International Journal of Language , Literature , Culture and History Studies
Vol. 1 , NO.1 , P:34-42
Received: 29 Nov 2018
Accepted: 25 Feb 2019

The "instinct of Workmanship" in Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* Trilogy

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Abstract

Research on Dos Passos's U.S.A. trilogy has mostly been focused on its technicalities or the notion of the American Dream and the cultural issues from a non-Veblenian point of view. Though Veblen's The Theory of the Leisure Class has been used in researches on U.S.A., and considering Veblen's influence on Dos Passos, still no study of the concept of efficiency has been conducted within a framework based on Veblen's theoretical views. In this study, an attempt is made to investigate in what way the life-styles of the characters who come from the lower classes are under the influence of the financial struggles and their devotion to the higher leisure class. The interpretation of Dos Passos's trilogy will be anchored in a Veblenian philosophical framework for the novelist's characters' motives will be more palpable once Veblen's critical terminology is employed.

Key Words: Dos Passos, Veblen's The Theory of the Leisure Class, The U.S.A. Trilogy, Efficiency.

Introduction

The term leisure class, propounded by Veblen, refers to the upper social classes who, through accumulating wealth and lavish expenditure, can afford both the time and the money required for observing put in evidence either by spending a life of leisure "before the eyes of the spectators" or "indirectly, through the exhibition of some tangible and lasting results of the leisure so spent" [1]. Idleness has the potential to show wealth since other groups simply cannot afford it. Unproductive expenditures of time, spending time on "various forms of domestic music and other household art; of the latest properties of dress, furniture, and equipage; of games [and] sports" are only some of the examples of displaying one's ability to afford idleness [1].

The members of the leisure class tend to shun activities that do not connote leisure. Complying with such expectations will bring them a higher level of honor, prestige, social status, and acquaintances through all the niceties expected of their social standing. Leisure, therefore, connotes a "non-productive consumption of time" since it shows the "ability to afford a life of idleness,"

which they can lead a life of leisure. Accordingly, wasting money and time while not producing anything is reputable since, together, they signify one's ability to afford a leisurely and futile life, which are also the essential prerequisites of gaining social repute and climbing the social ladder. Therefore, reputability is contingent upon "Conspicuous abstention from labour" [1] since it is marked as one's social standing by convention.

On the other hand, the members of the lower classes who do not possess enough wealth to live a life of leisure tend to gain others' respect through the "dislike of waste and the adaptation of a way of thinking" that is based on useful work [2]. This form of relationship has given shape to a "predatory upper class" which "denigrates

productive labor and enlists women and lower class men to do the work for them so they can freely engage in the more 'honorable' occupations […] which in turn become the basis for further wealth, status [and] waste" [3]. Whereas the leisure class members enjoy the opulence of waste and idleness for they are exempted "from work and pecuniary cares" for the other less pecuniary powerful members the struggle for reputability is "possible only within the field of productive efficiency and thrift" by which their work is measured [1].

Veblen calls this aptitude or propensity for efficiency the "instinct of workmanship," an instinct that obliges anyone in the service of the leisure class to put his or her efficiency and usefulness in evidence not only through their complete devotion to their wealthy masters but also by trying to master the expected standards of consumption and taste of the leisure class [1]. The disadvantaged classes who cannot afford the luxury of releasing themselves from economic struggles, may have to spend a life time providing services for the leisure class in exchange for a livelihood. Their very economic survival will rely on the wealthier classes who in turn need the services of the penurious classes for their own survival as a higher member.

The lower classes, since they are economically less fortunate and are directly involved in labor, will have to use their energy, time and money that maximizes their efficiency. Considering waste of time and non-productivity shameful, the worker is "resistant and opposed to the tastes of those higher up the social hierarchy" [4] and therefore, "can hardly ever extricate his art and skill from his trade and invest it somewhere else" [5]. What they take pride in is the labor which is "their recognised and accepted mode of life" [1]. Veblen does not give any specific name to this group of people. Nor does he characterize them as a group and simply calls them "certain portions of the population which are ancillary to [the leisure] class" [1].

Veblen's theory of the leisure class and his concept of efficiency defined new principles for the modern world which quickly permeated the atmosphere of his time, shaping a fresh understanding for the novelists who rose against the unfair social discriminations, including several "scholarly studies as well as novels and popular media, from the works of novelist John Dos Passos to Fortune Magazine" [6]. His arguments opened a theoretical window through which Dos Passos looked upon the consumer society of the 1900s. Dos Passos's U.S.A., rendering the modern individual life of New York while including a "full range of social classes […] managing to get all of New York's diverse people, nationalities, and occupations" [7], is a source for capturing how those individuals who came from impecunious families, seemed to struggle to find a prestigious standing trying to associate and devote themselves to the wealthy leisure class members.

Efficiency

Janey, coming from a poor family, fills her time going "window-shopping" and stopping "for a soda" since she did not have money to buy anything when she was younger [8]. As she grows older, she plans to get a job as soon as possible. She even puts "her name down at an employment agency" but is shocked when the agent "showed her the waiting list of expert stenographers [8]. Being at "a disadvantage so far as free choice is concerned" [5] and not being afford to enjoy idleness, she takes the first job she is offered and becomes J. Ward Moorehouse's personal stenographer, who happens to be a wealthy member of the leisure class.

Mary, working for Moorehouse, likes to keep herself busy and remarks that to her, people in Paris "waste a great deal of time," and that "Leisure's all right if you have something to do with it [9]. She notices that the leisure class "wastes so much of [their] time … people come to lunch and stay all afternoon," but does not realize that "The French value their leisure more than

anything" [9] and that the upper classes are "interested in treating food as an art form" [4] for it can be venerable for those who can actually afford it. Leisure, which necessitates exclusion from any kind of labor, is "beautiful and ennobling in all civilised men's eyes" [1] because such non-productive activities require time to waste and the prowess to pay. Janey cannot understand that gaining reputability through production and efficiency belongs solely to the lower classes and the higher classes obtain that reputability by being wasteful.

As J. Ward's personal stenographer, she is told that "sometimes the work was simply killing" and it will be hard to "get through" [8]. However, she is pleased with her job and the way she gets "to the office feeling bright and crisp with her dress feeling neat and her hair in nice order" [8]. Moorehouse, however, never really pays attention to her and rarely ever looking at her directly; he speaks to her only when he needs her to take care of the things he does not want to do himself or when he wishes to give her some instruction.

Janey does not actually get to meet Ward until "When things were closing up at five" [8]. He usually asks her to come earlier or to leave later because he needs her help to take care of the work left undone whereby she happily obliges for she feels as if she is the only person capable of doing things that all the other typists were so incompetent in handling. Moorehouse, being wealthy, enhances his well-being by avoiding any kind of labor while Janey, whose fanincial survival depends on Moorehouse, is content to direct all her service "to the furtherance of [her] master's fulness of life" [1].

Janey's whole day is spent thinking about Moorehouse and the way he dresses or if he is late or not. She puts flowers in his office, sorts his mails, lays his "letters in a neat pile" and takes care of almost all the work in the office just to please J. Ward [8]. She feels good working in an office where she is put "right in the midst of headline"

[8] for it makes her feel a member of the leisure class proper.

Also, Janey likes to work for J. Ward for it gives her a sense of efficiency (not waste) in time. In return, she receives the admiration she desires from both J. Ward and Eleanor, feeling valuable and efficient although she looks tired all the time. She likes the fact that she is known as an important associate of J. Ward, helping him around for, as an example, when she is introduced to Dick, Eleanor calls her "a treasure" loudly to make her feel useful but whispers to Dick that she "does more work than anybody in the whole place" [9].

In marked contrast to the women of the leisure class who are expected to waste and consume wastefully, Janey likes to be recognized as a dutiful and efficient lady. Not being conversant with the standards of leisure, she wonders "How can anybody expect to get through their work in a place where they take three hours for lunch and sit around drinking in those miserable cafes the rest of the time?" [9]. She takes great pride in two issues: first, her being J. Ward's "reliable stenographer" and, second, her having "to do all the typing beside [her] secretarial duties" [9].

She is employed for two reasons. First, being unable to live comfortably without the help of a Janey, Moorehouse hires her for there are "too many 'social duties,' and […] that the work to be done is too severe and that there is too much of it" [1]. In other words, Janey is needed for the service she can provide, like taking care of J. Ward's letters, typing and making copies. Moreover, Moorehouse strongly discourages any change concerning Janey's job, since if the conditions are to change or if Janey does not carry all the minor tasks for him, he will have to do them all by himself and, thus, will not be able to live as leisurely as always.

Another character whose life is devoted to Moorehouse is Dick. Though earning more money than Janey, Dick is also

dependent on Moorehouse for both his salary and his social standing. Working in J. Ward's office is better-paid than all the jobs he has ever had because after starting to work for Moorehouse, he can afford living more comfortably, for instance, he can hail a taxi "whenever he wanted to now" [9]. After years of working for J. Ward, Dick establishes a name for himself as a publicity and as "one of Moorehouse's bright young men" [10]. Dick's status is very much dependent on J. Ward for he is esteemed highly only when recognized as Moorehouse's agent.

Veblen calls this group of people the "impecunious gentlemen of leisure" who are "pecuniary weaker" and thus "fall into a system of hierarchical gradation" where they are regarded as lower compared with the other "gentlemen of leisure" and must "affiliate themselves by a system of dependence or fealty to the great ones" or patrons if they wish to "lead a life of leisure" [1]. Although this group of people is generally revered, they do not share the same respectable and reputable status as the leisure class. Their presence is generally for the benefit and comfort of the leisure class, helping the leisure class members focus their energy on their decorous leisure life-style. The leisure class will have these groups of people take care of the minor tasks, like typing or answering the phone calls, so much so that they can divert their own attention away to other tasks such as theatre going or parties which give the impression "of a pecuniarily blameless life" [1].

Similar to Janey, Dick's presence is very much needed for his service can and does exempt Moorehouse from carrying many of the tasks himself. Dick always hopes to get married and have a family of his own but his position in J. Ward's office holds him back. In other words, he does not want to get married for it can be a hindrance to his efficiency. He also helps eliminate anyone who stands "in the way of the efficiency of the office" [10]. The only thing that seems

to matter to Dick is to help the office work as efficiently as possible.

J. Ward does not really do much except telling Janey or Dick what to do. However, both Dick and Janey are also always worried about him for they believe he looks tired from working too much. They both stay single for marriage seems like a trap that can impede their honorific efficiency and devotion to a leisure class member. They are there in order not to let J. Ward do any sort of work; that is to say, their job is to serve their master whose satisfaction is the proof of their efficiency. Dick, for instance, stays awake one night while his "eyes felt hollow and his head throbbed," only to delight J. Ward "with his work," or smiles obsequiously When J. W. smiles [10].

Conclusion

The content of the story is very much affected by the prominent sociologist Thorestein Veblen's philosophical framework in The Theory of the Leisure Class, to the extent that we could argue Dos Passos's U.S.A. is the manifestation of Veblen's theory in action. Dos Passos's broadened viewpoint towards the culture of his community and the consumers' taste was very much the result of his reading Veblen's seminal studies. The content of Dos Passos' trilogy shows how the lower classes, who are in constant financial struggles, try to devote their whole life to the wealthy leisure class members who use their constraining financial prowess to live wastefully.

In the U.S.A. trilogy, characters such as Dick and Janey provide good examples because, for one thing, they both are in constant financial struggles and, for another, because both of them devote their whole attention and life to the service of Moorehouse who wishes to live more leisurely by not engaging in any sort of menial task. Not being able to release themselves from financial struggles, both Dick and Janey seem to take pride in working for Moorehouse for they try to

avoid anything that can be a hindrance to their efficiency.

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