

**Introduction**

J. Dos Passos was an American writer of the 1920s-1940s. He was considered one of the Lost Generation writers, and in this respect broke from the traditional style of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by using innovative narrative techniques, mainly influenced by art (Impressionism and Cubism). It is also known that he was deeply involved in the politics of the time and thus proved to be a committed writer.

This passage is an accurate example of DP's social interest and narrative technique (external focalization, heterodiegetic narrator, yet involvement of the journalist in his report), and as an unconventional narrative technique, it is bound to strike and unsettle the reader.

**Pb:** Through the interplay of building and destroying, how does the writer establish a particular relation between American history and literature?

First we will focus on the fragmented reality inherent to this passage, before concentrating on the notion of the self-made man along with the building of America of the 1920s. Finally we will try to ponder on the writer's goal, i.e. the meaning of staging history and the renewed literary hope or disillusion it may entail.

**I. Fragmentation or an experimental narrative technique.**

The reader cannot miss the unusual typography, content and style of the passage on a first reading.

**1. A varied typography**

## • The Newsreel:

- a title announcing news, usually filmed or at least spoken, is followed by a sentence 'in medias res', which is rendered by the absence of capital letter, and does sound as a snippet (fragment) of conversation
- the next 3 lines are written in italics and seem to be part of a song, a popular Jazz song of the time; words from this song are repeated 3 times but appear haphazardly through other pieces of news
- another type is used: capital letters, looking more like newspaper headlines since the message is concise/elliptic

## • Tin Lizzie:

- a first part in italics which is a report from a featurewriter about the famous first car invented by Henry Ford
- the second part looks like an extract from a traditional novel, referring to Ford's life; however, the reader is bound to be struck by the various short paragraphs starting without any capital letters mainly and ending either with commas, semi-colons or full stops, especially in the last part

→ this unconventional layout reminds us of the newsreel and contributes to the juxtaposition of elements in this passage

→ a wish to attract the reader's attention and disturbs him/her by providing pieces of news within a typographical frame that is more akin to modernist poetry.

## **2. *However, the depiction of realistic events***

- realistic elements abound in this part: use of proper names that should ring a bell to the reader of the 1920-30s; what's more, any reader may feel concerned since the 'news in brief' style or hard facts is still meaningful to a more contemporary reader
  - the reader is led through different pieces of information from an objective point of view, without any logical link between the clauses; so these clauses should be apprehended separately
  - however, some themes are recurrent: the financial aspect and the need for money, the prosperity of the steel industry and its ensuing power stand in stark contrast with the arson of carbarns, the likely bomb explosion, to the anonymous victims (who either have been arrested, have committed suicide or have been killed after a mugging/assault); the song being repeated seems to work as a leitmotiv so that the news is made less alarming/ in order to soften the message conveyed by the news, which is reinforced by ironic statements throughout the passage
- a wish to stick to reality when viewers or radio listeners become the preys to a vortex of words.

## **3. *Visual and sound effects: an aggressive way to inform***

- by using only the bare facts (external point of view) and by using a journalistic style, words are given pride of place in this part (not many articles, adjs, advs ...) and become aggressive to the reader; we have the impression of listening to the radio (reference to mass culture is undeniable here) and are trapped by its unending flow, unless we decide to switch it off
- not only is fast rhythm suggested visually with the unending flow of elements but also literally speaking, which is increased by the numerous allusions to sounds (in Newsreel + Tin Lizzie + Ford's biography); the acoustic quality of the passage is magnified by the use of evocative terms: 'they done gone wild', 'cry', 'bomb', the description of the car itself ('higher key', 'new noise', 'clattering', 'trotting horses'n 'motor's loud explosions')
- the reader is overwhelmed by miscellaneous sounds that seem like a real cacophony to the ear; we may wonder whether he is supposed to understand a message out of this violent phonic patchwork pervaded by a saturation of meaning, thus betraying a mad or/and chaotic industrial society.

→ The only way to depict this dynamic and chaotic society is thus made visually thanks to the technique of collage (an artistic composition made of various materials glued on a surface) of news put together to create a background of the period (1920), as if the flow of information could thus be tamed/pinned down to bring unity to an obviously fragmented reality. Nevertheless, a human figure stands out as meaningful among the mass.

## **II. *Building up or the rise of the self-made man.***

The provocative and violent style of the beginning of the passage is toned down by the summary of Henry Ford's biography.

### **1. *The man and his invention: the birth of a new society/empire***

- from the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> part, H. Ford is referred to as 'the automobileer', so characterized through his invention, the Tin Lizzie; the text is interspersed with concrete terms related to the automobile engineering (part in italics) which is reinforced by the account of

Ford's active life + the accumulation of elements portrays Ford as a hard-working person, which is emphasized by 'working his way up' (l.20) = an explicit allusion to the American Dream

- details are given through a flashback/analepsis (suggested by stress on duration + pluperfect): simple sentences, sounds like a logical/chronological demonstration ('first, then, at last...'), 'Detroit' (l.14, l.44, l.54): real city for the reader to locate and visualize the scene as part of the American history = as if the newsreader were reading a report or was summing up a fragment of history
  - the verb 'build' is used several times and is part and parcel of Ford's characterization: he is the man (the one singled out as an individual) who not only invented and designed a new car but, by doing so, added his contribution to the building of the American identity
  - the allusions to other self-made men – Edison as 'the great admiration of HF's life' and the Steel Corporation (meaning Andrew Carnegie) characterized with terms like 'stands forth', 'corporate colossus both physically and financially' – foreground America's power and strength (after WWI), an empire impossible to overthrow
- a wish to anchor the scene in an American background, that of the American success, from (raw) material to materialism = a secured path.

## **2. Henry Ford : standing out of the crowd, spared from the rampant contamination**

- he stands in stark contrast with the other people mentioned in this extract : about 40 lines are devoted to him and constitute quite a coherent whole, though not necessarily built in a chronological order (l.33 starts with his origin whereas l. 14 relates his youth from 16 years old) ; but he belongs to a narrative framework unlike the other people who are only attributed with an incomplete full sentence (Newsreel) and are mere bits and pieces that compose a news in brief patchwork
  - HF also has a proper identity so to speak whereas the others are not referred to as individuals but part of a group : "folks", "democrats", "gypsy" or "woman" (no definite or indefinite article is given) ; besides, the famous silent movie actress Olive Thomas appears as a figure lost in the crowd as no clear reference is made to her professional status or fame
  - not only are the people mentioned in the Newsreel anchored in the realistic background and the ongoing flow of news, but they are also and most of all associated with negative connotations ("gone wild", "arrested", "cry", "suicide", "dead from poison")
- + narrative technique as external while the narrator can be felt as more present / intruding with HF's presentation, as if he/she were telling his story to the reader = a narrative voice can be heard

→ these people, either representative of the average American or the weaker sex, belonging to a specific political background or mass culture (cinema) or coming from a foreign country, seem to be lost in and swallowed by the chaotic world of the Roaring 20s while HF seems well-protected by his down-to-earth, pragmatic and economic realm, driven by his ambition for the common good, hence praised as the embodiment of American values

## **3. The man himself as the embodiment of the values of America**

- l. 33: a new § starts with 'he' : no need to mention the name of the man, the strong referent appeals to what has been put forward so far = Ford as the archetype of the American self-made man
- after Ford's professional life, the reader is given clues about his personal life, and particularly his family origins: 'Irish immigrants, CW, Penn., Dutch' = allusion to the 1st settlers, Pilgrim Fathers, WASPs) Ford can be seen as an actor playing in the birth of the/his

nation and undeniably/indisputably belonging to THE American identity (l.37: 'like plenty of other Americans'): he is making a contribution/a fair share to the building of America, being himself a "cornerstone" of it

- this positive background is compounded by Ford's physical advantages and the moral values his mother had imbued him with; once again the moral principles of a virtuous American mother speak volumes about the impact of religion in the country.

→ Through the successful portrait of the self-made man, America itself is praised and put on a pedestal; however, the humorous tone may cast another light on such a hyperbolic portrait.

### **III. Building or destroying the panorama of American life: the relation between history and literature.**

The reader cannot but notice the humorous tone of the narrator/reporter which furthers the dramatization of the society and implies a distance from what is stated.

#### **1. A narration/report tinged with irony and sarcasm:**

- the anecdotal account of the meeting between Ford and Edison, whose only purpose must be to entertain? Yet, successful self-made men are known to be driven by making 'big money' (cf. title) + justified by Ford as 'a thrifty young man'; this is reinforced by the 'cry for money' in politics + ref. to Wall Street
  - Ford driving 'his mechanical buggy' (l.26) making other people appear as ludicrous on their horses since outdated; the colloquial language used to portray Ford can make the reader smile, but simultaneously betrays Ford's pride and lofty ambitions which widens the gap between old values to be discarded and new values to be followed; this aspect is also illustrated with Ford's determination to build his car and his flat refusal or disinterest to live in the country on his father's farm: depicted with its disadvantages (manure, sweat, mud, chores), it contributes to the deflation of the character's portrait and widens the gap between farming and industrialization and at the same time, highlights the two-tier society that America is itself shaping
- however, the shift in values should be taken seriously here: it means the shift in actions: farming = people as actors vs mass production = people as objects; where have the puritan values gone?

#### **2. Industrialization = people or machines?**

- on a closer reading, we realize that Ford only exists through the invention of the Tin Lizzie: the car is indeed introduced as a real character in the paragraph bearing its name (Ford's biography is not presented as such; only clues); and Ford is named as 'the automobileer', a portmanteau imagined by the reporter to probably insist on his strong bond with the car; besides, don't we associate Ford with his car only nowadays?
- in the 'Tin Lizzie' section, the car is actually given birth (sound effects) and appears as a baby making its first steps in life whereas Ford is only the inventor, the helper; moreover, the car is described before Ford's biography as if priority were given to machines, real people being props/accessories
- progress is also and mainly depicted through its negative consequences: the overbearing power of money and industry can only lead to destruction (suicides, arsons, bombs) = individuality crushed under the mass?

- the function of the song: to show the fun of a new era? the invasion of mass culture and its levelling effect? the indifference of most people in serious matters since unable to make sense of what is going on?
- Is the passage a proleptic vision from an insightful narrator? What is the artist's position in such a society?

### **3. *From historical disillusionment or/and political criticism to literary or/and artistic hope or renewal ?***

- Dos Passos was well aware of the 'two Americas' in the 1920s, socially speaking, as well as the destructive power brought by industrialization and money: as such, he is very likely to embody the "Writer of Warnings Arrives"
- The use of colloquial language, the verbal collage and the journalistic style let the events speak for themselves and reflect true-to-life society, without the intervention of a mediator
- In this respect DP intends to break from the conventional novels and narrative techniques: the flow of information is the mirror of a freedom of style, which DP was rather obsessed with = echoes, repetitive patterns, alliterations and almost poetic quality in the 3 parts of the extract = impressionistic panorama of America
- By painting the powerful American society of the 1920s-30s, he stages history as a real character to ridicule it in a fierce but subtle way.

→ Literature is made alive and the reader – however disturbed – is both freed from the fetters of literary tradition and free to interpret and to react to the message he is given: individuality is possible through the new language of literature.

#### ***Conclusion:***

By experimenting a new narrative technique that is actually to be understood as his freedom of literary expression, DP succeeds in making his work provocative, shocking and disturbing, yet informative and entertaining. His singular criticism of society discloses his keen social interest in the American life as well as his own involvement in politics, literature and art.

By characterizing 'US history as the great drama of modern times', he managed to sow the seed of a chaotic America contaminated by materialistic values, which foreshadows the upcoming economic slump and overall disillusionment in the American Dream, on the one hand ; on the other, he proved that he was able to claim his own individuality and identity, something he achieved through his new conception of art, thus sending a hopeful and insightful message to his contemporaries.