

# The Concept of Freedom in John Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers*

Dr. Wael Fadhil Hassobi

Department of English, Ashur University College, Baghdad, Iraq

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<p>Received on: 02 May 2025</p> <p>Revised on: 01 Jun 2025</p> <p>Accepted on: 07 Jun 2025</p> <p>Published on: 13 Jun 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords—</b> freedom and rebellion, detachment and illusion, disappointments, Man's initiation, glory, honor</p>	<p>John Dos Passos has been neglected by the literary and academic worlds. Too often his work has been judged, not on its literary merit, but on its political content. This work is undertaken as an effort to help to elevate Dos Passos to his proper place in the ranks of American writers. Continuity is given to almost all of his writings by the constant theme of the desirability for individual freedom. In his brief early period, Dos Passos sought freedom largely for the alienated artists of society. Then he became involved in the search for the maximum freedom for all people. The turning point came when the Sacco-Vanzetti case drew him from the isolated garrets into the streets. Management's abuses of labor and the general class war became his subject matter in U.S.A. and other books as Dos Passos fought for freedom from oppression for the workers. He enthusiastically endorsed Roosevelt and the New Deal. The liberal critics applauded his efforts.</p>

## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of freedom can be seen as the ability to act with choice which means that the person is not forced by external or internal forces and thus one has the right to enjoy his personal liberty without being slave or prisoner to those external or internal forces. Dewey claims that "Freedom is the power to act in accordance with choice." (Dewey1960:267) While Brigger has asserted that "Freedom in general is the state of not being forced or determined by something external in so far as it is joined to a definite internal faculty of self-determination (Brigger 1971:146). Since everybody is free by nature many people usually fight for their freedom. It should be noted that many thinkers believe that freedom must be accompanied by law otherwise there is no freedom; Locke asserts that "absolute freedom has no meaning...where there is no law, there is no freedom" (Locke 1960:108).

Dos Passos has thrown the light through his novel *Three soldiers* on the impact of the war and times on the life and freedom of an ordinary soldier. We follow three lowly soldiers, Dan Fuselli from San Francisco who is 19 and enlisted in order to appear brave and patriotic to his friends, neither of which he was. Chris Chrisfield is 20 and from a small town in Indiana. He enlisted because small businessman in his town could only hope to do business with the locals if one had served in the war. John Andrews is 22 and from New York City. He is a pianist and composer, the most thoughtful of the three, but not yet at peace with himself.

The novel is sort of like three separate works, two long short-stories about the lives of Fuselli and Chrisfield, and then a novel about the war years of John Andrews. Andrews sees himself as a free man who must resist giving in to the force of others, thus he despises the army. He talks a great game of freedom and rebellion.

Yet, he knuckles under to army discipline, fearing authority, while constantly berating it and planning his resistance which doesn't come.

The most clever section by Dos Passos is the section concerns Andrews who is very thoughtful about his sense of independence and his hatred of the system and disgusted with himself who too often still caves into the system. There is an anger in Andrews with himself and his inability to live the freedom. Andrews sees himself as a free man who must resist giving in to the force of others, thus he despises the army. He talks a great game of freedom and rebellion.

## II. THE SEARCH FOR INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM

Dos Passos' stress on individual freedom has taken various forms during his long writing career, but the underlying motive has remained unchanged. At first he went through a kind of half-hearted phase of trying to discover individual autonomy in the "alienation" of the artist; then he made an effort to find individual freedom in socialistic collectivism; then he turned toward a more or less nostalgic search for individualism in "free enterprise." Of course, these phases are not always distinctly marked, but they are evident in his novels and other works. The first phase, that of the "alienated artist," dominated all of his early writings. If one examines Dos Passos' life, it is easy to see why. He was born out of wedlock on January 14, 1896, to John Randolph Dos Passos and Miss Lucy Addison Sprigg, a spinster who was forty-seven years of age. His father, son of an immigrant Portuguese shoemaker, was a truly "self-made man." He was a prominent criminal attorney, an author, and a personal friend of President McKinley. When he turned to the practice of civil law, he became instrumental in the development of the great trusts during the 1890's. A strong advocate of gold, industry, and capitalism, he received what was purported to be the largest legal fee then on record for his efforts on behalf of the Sugar Trust in 1895. The general governmental attitude toward big business at the time can be seen in the Supreme Court's decision which held the Trust's controlling ninety-eight per cent of the sugar refining industry did not constitute restraint of trade.

The elder Dos Passos appears in several of the semi-autobiographical works of his son. He is the "Jack" and the "He" referred to in several of the 'Camera Eye' divisions in U.S.A. and the James Knox Polk Pignatelli or Monsieur Dandy in Chosen Country. A strong, vigorous man, an impressive speaker, as well as an outstanding lawyer, the father of Dos Passos embodied the typical American success story. He was a self-made aristocrat. Dos Passos' mother was born one. (Hicks, 1931)

### 2.1- Early life and writings:

His mother carted him off to Mexico, to England, and to the Continent during his childhood. At times he was placed in the hands of governesses or friends of his mother while his parents went on extended trips. Only occasionally did he see his father, who must have been disappointed in his offspring. The lad was nearsighted and required thick glasses; he was shy, sensitive, self-conscious, and emotional; in short, he was the antithesis of the robust, vigorous father. Doubtless, the bar sinister and the rootless existence did little to give the boy selfconfidence.

As a lad, Dos Passos briefly attended a private school in England and a public school in the District of Columbia, and then in 1907, he was enrolled in the Choate School, a preparatory school for boys in New England. He was registered under the name of John Roderigo Madison — his father did not publicly acknowledge the lad until he was sixteen years old. It was at Choate School that Dos Passos first began to write, when he became a staff member of the Choate School News. A year after having completed his preparatory schooling, he entered Harvard at the age of sixteen. During his freshman year he had his first story, "The Almeh," published in the July, 1913, issue of the Harvard Monthly. It was signed "J. R. Dos Passos."

The tale is a rather well-written one about the pursuit of a beautiful Arabian girl by two young Americans who discover to their dismay that she is nothing but a danseuse du ventre. The acceptance of a story, even one about an Egyptian belly-dancer, was quite an accomplishment by a freshman at Harvard. During the remainder of his year at the university, he had several more stories accepted by the Monthly. In 1915 he

became an editor of the magazine and later in the year became its secretary. He wrote poems, stories, and editorials.

After his mother died in April, 1916, he composed the most important of his early writings, an essay entitled "A Humble Protest," which came out in the Monthly in June, 1916. In it he tried to formulate a philosophy for living, asking the inevitable, unanswerable question: what is the end of life? The best possible course to follow, he tentatively concluded, is to divide life's aims between thought and art, between the two halfopposed ideals represented by Plato and Michelangelo. He saw one as a desire to fathom the meaning of life, the other to create it. The ideal would be a blend of the two. Dos Passos' dichotomy is quite similar to Matthew Arnold's Hebraism and Hellenism. Like Arnold, he abhorred the way in which most men spend their lives in an industrial society without any chance of self-expression, except in the hectic pleasures taken while suffocating in crowded cities.(Hicks,1931)

At this time Dos Passos refused to accept the reality of industrialization. Granville Hicks comments: "It does startle us to discover that the man who., preeminently among his contemporaries, has refused to dodge industrialism began by repudiating it." (Hicks,1931)

## 2.2-The impact of wars:

After graduating cum laude from Harvard in 1916, Dos Passos volunteered for duty overseas with the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Unit. Because of the strong objections of his father, he went instead to Spain to study architecture. There he studied, wrote poetry, and, in the October 14, 1916, issue of the New Republic, saw his essay "Against American Literature" published. In this he complains of the sterility and lack of roots of American literature and praises Russian literature for its primitive savagery and color. He declares:

An all-enveloping industrialism, a new mode of life preparing, has broken down the old bridges leading to the past, has cut off the possibility of retreat. Our only course is to press on. Shall we pick up the glove Walt Whitman threw at the feet of posterity? Or shall we stagnate forever, the Sicily of the modern world, rich in the world's good, absorbing the thought, patronizing the art of other peoples, but producing nothing from

amid our jumble of races but steel and oil and grain? (Gold ,1933)

On January 27, 1917, his father died, and Dos Passos returned to America. He re-enlisted in the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Unit and, together with Hemingway, commenced a tour of ambulance duty in France. In the same year, Dos Passos appeared in Eicrht Harvard Poets. After the dissolution of the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Unit in 1918, he served for a time on ambulance duty in Italy. Then he returned to America, was inducted into the army and was assigned to Allentown training camp. In November he was sent back to France a member of the Medical Corps, engaged in clerical and ambulance duty. When he received his discharge in France in the spring of 1919, he went to Portugal and Spain to write. In October, 1920., his first novel, *One Man's Imitation*--1917, was published in London. (Lerner,1936)

Gradually he changes, losing both his sense of detachment and his illusions as the horrors of war impinge more and more on his consciousness. His romantic attitudes are nullified by the sight of the wounded, the maimed, and the dead. He becomes interested in the anarchist beliefs of his French friends and in social reform.

As could be expected, this first book of Dos Passos is his least important one. It shows little in the way of literary style and not much in the way of characterization, although it bears some similarity to Hemingway's future novel, *A Farewell to Arms*. Frederick Henry's counterpart is Martin Howe who, like Henry, is a volunteer ambulance driver in a foreign army. Henry, however, is older than Howe. He has served long enough at the front to come some sort of terms with the life of war: he has already lost his illusions, and fine words are meaningless to him. Martin Howe is full of illusions and believes in the idealistic slogans of the day. Martin, like Dos Passos himself in 1917, is a naive young Harvard graduate who volunteers to serve with the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Unit in France. He goes forth to "save the world for democracy." He sees the issues only in black and white. The Germans represent the forces of barbarism; they are brutal ravishers and blood-thirsty Teutons. The Allies are on the side of decency

and civilization. Though Martin is involved in the war., he is not directly a part of it., not for a while anyway. His is a spectatorial attitude. (Lerner ,1936)

### 2.3 Man's Initiation:

Although One Man's Initiation – 1917 is not important as literature, it does have significance in the study of Dos Passos, for it forecasts the novels which have come after it. It is a portrayal of the condition of modern man and the institutions which he has created that defeat him. It is at once a protest and a story of destroyed illusions. Yet bathos is the prevailing mood of the book; the cold, hard anger of the better novels of Dos Passos is lacking in One Man's Initiation – 1917. Martin is more concerned with his own disappointments than with the overall destruction going on about him. Although he speaks at times of freedom, he is more concerned with the idealistic freedom of the sensitive artist than with the freedom of ordinary people. Dos Passos writes from the point of view of the alienated artist rather than from that of the critic of society.

### 2.4 The search for a new tradition after the civil war:

During most of the 1920's he continued writing in this vein, placing his chief emphasis on the frustration of the artistic temperament in confrontation with society, not on the social responsibility of the writer. However, in some of the writings of this period, clues to the direction which his major works would take are to be found. In an article appearing in the Nation during 1920, he speaks of the dislike of Europeans for Americans after the war. The continental people, he says, had been captivated by Wilson's Fourteen Points. They had renewed their hope for American democratic freedom buried under the top-heavy industrial organization which dominated the United States after the Civil War, only to see their hope swept into the waste basket beside the conference table at Versailles. Dos Passos asserts a new tradition is needed, "something similar to the great agin-the-government tradition that England inherited from the turbulent seafaring folk that crowded into the island out of the northern seas." (Dos Passos, 1920). Taking his own advice, he became the foremost of the "agin-the-government" writers, invariably opposing those in control, for governments were responsible for the wholesale slaughter of men as they led their nations into

battle. And war was to become the setting in Dos Passos' first really important book. (Lerner, 1950)

### 3-The concept of freedom in *Three Soldiers*:

Three Soldiers was published in 1921. Not only was it Dos Passos' first major work, it was also the first really significant novel of the first World War. In its unsentimental and stark treatment of the citizen soldiers caught up in war's madness, Dos Passos set a tone later to be emulated by numerous writers. Even after World War II such books as Norman Mailer's The

Naked and the Dead and Irwin Shaw's The Young Lions show an indebtedness to Three

Soldiers. Dos Passos' three soldiers are separately drawn entities. Dan Fuselli is a San Franciscan of Italian parentage. He is stupid and docile; vainly striving to make good in the army and to gain recognition by being a good soldier, he tries to advance to the rank of corporal. But he is pathetic; he believes everything his superiors tell him. When he contracts a venereal disease, his pitiful military ambition is defeated. Chrisfield, who is from Indiana., self-consciously talks like a Southerner. He is the rebel from army discipline, the proverbial round-peg-in-the-square-hole-type. Not too intelligent and believing in little but his own personal dignity, he eventually kills his sergeant who has offended him. The third soldier is

John Andrews, sensitive, educated, and artistic. Like Dos Passos' earlier creation, Martin Howe, John Andrews is partially an autobiographical character. While talking to a French girl, he remarks: "My mother taught me to play the piano when I was very small. . . . She and I lived in an old house belonging to her family in Virginia. . . . Mother was very unhappy. She had led a dreadfully thwarted life . . . that unrelieved hopeless misery only a woman can suffer." (passos, 1921) Unable to conform to army discipline, Andrews throws away his uniform, deserts, and is caught by the military police, who beat him to a pulp. Although he is not explicitly told so in the book, the reader is left with the impression that Andrews will serve a long term at Leavenworth.

The story is related with unusual frankness, the soldiers talking much as they do in real life. The ugliness of petty



men given authority, the facts of drunkenness and prostitution the total effect of crushing army discipline on a sensitive soul are. all depicted in *Three Soldiers*. The book describes no battles; rather, what it portrays is the transformation of minds and bodies under the pressures not of war as such, but of the army, the most undemocratic and autocratic organization of all the institutions created by men. "Making the Mold," "The Metal Cools," "Machines," and "Rust" – the four divisions of the novel – detail the transformation of the three soldiers as they progress from one state to another. It is the system of the army to strip the individual from his personality, to fashion him into a small cog of a gigantic machine, smoothly functioning as one of its minute units. This is what Dos Passos deplors. The army is the destroyer of the individual. John Andrews, after being wounded and feeling the futility and despair of army life with its discipline, hate, and killing, thinks of deserting: "He was ready to endure anything, to face any sort of death, for the sake of a few months of liberty in which to forget the degradation of this last year." (Dos Passos, 1921)

*Three Soldiers* has been criticized for being overly aesthetic, but such a charge can be substantiated only by making the loss of John Andrew's symphonic work the central tragedy of the novel. It is not. Undoubtedly there is a keen affinity between the author and his character, John Andrews, but not to be forgotten is the fact that Andrews is but one of the men in *Three Soldiers*; not only Andrews, but also Chrisfield and Fuselli – neither of whom is artistic or sensitive – are destroyed by the army. Their function in the novel is also important, each one represents a large group of men. Chrisfield symbolizes those whose personal sense of the importance of individuality is never crushed, the rebels, those whom the army can never make into soldiers; Fuselli typifies those ignorant souls, those trusting and naive recruits who believe the drivel and do their best to conform and by so doing to rise to the majestic state of being corporals. Both the rebel Chrisfield and the truckling Fuselli are, like Andrews, mangled by the army machine. No one escapes.

Truly, the book has been criticized as being antimilitaristic. It is not a novel which would be

recommended by the American Legion. It strips away the facade of glory, honor, and duty, showing the ugliness underneath. The book is naked and bitter. The posturing of the Y.M.C.A. people are exposed, as is their unctiousness. The officers and G.H.Q. are shown as a class apart, a different face from the common soldier. They are in fact his enemy. (Beach, 1941)

During the year in which *Three Soldiers* was published, Dos Passos traveled widely, working for the Near East Relief organization. He assimilated much of what he saw and heard, later using the information in a travel book. His next work, however, was based on the knowledge of Spain which he had accumulated while studying architecture there before enlisting in the ambulance corps. *Rosinante to the Road Again* (1922) was published shortly after the writer had returned to the United States, when he took up residence in New York. In this story we again meet the shy, introspective, literary, and aloof young man found in so many of Dos Passos' early books. This time he is Telemachus, ostensibly searching for a "father" and looking for the gesture which truly represents Spain. The semi-fictional and semiautobiographical Telemachus is juxtaposed by the other main character of the book, Lyaeus, who is engaged with life and living, with gaiety and love. Telemachus stands back, gazing enviously at his counterpart, eagerly zesting for life and action but too inhibited to partake of it himself. In contrast with the sober treatment given Martin Howe, a note of mockery and self-ridicule is sounded in Telemachus. Dos Passos is becoming increasingly aware of the ridiculous position of his heroes in their detachment from life.

### III. CONCLUSION

Freedom is the theme that underlies all others in Dos Passos' work. It can be seen that the necessity of freedom, from its constant repetition in both his fiction and his non-fiction, is a kind of unchanging monomania, giving unity to the whole of his creative work. The America that Dos Passos depicts is not a lovely one. It could not be and still be a truthful portrayal, and Dos Passos writes the truth as he sees it. He is also one of the truly literate novelists writing today. *Three Soldiers* by John Dos Passos follows the

journeys of three soldiers in the European theater of World War II. Despite the three soldiers' different personalities and experiences in the US armed forces, all three were dramatically changed by the war and by the military machine they're a part of.

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