

Dos Passos and The Socialist Revolution In *Adventures of A Young Man*

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ABSTRACT

John Dos Passos spent his entire life in supporting the cause of the weak and the downtrodden. He was a radical thinker and a champion of the proletariats like John Steinbeck. In this research paper, the radical and socialistic vision of Dos Passos is analyzed depicted in his two famous novels *Adventures of a Young Man* and *Midcentury*. Both the novels highlight the culmination of his philosophy of freedom and an expression of his passionate concern for the poor and the downtrodden. John Chamberlain in his article “Two Novelists at War with Each Other” published in *Saturday Review*, June, 1930 observed that Dos Passos emerges as a “hard minded realist” and “a radical historian of the class struggle” (Chamberlain 14). Samuel Sillen in his article “Misadventures of John Dos Passos” published in *New Masses* attacked Dos Passos and Sinclair Lewis who had published *The Prodigal Parents*. He argued that both the novels are “rotten” based on the fictitious material. The plot of the novel *Adventures of Young Man* is full of “hollow characters, machine-made dialogue.” The plot is built on “narrow sectarian impulse.” Dos Passos was passing through a period of crisis when he wrote *Adventures of Young Man* since his faith in the Communists had dwindled. He had already spent some time in Russia and was skeptical about the Russian trials but his Spanish experience was horrible and disappointing. Samuel Sillen further argues that the novel *Adventures of Young Man* is the product of his

disillusioned mood since the workers were being defeated and killed everywhere. Glenn is thrown out into the steaming water of capitalism and the plot dramatizes the heart rending scenes of violence, and treachery of the class war.

Keywords: Freedom, Socialist Revolution, Radical, Disillusionment, Capitalism, Violence, Treachery

Introduction

Edmund Wilson in a letter written to Dos Passos on 16th July 1939, expressed his dissatisfaction with the plot and themes of the novel: “And it seems to me that you have substituted for the hopes, loves, wounds, exhilarations, and depressions of Glenn a great load of reporting of externals which have an organic connection with your subject” (Wilson 5). Interestingly, the story of Glenn Spotswood is given a political color by Dos Passos. He is a college graduate, young and energetic and only twenty nine years old. The first twenty pages of the novel describe his early life. His father was also a staunch idealist who was sacked because of his pacifist stance in World War1. Glenn came under the influence of idealism of his father and soon he became a radical and the leader of young Americans, who were passionate to fight against injustice and for the rights of working men. Glenn soon joined the Revolutionary Movement and joined Spanish Civil War for the restoration of Second Spanish Republic.

Rosen observes that Dos Passos gives his anti-communist vision in this novel since he was disappointed by the working of the Communist Party in Russia and Spain. He had visited Russia and was aggrieved to see the loss of liberty and the political developments there. In the novel *Adventures of a Young Man* he articulates his first hand experience about the future of the Communist Party in America and Europe. Rosen argues that in his latest fiction Dos Passos produces “stereotyped characters” in depicting his tone, individualists who are victimized by heartless Stalinist bureaucrats. Foucault observes in his *Prison Talk* that power makes people mad:

Power makes men mad, and those who govern are blind; only those who keep their distance from power, who are in no way implicated in tyranny, shut up in

their Cartesian people, their room, their meditations, only they can discover the truth.(Foucault 51)

Dos Passos had spent a long time to explore the destructive aspect of the power structure as he wrote in 1950 in his *The Theme is Freedom* thus:

In the United States we call it capitalism. If you go over to England you'll find people behaving in much the same way but calling it socialism. In the Soviet Union and its satellite states you'll find a remarkable similar social structure going under the name of dictatorship of the proletariat, the government of a great American Corporation. (Passos 251)

Glenn is passionate to improve the lonely, sick and backward youth giving them a purpose of life; he wants them to overthrow the contradictions of capitalism. He wants to become a glorified proletariat to help to bring awareness in him and the noble masses. Glenn is important in the novel not as a character but an honest radical. The party line changes and Glenn is made to suffer physical and psychological pain. Glenn returns to New York but he begins hating God and becomes a heretic. His own comrades turn hostile to him and soon he is expelled for subversive opinions. His idealism proves counter-productive. He is blacklisted and has no place anywhere in the world. At last like Lord Byron, who being ostracized by the English community struggled for the War of Greek Independence and died there, Glenn is killed as a Trotskyism traitor. The radical journey of Glenn is quite thrilling and sensational; his adventures are well adapted to point social morals and his pilgrimage leads him to explore the true and hypocritical nature of the bourgeoisie. Dos Passos has depicted the class struggle between proletariat and the bourgeoisie through the character of Glenn.

Glen accumulates multifarious experiences; he works in a youth camp and shows his earthy passion with a nymph of the coal mines. But soon he is betrayed by his own cronies of New York. Glenn decides to go to Spain because his journey to Spain brings a decisive turn in his life. In the story line his plan is unconvincing because it is motivated by Dos Passos' cynicism. He gets the report that "in Russia they've starved them deliberately." John Chamberlain reviewed the novel *Adventures of a Young Man* in *Saturday Review* on June 1939 observed that Dos Passos "travelled in France, Spain, Mexico and took notice of demonstrations, repression

and revolutions and conventions.” He further observed that “his instinctive, all pervasive sympathy for the underdog has caused the communists to hail him, at various times, as Number one Literary Fellow Traveler, the grand-daddy of the modern proletarian novel.” Chamberlain explored the circumstances that led to the writing of this novel; the novel is a “satire on the American movement, particularly as it has come under the sway of the communists” (Chamberlain 14). Glenn’s father always exhorted him to reach at the top level of life being an idealist: “You know, I always tried to impress it on you boys that no matter how overcrowded the professions are, there’s always room at the top” (Passos, *Adventures of a Young Man* 125). Dos Passos created an idealist character in this novel to explore the ambitions of American youth in the post-war America. But the critics flayed Dos Passos for his over ambitious idealism. The critical analysis of the text of *Adventures of a Young Man* is appalled by the power structure of bureaucratic government in American life. Common man has always suffered as common and has only exchanged masters. The rule of oligarchy had exploited and oppressed the poor and the downtrodden in America. Dos Passos’ novel *Adventures of a Young Man* voices the cry of protest on behalf of all mankind. Glenn condemns industrial society for its emphasis on greed and materialism and its evil institutions.

Glenn is an idealist and believes that the real meaning of life can be found only in Spain. His voice of protest is muted by an underlying note of despair. Glenn has a cosmopolitan outlook; he dedicates his life to gain social consciousness; an acute awareness and concern for the liberty and individuality of individuals which comprise an associative system. Dos Passos has depicted the true nature of the labor leaders in the novel who use all fair and foul means to crush the individuality of common man.

When the novel *Adventures of a Young Man* appeared the critics and the reviewers expressed their divergent views on the plot and themes of the novel. They expressed their surprise over the issues raised by Dos Passos and many of them including Edmund Wilson agreed that *Adventures of a Young Man* is a shoddy literary job. Mr. Hansen in his *World-Telegram* says, for example, that “what I miss in the book is evidence of the mental struggle in Glenn during various stages of his career, a fairly serious defect in view of the fact that Glenn’s development is presumably the

theme of the book”. Clifton Fadiman of the *New Yorker* had the feeling that by omitting the “childhood experiences, youthful sex contacts, and all the rest of the regulation development-novel paraphernalia” (Fadiman 123).

Dos Passos' *Adventures of a Young Man* is concerned with the social, moral and political issues. The issue of integrity of man is the chief concern of the plot of the novel. Glenn suffers and dies because he is serious about his integrity. Pessimism is the main force in this novel. Most of the characters suffer from cheap political gimmicks. The ideas of Dos Passos are revolutionary since he struggles to expose the degeneration of the political parties. He is now concerned and struggles to defend his integrity against it. Dos Passos faces a dichotomy like Matthew Arnold's Hebraism and Hellenism. He was contemptuous of men who spent their life in a meaningless manner without any chance of self-expression. Dos Passos refused to accept the reality of industrialization. According to Granville Hicks: “It does startle us to discover that the man who prominently among his contemporaries, has refused to dodge industrialism began by repudiating it” (Hicks 7). Dos Passos once admitted that he once joined hands with the “gullibles and dupes” during the 1920s and published his famous treatise *The Theme is Freedom* (1956). Dos Passos speaks of the Sacco-Vanzetti case and of the effect it had on his future plan of action. He also explored the real working of the Mexican agreement in anachronisms.

Foucault always opposed the oppressive power structure as he saw power in the hands of capitalistic businessmen who employed strategies to exploit and crush the individuals. The chief concern of Dos Passos is with that Leviathan society striving weakly to adjust itself to the new industrial world order. When he wrote the novel *Adventures of a Young Man* he had begun thinking of masses of people rather than of isolated individuals. Edmund Wilson commented in 1929 thus:

Dos Passos is apparently a socialist revolutionist; he believes that, in the United States, as elsewhere. The present capitalistic regime is some day destined to be overthrown by a class-conscious proletariat. (Wilson 28)

Glenn is the real spokesman of Dos Passos whose social conscience can't stand the injustice as he continues to struggle for the release of the workers. He fails to understand the psyche of the

party workers. Their ideology remains ambiguous as they stand still for the injustice committed on the workers. His sense of right and wrong becomes problematic and he gets blacklisted by the Party. He is shocked to see that the Communists are power hungry and their lust of power dismayed him. Glenn takes a drastic decision and leaves them for the Spanish Civil War but he meets the same kind of oppressive power structure. Glenn believes that the excess of power is suicidal for the growth of an individual. Glenn didn't go to any school and he never received formal education. He expresses his disgust when his father refused to support him on this issue: "It's all been bad news since Mother died....I guess I won't be able to go to Columbia" (Dos Passos, *Adventures of a Young Man* 17). He learns the lessons of life as a laborer in the Midwest hanging out with Wobblies. Dos Passos depicts the disillusionment of Glenn with the American culture. His association with the communistic movements also brings him sufferings. He believes that the American culture and the social set up is inimical to working class people. Glenn joins the movement with full zeal expressing his strong need to do something worthwhile for the betterment of the labor class. Glenn explored the relationship between man and machine and found that machine has been very cruel to the workers. He expresses his disgust for the machine highlighting the plight of the labor class: Paul tells Glenn:

"Wasn't any skin off your ass?"

"But it wasn't fair, it was his fault for letting fats go on the trip"

"You'd ought to kept your mouth shut." (Passos 23)

Dos Passos' novel *Adventures of a Young Man* represented the movement of the common people. He cleared his position in the essay, *The New Masses* thus:

As mechanical power grows in America general ideals tend to restrict themselves more and more to Karl Marx, the first chapter of Genesis and the hazy scientific mysticism of the Sunday supplements. (Passos 81)

Dos Passos' novel *Adventures of a Young Man* is a political novel; it is not a romantic comedy as the hero Glenn is not interested in sexual pleasures or in the love of women. He is a committed socialist and is ambitious to bring change in the life of the workers. The novel depicts the oppressive nature of the American culture; Glenn finds the society repressive as he closely

observes the miserable life of the migrant workers. Sinclair Lewis also took up the theme of the migrant labor in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) challenging the American society. The plot of *The Grapes of Wrath* records the history and lives of dislocated, poor, white, share cropping farmers from Oklahoma. Steinbeck took up this theme and articulated the plight of the proletariats. Lewis became the spokesman of the lower class or “the American Underclass:” those “people who stuck at the bottom”, Steinbeck hits at the machines that enslave the farmers. He vilifies the men that work as the machines. Glenn’s revolutionary ideas are inspired by Mike Gulick who was an economist of Columbia University.

In the Post-World War era, the writers expressed their revolutionary zeal and expressed their passion to defend the Soviet Union as Throp states: “They must join force with the International Union of Revolutionary writers in fighting fascism defending the Soviet Union and strengthens the revolutionary labor movement all over the world” (Throp 127). Dos Passos, Edith Wharton and John Steinbeck wrote about the loneliness and frustration of the Americans who keenly observed the callous working of the urban industrial culture. The emergence of the middle class industrial capitalism destroyed the identity and individuality of the individuals. The workers who worked in the coal fields, in the mines and in the factories suffered loss of identity and oppression because of the growing power structure. The strike culture became popular in America after the World War 1, because of the cultural transformation and industrialization. John Steinbeck depicted the scenes of strikes of the plantation migrant workers in *The Grapes of Wrath* and Dos Passos presents Glenn who organizes the strike supported by the miners.

Dos Passos wrote *Adventures of a Young Man* to depict the unsettled life of the workers of the middle class. They had to move from one place to the other in search of jobs. Dos Passos articulates his ideas about the future of Communism and the survival of the workers in a capitalistic society. He never belonged to Communist Party and never organized a strike in his life. He simply watched the political events of Spain and Russia.

Glenn is not a follower of Stalin and his oppressive policies that brought about the reign of terror in Russia. Glenn hates a heavy centralization of power. Glenn becomes a radical to fight for the rights of the middle-class workers through intellectual persuasion but soon he gets disillusioned

and has his head bashed in by the selfish leaders of the Communist Party. Glenn is enamored by the Marxian ideology but Foucault explores the Marxian ideology in his writings:

As regards Marxism, I'm not one of those who try to elicit the effects of power at the level of ideology. Indeed, it wouldn't be more materialist so to study first the question of the body and the effects of power on it. (Foucault 58)

Dos Passos has examined the psyche of Glenn; his radical vision and an analysis of his development as a hero of the poor masses. Dos Passos' main concern is to repair the society; Glenn also struggles to explore the cause of cancerous growth of society. Glenn is not concerned about the romance and sexuality but about the sufferings of poor workers who are living in darkness. He realized that the Americans are living in an industrial age. No amount of wishing can do away with the complication inherent in industrial society. Foucault discusses the relation between labor and the capitalist.

The novel *Adventures of a Young Man* represents great concentration of power. The head of the New Deal agency is a character of many vices and the idealists Paul Gravis has to face the crimes and fallacies of the Roosevelt administration which leads America to the depression. In the beginning, Dos Passos had supported liberalism but the critics claimed that he changed his allegiance from the liberal to the conservative by the time he wrote *Adventures of a Young Man* during the late 1930s.

The major characters of the novel, Gladys, Paul, Glenn discuss the world situation in a scene after supper one night and argue about the merits of communism. They also discuss in detail the cruelties of the power structure of bureaucratic organization like the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Glenn is hopeful that capitalism is on the verge of total collapse and very soon the economic problems will get better in Russia. The American workers are also getting united to fight out the oppression of capitalism. The Revolution of the workers is at hand and Glenn expresses his hope to bring total transformation in society. Gladys is apprehensive of the success of the union of the party workers and claims that the real proletarian guys he has talked to are pessimistic of foreign ideas. Glenn is shocked to know about the reality of the working of the political party and its

methods and goals. He thinks back over his past actions and broods over the future of American society while travelling by bus. The problem with Glenn is his incapacity to solve the problems as he fails to solve the dilemma. He goes on changing jobs and never feels settled. Glenn becomes a dishwasher and “found himself up to his armpits in grease for ten hours a day” (Passos 56). Glenn is a proletariat who has multiple experiences. Most of the characters get interested in Glenn and his experiences. Glenn’s vision of life is regressive and not progressive. He is welcomed as they are anxious to listen to him.

Glenn believes that the State machinery is oppressive. Glenn has the revolutionary spirit and passion to transform the society. He remains committed to the ideal of revolution as he confides with his father: “But, Dad, only the revolutionary working class, following in the lead of the Russian working class, can really give us world peace” (Passos 110). But Glenn remains confused and bewildered as he says: “I don’t know what I am” (Passos 88). Glenn has full sympathy with the revolutionaries as he says: “I don’t see how you can talk against extremists when the whole capitalist system is tottering on the brink” (Passos 100).

Glenn is an exceptional character of Dos Passos who has to pay for his idealism and heroism. He is the honest radical who wants to bring positive transformation. Irving claims that Dos Passos is vividly describing the destructive effect of the economic policies of the government followed after the World War 1 in America and the reaction of the middle class workers. The majority of the people were in the grip of confusion which follows and the masses turn to the Party for leadership and good governance. Glenn’s positive attempt is misunderstood; his plans are dampened by the selfish leaders of the Party. Glenn encounters one leader: “Our function is to educate the American working class in revolutionary Marxism. We are not interested in the fates of individuals” (Passos 929). Glenn is shocked to find out the false and misleading ideas of the leaders of the party. He is shocked to find that the Party manipulates and allows some of them to go to the prison and he calls it “democratic centralism.” The central Bureau of the Party is dominating oppressive and despotic. Glenn sarcastically remarks that “parties and politics are built on hate” (Passos 30). The plot of the novel *Adventures of a Young Man* is not a story of crime and punishment but it is a tale of pessimism, disillusionment exposing the weaknesses of

the workers; their defeats and the oppressive power of Political Party. The novel *Adventures of a young Man* of Dos Passos is a harrowing tale of a young American radical belonging to middle – class.

To conclude, the novel *Adventures of a Young Man* is about the struggles of American youth. Dos Passos was a passionate supporter of the Marxian ideology and believed in strikes and revolution to transform the society and to overthrow capitalism in America. But in this novel he expresses his disgust for the Communist Party which is based on the oppressive power structure. Glenn's sacrifices his life for the identity of the workers. He believes that real democracy can be established in America while oppressing the working class. The novel *Adventures of a Young Man* is a classical novel of Dos Passos articulating his political vision.

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