John Dos Passos's Narrative Technique in his novel 'The Big Money'

Dr Ravindra Prasad Singh
Associate Professor of English
Jagdam College, Chapra
J.P.University, Chapra, Bihar

The preoccupation with form is perhaps in the sense of' technique' as defined by Mark Schorer in the essay Technique as Discovery. Technique in fiction, according to Mark Schorer is not a supplementary element that adds embellishment to the content. In blunter terms it is not the arrangement of events to create a plot, suspense, climax and the analysis of character motivation. Technique is not something external to the content but it is only means at the disposal of a novelist "… Of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning, and finally, of evaluating it"[1].It becomes a tool towards the positive definition of the theme.

The Big Money was written by John Dos Passos in 1936. The novel covers the post-war period before the Wall Street crash of1929. Money, as the title suggests, is the presiding deity in the novel. People are completely under the sway of the big money. Money to them is the only God, the only source of power and prestige. The Big Money, written during the phase of disenchantment, naturally presents a more sombre picture of the American body –politic. He still" aims his guns … at the capitalistic system"[2], as Gordon Milne puts it, but there does not seem to be much powder in them.

The *U.S.A.* trilogy is a series of three novels by American writer John Dos Passos, comprising the novels *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932) and *The Big Money* (1936).

The Big Money makes use of all the three devices Dos Passos invented for U.S.A. The 'newsreels', as in two earlier volumes, are mixtures of newspaper headlines and advertising slogans. sentences from magazine articles and political speeches, all drawn from the moment of social history that Dos Passos is dealing with in his main narrative, Here are the vague hopes of ordinary men exactly as they are misrepresented by the songwriters and the Sunday-supplement writers or the day. In these newsreels can be found the solemn pronouncements of the "responsible" opinion-makers who are bent on keeping ordinary men in their places and are listened to earnestly by such men_ and the angry eloquence of "irresponsible" revolutionaries who want to help ordinary men and are scornfully ignored by them.

In Newsreel 44, there is a news item concerning the suppression of the democratic rights of the people: "they permitted the Steel trust Government to trample under foot the democratic rights which they had so often been assured were the heritage of the people of this country "[3]

There is unambiguous evidence of confrontation between the proprietors and the workers. In an atmosphere surcharged with tension and violence "Ship owners Demand Protection. "[4]

America's pursuit of materialism is a target of mild satire. The more one has the more one seeks and covets. Not satisfied with a Ford. one craves for a Dodge:

Just as soon as his wife discovers that every Ford is like every other Ford and that nearly everyone has one, she is likely to influence him to step into the next social group, of which the Dodge is the most conspicuous example ... The next step comes when daughter comes back from college and the family moves into a new home. Father wants economy. Mother craves opportunity for her children, daughter desires social prestige and son wants travel, speed, get-up-and-go.[5] '

The Newsreels also anticipate the violent American society of today. There are news items concerning daylight holdup, desperate revolver and crimes like murders etc.

The execution of Sacco and Vanzetti divided the nation. While there was no dearth of people who condemned and well-meaning people who viewed the support for the two men as misplaced. Here is a conservative view of the whole episode:

these are the men for whom the rabid lawless, anarchistic element of society in this country had been laboring ever since sentence was imposed, and of late they have been augmented by many good law abiding citizens who have been misled by the subtle arguments of those propagandists.[6]

Dos Passos also quotes popular songs to make relevant social comments. The following song, for example, highlights the frustration of the people:

The times are hard and the wages low

Leave her Johnny leave her

The bread is hard and the beef is salt

It's time for us to leave her.[7]

Dos Passos' attitude and sympathy are made clear by his selection of news. Ex-service men demand jobs and the jobless not at Agency.

The Americans as a nation became worshippers of the god of materialism. It leads to the evil of excessive concentration of wealth in a few hands. Materialism also created a contempt for the rights of others: "the desire for profits and more profits kept on increasing and the quest for easy money became well nigh universal. All of this meant an attempt to appropriate the belongings of others without rendering a corresponding service".[8]

Newsreels 66 highlights the official attitude towards the radicals. The radicals and the reds were viewed with extreme suspicion. Their activities were always subject to the closest scrutiny. Side by side, the encouragement that the so called scum of the earth received is also highlighted prominently.

The following selection brings out the conflicting attitude of the government and one section of the people:

"Washington Keeps Eye On Radicals"

'Arise rejected of the earth "[9]

Newsreel 65 mentions the case of Smythe who was employed testing the viscosity of lubricating oil in the Okmulgee plant of a company on July 12, 1924. One of his duties was to pour benzol on a hot vat where it was boiled down so that the residue could be examined. Day after day he breathed the fumes from the vat. One morning Smythe cut his face while shaving. The tiny wound bled copiously for hours. His teeth also began to bleed when he brushed them and when the flow failed to stop after several days he consulted a doctor. The doctor's diagnosis was that the benzol fumes had broken down the walls of his blood vessels. He remained in bed for eighteen months and could sleep only under the effect of opiates. His spleen and tonsils were removed. He was also given blood transfusions from time to time. The complaint recorded that during the whole time up to eight hours before his death, he was conscious and in pain.

Dos Passos illustrates his views on the rights of workers through the case of Smythe. The very fact that a complaint was brought on behalf of Smythe shows that the people, especially industrial workers, were becoming increasingly conscious of their rights.

The workers who assert their rights meet with resistance from the establishment. Police turn machineguns on Colorado mine strikers. As a result of the police action five are killed and forty wounded. Sometimes, the workers were ridiculed by other workers:

Sympathizers appeared on the scene just as thousands of office workers were pouring out of the buildings at the lunch hour. As they raised their placard high and started an indefinite march from one side to the other, they were jeered and hooted not only by the office workers but also by workmen on a building under construction...[10]

Another popular song throws light on the misery, poverty and exploitation of the working class:

While we slave for the bosses

Our children scream an' cry'

But when we draw our money

Our grocery bills to pay...

Not a cent to spend for clothing

Not a cent to lay away .....

But we Can not buy for our children

Our wages are too low

Now listen to me you workers

Both you women and men

Let us win for them the victory

I 'm sure it ain't no. sin . [11]

Dos Passos used the 'Camera Eye' technique less and less as his trilogy progressed and in The Big Money he used only nine pieces. Most of the Camera Eves in this novel are very general in character. It seems as if Dos Passos had realised that his personal memories were not really as important as he had originally thought them to be. James Westerhoven observes:

. . . the authorial presence in the Camera Eve is diminished dramatically; most of the observations could have been written by anyone who lived in New York during the twenties or who was emotionally involved in the Sacco and Vanzetti case.[12]

On January 15, 1922, he wrote letter to his old Harvard friend Stewart Mitchell from a terrace in Beirut;[13] the view is much as he describes it in Camera Eye 44. In February of the same year he was back in New York. The political climate did not favour left-wing radicals, and this is reflected in the incoherent explanations about the reading of a poem in a foreign language and the reference to plain-clothes policemen at the end of Camera Eye 44.

The Camera Eves 45, 46 and 47 are essentially impressionistic renderings of the Greenwich Village atmosphere in which Dos Passos spent most of the 1920's. A feeling of loneliness and isolation runs through these sections of the Camera Eye. Also present in them is an undertone of whispered discontent. Camera Eye 48 depicts the empty existence of the well-to-do during the Jazz Age. Thematically, it prepares us for the unsavoury adventures of Margo Dowling and her Cuban husband.

In 1926, Aldino Felicani, one of the organizers of the Sacco- Vanzetti defence, commissioned Dos Passos to report a motion for a new trial. Dos Passos, himself almost a foreigner by upbringing, was deeply disappointed at this miscarriage of justice in the country he wanted to call his own, and his view of the United States as his "fatherland" made the disillusion more poignant. Vanzetti's words are quoted in Camera Eye 50 and they betray hope in the face of death, but it is the hope of an idealist.

On August 23, 1927, the day of execution the realist Dos Passos feels only the weight of defeat:

... on the streets you see only the downcast faces of the beaten the streets belong to the beater; nation all the way to the cemetery where the bodies of the immigrants are to be burned we line the curbs in the drizzling rain we crowd the sidewalks elbow to elbow silent pale looking with scared eyes at the coffins we stand defeated America.[14]

In the autumn of1931 Dos Passos and Theodore Dreiser investigated the ill treatment of coalminers in Harlan County, Kentucky. There was constant friction with the police, who viewed with contempt this sort of “radical” interference in what they considered their own affairs.

Despair is the dominant mood of the last Camera Eye. Commenting on the confrontation between power and compassion, James Westerhoven writes:

although I do not think that Dos Passos wanted to conclude U.S.A. with the sanctioning of violence. one gets the distinct impression that at least he wanted his readers to understand how the oppressed workers are sometimes tempted to improve their fate through the use of

arms. Once this is understood. once the reader, out of pity or out of frightened self-interest, can be induced to take an active part in the allevation of human misery, there is a chance that violence may be avoided. only then words will have prevailed.[15]

The third new device of Dos Passos, the brief, emotionally charged 'Biographies' of representative public figures of the time, is also made use of in The Big Money. Interspersed between the fictional biographies are the biographies of Frederick Winslow Taylor, ‘‘w ho invented time-and-motion studies and became the first efficiency expert; Henry Ford, who invented mass production, Thorstein Veblen, the brilliant and eccentric sociologist who wrote The Theory of the Leisure Class; Isadora Duncan, the dancer who was half genius and half crank; Rudolph Valentino. the movie idol-, the Wright Brothers, who first flew an airplane; Frank Lloyd Wright, the architectural genius; William Randolph Hearst, the fabulously wealthy inventor of America's yellow press; and Samuel Insull, who built a huge and crooked utilities' empire. Nearly every significant aspect of the American society in the 1920's is represented in these biographies.

Dos Passos' selection of subjects for biographies in The Big Money indicates a collapse of political and economic reform movements. There are several biographies of political rebels in The Forty-Second Parallel arid Nineteen-Nineteen. In The Big Money, however, only one such biography is to be found. Dos Passos describes Veblen as an unhappy man who died feeling that his hopes for economic reorganization had been frustrated. In the contemporary society dominated by monopoly capital, Veblen experienced the sabotage of life by blind need for money profits. According to him, there are only two alternatives before the people:

…a warlike society strangled by the bureaucracies of the monopolies forced by the law of diminishing returns to grind down more and more the common man for profits, or a new matter-of-fact commonsense society dominated by the needs of the men and women who did the work and the incredibly vast possibilities for peace and plenty offered by the progress of technology.[16]

Decidedly he was for the latter. His personal views were also influenced by Deb's . These were also the years of speeches, growing labour unions and the I.W.W.'s talk about industrial democracy. Veblen fondly entertained the hope that the working class would take over the machine of production before monopoly had pushed the western nations down into the dark again. Veblen's hopes were belied by the intervention of the war. However, the war offered Veblen an opportunity to break out of the airless greenhouse of academic life he was offered a job by the Food Administration. But soon, he found the going hard there. For the Food Administration Veblen wrote two papers: in one of them he advocated granting demands of I.W.W. as a wartime measure and conciliating the working class instead of beating up and jailing all the honest leaders; in the other paper he suggested that for the efficient prosecution of the war the government should step into the place of the middleman and furnish necessities to the farmers directly in return for raw materials. But as curtailing the business of the middlemen was not at all the Administration's idea of making the world safe for democracy, Veblen had to resign his post.

After that he wrote for the Dial and lectured at the New School for Social Research. He still had a hope that engineers, technicians, the non-profiteers might take up the fight where the working class failed. But no such bold group seemed to emerge. No one seemed interested in his ideas and beliefs, and he died on August 3, 1929 as a lonely man. Among his papers was found a note in which he had wished for an inexpensive, simple burial without any tombstone, inscription or monument. Dos Passos pays a very high tribute to Veblen when he says in a magnificent imagery: "but his memorial remains riveted in to the language :the sharp clear prism of his mind."[16]

The Big Money contains a sketch of the erratic life of Isadora Duncan. One has to go beyond the biography to appreciate her importance as a symbol. Joseph Freeman is of the opinion that among radicals and liberals she was considered both the greatest living dancer and the, symbol of the body's deliverance from mid- Victorian taboos: "Isadora Duncan was not a dancer merely; she was a sublime cult. Her language Of motion foretold the time when life would be 'frank and free ', when it would proceed under the sky with happy fearlessness of faith in the beauty of its own nature."[18]

The biography of a genuine artist like Isadora is followed by that of Rudolph Valentino. Valentino w as a very popular film star and wherever he went ''the streets were jumbled With hysterical faces waving hands, crazy eyes … his valets removed young women from under his bed; all night in night clubs and cabarets actresses leching for stardom made sheepseyes at him under their mascaraed lashes ."[19]

Dos Passos's attitude towards the motion picture star is sympathetic but he makes fun of the crazy fans and aspirants.

The biography of Frank Lloyd Wright, the ambitious architect, is related to Dos Passos' own life. Dos Passos, who wanted to study architecture, became one of the significant structural innovators among modem novelists. Dos Passos says that wright has tried to apply new materials, skills and inventions to human needs. But man's needs include social reform. The novelist comments:

Perhaps in spite of himself the arrogant draftsman, the dilettante in concrete, the bohemian artist for wealthy ladies desiring to pay for prominence with the startling elaboration of their homes has been forced by the logic of uses and needs, by the lifelong struggle against the dragging undertow of money in mortmain, to draft plans that demand for their fulfilment a new life; only in freedom can we build the Usonian city. His plans are coming to life. His blueprints, as once Walt Whitman's words, stir the young men: Frank Lloyd Wright, patriarch of the new building, not without honor except in his own country.[20]

In the biographies of Frederick Winslow Taylor, Henry Ford and the Wright brothers, Dos Passos states that manufacturers and technicians have, no insight into the needs of the society that they seek to create. Taylor saw nothing wrong with men becoming Cogs in the industrial wheel. He was so naive that he believed that the industrialist would let him increase wages as he made gears turn more rapidly. When he began to pay his men in proportion to the increased efficiency of their work, the 'Inventor of efficiency ' was unceremoniously fired.

The biography of Henry Ford suitably illustrates the theme of 'Big Money'. From a simple mechanic boy in a Detroit machine shop he rose to become the richest man of the world. He had been nuts about machinery. First he designed watches, then a steam tractor, then a horseless carriage with an engine, then a mechanical buggy, and an automobile. He also had ideas other than designing of motors carburettors, jigs and fixtures,punches and dies;he had ideas about sales, "that the big money was in economical quantity production, quick turnover, cheap interchangeable easily replaced standardized parts …"[21]

When the war broke out he also manufactured munitions, tanks, submarines etc. and by 1922 he was the richest man in the world. When after the wall Street Crash in 1929 the stock market bubble burst, Ford said jubilantly: "Serves you right for gambling and getting in debt. The country is sound."[22]

The great slump was followed by mass unemployment and the hungry masses asking for work were shot at. The novelist comments:

But when the country on cracked shoes, in frayed trousers, belts tightened over hollow bellies, idle hands cracked and chapped with the cold of that coldest March day of 1932, started marching from Detroit to Dearborn, asking for work and the American Plan, all they could think of at Ford's was machineguns ... "[23]

It is a sad commentary on 'Big Money' that Henry Ford, in his old age, lived besieged on his father's farm, in constant fear of being murdered by the unemployed and the hungry. According to Landsberg,

Ford's biography offers a particularly ironic example of 'cultural lag': : one of the creators of mass production and hence of the modem American economy, Ford cling to his mother's precepts and thinks that the Great Depression is due to people's gambling and getting into debt.[24]

In the biography of William Randolph Hearst, Dos Passos focuses attention on the rising threat of fascism. Since the twenties he had been aware of the growing dimensions of fascism. He was apprehensive that the industrialists would seek to inflict it on the United States. Dos Passos was of the opinion that through his control of newspapers and through his power in Hollywood, Hearst was poisoning the minds of the least responsible section of the public. Hearst was an admirer of Hitler's Reich : "praising the comforts of Baden-Baden under the blood and bludgeon rule of Handsom Adolph (Hearst' own loved invention, the lowest common denominator come to power out of the rot of democracy)…[25]

The final biography is that of Samuel Insull. The biography contains a hint of optimism. The Insull Empire falls in the stock market crash. When the Roosevelt administration — which was renewing Dos Passos' hope in American government — extradites Insull and places him on trial, the leading business men rally round to him. Driven to the wall by the prosecuting attorney, who by this time had made himself thoroughly unpopular with his rude insinuating questions, the old man blurted out that there had been errors in accounting amounting perhaps to ten millions of dollars, but Insull maintained that they had been honest errors. Insult was pronounced 'not guilty'.

The new directors of his old company restored to him the pension of twenty-one thousand a year. The investors may have been mined but Insull was mined too. The captain went down with the ship. The old man told the reporters, "after fity years of work, my job is gone."[26]

Because of its obvious dependence for ideological basis on Veblen, U.S.A. seems a sombre and negative book; yet it contains a tentative, affirmation. According to Walter B.Rideout,

The positive hope of U.S.A. comes from Walt Whitman, of whose revolutionary quality Dos Passos wrote in answering the Modern Quarterly questionnaire. Even more than in Manhattan Transfer one sees that Whitman' love of the American spoken word lies behind Dos Passos' own colloquial style in the stories, and like the poet, the novelist has tried to include, not just New York, but all America in his work. Equally important, Dos Passos looks for the cure of his sick country, not to a dictatorship of the proletariat, but to restoration — the word is significant — of the democratic vista[27].

References:

1. Perspective On Fiction, Edited by James L Calderwood and E Harold Toliver(Oxford University Press,1968),p.200.

2. W.Gordon Milne, "John Dos Passos' in The Politics of the Twentieth Century Novelists. Ed. George Panichas (New Yok:Thomas Y.Crowell Co.,1974),p.271.

3. Twelve Great American Novels,p.737.

4. Ibid.,p.737.

5. Ibid.,p.744.

6. Ibid.,p.750 .

7. Ibid.,p.750.

8. Ibid.,p.887.

9. Ibid.,p.1105.

10. Ibid.,p.1151.

11. Ibid.,p.1153.

12." Autobiographical elements in the Camera Eye",p.362.

13. Fourteenth Chronicle,p.348-349.

14. Fourteenth Chronicle,p.348-349.

15. " Autobiographical elements in the Camera Eye",p.364

16.U.S.A.,p.812.

17. Ibid.,p.815.

18.Joseph Freeman, An American Testament (New York: Farrar and Rinrhart,1936),p.61.

19. U.S.A.,p.884.

20. Ibid.,p.1080.

21. Ibid.,p.771.

22. Ibid.,p.775.

23. Ibid.,p.775.

24.Dos Passos' Path to U.S.A.,p.197.

25. U.S.A.,p.1116.

26. Ibid.,p.1161.

27.Walter B Rideout, The Radical Novel in the United States:1900-1954(Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press,1966),p.162.