the unconcerned comment of Nat Benton on Cermak's death "After all, he was only a mechanic," (*The Big Money*, 288), shows the depth of the insensibility of upper class people. Bill Cermak's death does not bring any sympathy in Nat's mind and he compares harshly a man with a machine.

According to John Dos Passos, the real victims of the system are the working class people. In the trilogy, there is a constant conflict takes place between the workers and the rich people. Thus, Passos sympathizes with the working class men who are exploited by the capitalists. There is always the conflict between the rich and poor. Poor men toil hard to get material substance but in the process they lose all their noble values. Tim O'Hara blames the system:

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. . . It's the fault of the system that doesn't give a man the fruit of his labour . . . The only man the fruit of his labour . . . The only man that gets anything out of capitalism is a crook, an' he gets to be a millionaire is short order . . . But an honest working' man like John or myself we can work a hundred years and not leave enough to bury us decent with . . . And who gets the fruit of our labour, the goddam businessman, agents, middlemen who never did a productive piece of work in their life. (*The 42nd Parallel*, 13)

The system is shaping youth either by rebelling against the rich or to live in their domination. The rich exploit the poor and there is no way out for the poor to escape. The working class people work day and night for their daily wage, but the profit goes to the businessmen, agents and others. Those rebelled against are defeated by the system, and those who dominate get more benefit from it. Through the section, "Camera Eye," historical events are captured. The two major kinds of social classes are shown in the *U.S.A Trilogy*: The influential rich class consists of John Ward Moorehouse, Charley Anderson, Richard Ellsworth Savage, Eveline Hutchins, and Eleanor Stoddard, and the prototype poor class consists of Joe Williams, Ben Compton and Mary French. They suffer from the class discrimination. They all come to the end with their shattered American Dream, and lack of peace and barren mind.

In *Nineteen Nineteen*, the writer depicts the extreme impact of the war and the clash of classes. Ben Compton is the labour agitator and he turns himself as a communist. He is sentenced to penitentiary in Atlanta for his opposition. He lives with Mary French, who is a radical and devoted worker for various labour movements sponsored by communists. These two characters stand firmly on their moral values and reject material enchantment. Finally, Mary French discovers that even the values such as honesty, loyalty and comradeship are made victims of the exigencies of organized radicalism. John Dos Passos introduces Morgan as an ambitious young business man, a banker. He hails from a rich family with legacy and he touches the milestone of professional success. Morgan like other capitalists never misses a chance to double his wealth by using the favorable condition. Towards the concluding lines of the biography, he depicts the reality: "Wars and panics on the stock exchange, machine gun fire and arson, bankruptcies, war loans, starvation, lice, cholera and typhus: good growing weather for the House of Morgan" (*Nineteen Nineteen*, 293). Morgan is not less than the other opportunist. Through the portrayal of the characters who are struggling for material success but in the process losing the values of life, John Dos Passos has thrown light on the moral degradation of the society. People focus more on luxury and wealth than emotion and sentiment. They are concerned with their own welfare. In this process, man becomes insensitive and never cares for others. Material success cannot give complete happiness to man. Peace is the most important requirement for man. Unfortunately, people from "The Lost Generation" have focused much on earning money and they have frittered away their life by indulging themselves in the unwanted deeds. If there is no place for moral values, the world turns to be chaotic and lawless. It turns to be barren land as observed by T.S. Eliot in his "The Waste Land" and it is aptly echoed by John Dos Passos in his *U.S.A Trilogy*.

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