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Women & Capitalism in *The Big Money*

John Dos Passos' novel *The Big Money*, which is the last volume of his *U.S.A.* trilogy, is typically read as an exclusively socialist text that deals with socio-economic and class issues, namely the power struggle between the proletariat and bourgeoisie. Although this is an accurate reading, there is another major theme of conflict present within the novel – a gender struggle concerned with women and the extent to which they survive and succeed in a capitalist society. While women in Modernist literature are not quite villains, they are generally represented negatively. Take for example Hemingway's Lady Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises*, Fitzgerald's Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* or Anita Loos' Lorelei in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. All of these women are portrayed as manipulative, selfish, mercenary and ultimately detrimental to the novels' male characters. However, female characters in *The Big Money* are much more complex. As author Janet Galligani Casey notes in her article "Historicizing the Female in *U.S.A.*: Re-Visions of Dos Passos' Trilogy", in employing four different forms of narrative – found in the conventional storylines, the Newsreels, the Biographies and the Camera's Eye – Dos Passos presents a variety of views of American women, further developing his female characters and accounting for their occasionally-distasteful behavior within the context of a capitalist society.

While the author's opinion is clear throughout the book, it is important to establish how his fictional characters think about capitalism. Although it is barely referred to explicitly, Mr. Wheatley – Gladys' father – does make one revealing statement while describing Charley

Anderson: “His whole career seems to me to be an example... of how American democracy works at its very best pushin’ forward to success the most intelligent and bestfitted and weedin’ out the weaklin’s...” (Dos Passos 239). Interestingly, Mr. Wheatley references here the “survival of the fittest” quality that is a commonly acknowledged characteristic of capitalism, confusing it with what he calls “American democracy”. This statement is testament to how deeply ingrained capitalism is in ideas of “Americanness”. In addition to fostering a hyper-competitive environment, many have noted that capitalism serves to define distinct gender roles. Since capitalism promotes the idea that the best suited or most experienced laborer should succeed economically, women who stay home to raise their children are often hindered or prevented from having a successful career. Additionally, pay inequality and employer bias are prevalent. Other essentially American institutions – such as patriarchal government and the nuclear family – also serve to define the domestic role of women in society. So we see that perhaps Mr. Wheatley’s, ideal of “American democracy” – synonymous with capitalism – is for men only.

Highlighting the gender bias of capitalism, Dos Passos considers how it shapes the behaviors and lives of women in American society. His portrayal of women is clearest in conventional narrative that occupies the majority of the novel. In this aspect, women are represented equally throughout the trilogy, as the fictional storylines are split evenly between six female and six male characters. One major female character is Margo Dowling, who comes from an impoverished background and attempts to earn her living as a performer. Another survival strategy of Margo’s, however, is using her sex appeal to woo admirers – including Charley Anderson – who will grant her favors and provide for her financially. She is conscious of this to a great extent, and her adoptive mother Agnes even goes so far as to say, “Margie dear, you

mustn't talk like that, it sounds so mercenary," when Margo jokes about using Charley for his money (261).

Mercenary is term that is also used to describe Doris Humphries, the first woman Charley Anderson falls in love with in New York. Unlike Margo, Doris Humphries comes from a wealthy family. However, this does not mean she is any less motivated by money. Although she seems to enjoy flirting with Charley, she refuses to marry him or even develop a genuine relationship with him because he is not sufficiently wealthy. Ironically, Doris often claims that she desires to participate in the economy, but stresses that she cannot. She says to Charley: "You must think I'm a horrid mercenary little bitch... Honestly, Charley, what I'd love more than anything in the world would be to get out and make my own living... It's my dress, darling, yes, that costs money, not me..." (162). In saying this, she seems to absolve, or attempt to absolve, herself of responsibility for her behavior; she claims she is somehow made to act the way she does. Although she does not explain why she cannot participate in the economy, we can assume her gender plays a role in preventing it. However, although the "mercenary" trait is criticized in *The Big Money* to some extent, it is in itself both profit-seeking and necessary for female survival and success, and is therefore simply a reaction to and facet of capitalist society. In allowing for this observation, Dos Passos is unlike other Modernist authors.

An exception to the prototypical female character is Mary French. Mary is fair, caring and socially aware. In supporting the labor movements of the early 1920s, she attempts to effect a change in the treatment of the working classes, despite being a member of the middle class herself. She avoids relying on her parents or privileged upbringing and chooses a career that is significantly less financially rewarding than her other options. However, although Mary is visibly less self-centered than Margo and Doris, she does in fact also take advantage of her

relationships with men to further her own interests. This becomes evident through her association with George Barrow, who wants to marry her. George offers her a well-paying, comfortable job, which she accepting, thinking she will still be helping the Amalgamated Steel union workers. Although we are not told directly that Mary is sleeping with George, we learn that she becomes pregnant by him. It is interesting to note that by the end of the novel, Mary, who seems to be the least typical of Dos Passos' female characters, is entrenched in her work, unhappy, and no closer to accomplishing her goals than when she began.

In addition to observing women in Dos Passos' fictional storylines, is also interesting to consider the pseudo-historical forms employed in the novel, which include the Newsreels and Biographies. These forms of writing can be considered to be to some extent representative of the veritable condition of women in the 1920s, as they are taken from headlines and popular songs. Author Janet Galligani Casey writes, "One of the first things we notice about the novel is that the modes that essentially record public action – the Biographies and the Newsreels – devalue women: the former mode acknowledges their overall lack of influence in history, and the latter records their inferior and often debased social status," (Casey 251-252). Throughout the twenty-seven Biographies found within the trilogy, the sole female figure discussed is Isadora Duncan, who is portrayed in a fairly positive manner. It is noteworthy that Isadora is the only woman to appear in the Biographies because, whether intentional or not, it acknowledges women's overall lack of importance and influence on society. Compared to other figures that appear in the Biographies, she is in most ways a failure. This is especially true economically, as she goes through sporadic periods of being well-off and penniless. Within Isadora's biography, however, Dos Passos offers another definition of democracy: "She arrived in St. Petersburg in time to see the night funeral of the marchers shot down in front of the Winter Palace in 1905. It hurt her. She

was an American like Walt Whitman; the murdering rulers of the world were not her people; the marchers were her people; artists were not on the side of the machineguns; she was an American in a Greek tunic; she was for the people,” (Dos Passos 124). The reference to Greeks here invokes an older definition of democracy; one of citizenship, and government by the people for the people. This idea contrasts sharply with Mr. Wheatley’s, and is perhaps truer to John Dos Passos’ own thought.

The Newsreels are another pseudo-historical form of narrative present with *The Big Money*. It is important to remember when considering the Newsreels that, although the selected headlines and song lyrics appear to be random and sporadic, they were in fact chosen specifically by Dos Passos, and therefore serve some greater purpose within the novel. The headlines selected show, “increasing emphasis on violence against the female sex. Rape, physical abuse, sexual harassment, and murder of women become increasing commonplace as the Newsreels progress,” (Casey 254). Examples of such newspaper headlines include, “TWO WOMEN’S BODIES FOUND IN SLAYER’S BAGGAGE” (Dos Passos 169), “UNHAPPY WIFE TRIES TO DIE” (202), “RUSSIAN BARONNESS SUICIDE AT MIAMI” (205), “BROADWAY BEAUTY BEATEN” (306), and, “WOMAN SLAIN MATE HELD” (347). While the headlines show the negative and unhappy female condition in contemporary America, the song lyrics included in the Newsreels trivialize and objectify women, saying, “If you can’t tell the world/ She’s a good little girl/ Then just say nothing at all”, and referencing, “the kind of girl that men forget/ Just a toy to enjoy for a while” (Dos Passos 35, 205). However, it is important to observe that the Newsreels do in fact show a progression in opportunities and independence for women throughout the novel. For example, one Newsreel shows several paragraphs of job listings that are evidence of the increased employment of women postwar.

Writing from the vantage point of the 1930s, Dos Passos was able to look back upon the conflicts of the 20s with a critical eye. In crafting together the fictional storylines, *Biographies* and *Newsreels*, he was able to successfully portray the perils of capitalism and the ways in which it shaped the lives of women in *The Big Money*. Though mostly excluded from the economy, his female characters – a reflection of women in American society – are forced to react to the “survival of the fittest” climate fostered by American capitalism. Although Dos Passos’ novel is certainly a socialist text, critical of class and labor issues, it also laments the condition of another oppressed group: women in early twentieth century America.

Galligani Casey, Janet. "Historicizing the Female in U. S. A.: Re-Visions of Dos Passos's Trilogy." Twentieth Century Literature Vol. 41, No. 3 Autumn 1995 249-264. Hofstra University: 8 Dec 2008. JSTOR.