

⇒ Study the text, showing that it is a satire of the American Dream.

Tin Lizzie

(...)

For twenty years or more,

ever since he'd left his father's farm when he was sixteen to get a job in a Detroit machinshop, Henry Ford had been nuts about machinery. First it was watches, then he designed a steamtractor, then he built a horseless carriage with an engine adapted from the Otto gasengine he'd read about in *The World of Science*, then a mechanical buggy with a onecylinder fourcycle motor, that would run forward but not back;

at last, in ninetyeight, he felt he was far enough along to risk throwing up his job with the Detroit Edison Company, where he'd worked his way up from night fireman to chief engineer, to put all his time into working on a new gasoline engine,

(in the late eighties he'd met Edison at a meeting of electriclight employees in Atlantic City. He'd gone up to Edison after Edison had delivered an address and asked him if he thought gasoline was practical as a motor fuel. Edison had said yes. If Edison said it, it was true. Edison was the great admiration of Henry Ford's life);

and in driving his mechanical buggy, sitting there at the lever jauntily dressed in a tightbuttoned jacket and a high collar and a derby hat, back and forth over the level illpaved streets of Detroit,

scaring the big brewery horses and the skinny trotting horses and the sleekrumped pacers with the motor's loud explosions,

looking for men scatterbrained enough to invest money in a factory for building automobiles.

He was the eldest son of an Irish immigrant who during the Civil War had married the daughter of a prosperous Pennsylvania Dutch farmer and settled down to farming near Dearborn in Wayne County, Michigan;

like plenty of other Americans, young Henry grew up hating the endless sogging through the mud about the chores, the hauling and pitching manure, the kerosene lamps to clean, the irk and sweat and solitude of the farm.

He was a slender, active youngster, a good skater, clever with his hands; what he liked was to tend the machinery and let the others do the heavy work. His mother had told him not to drink, smoke, gamble or go into debt, and he never did.

When he was in his early twenties his father tried to get him back from Detroit, where he was working as mechanic and repairman for the Drydock Engine Company that built engines for steamboats, by giving him forty acres of land.

Young Henry built himself an uptodate square white dwellinghouse with a false mansard roof and married and settled down on the farm,

but he let the hired men do the farming;

he bought himself a buzzsaw and rented a stationary engine and cut the timber off the woodlots.

He was a thrifty young man who never drank or smoked or gambled, but he couldn't stand living on the farm.

He moved to Detroit, and in the brick barn behind his house tinkered for years in his spare time with a mechanical buggy that would be light enough to run over the clayey wagonroads of Wayne County, Michigan.

By 1900 he had a practicable car to promote.

He was forty years old before the Ford Motor Company was started and production began to move.

Speed was the first thing the early automobile manufacturers went after. Races advertised the makes of cars.

Henry Ford himself hung up several records at the track at Grosse Pointe and on the ice on Lake St. Clair. In his 999 he did the mile in thirtynine and fourfifths seconds.

But it had always been his custom to hire others to do the heavy work. The speed he was busy with was speed in production, the records in efficient output. He hired Barney Oldfield, a stunt bicyclerider from Salt Lake City, to do the racing for him.

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Henry Ford had ideas about other things than the designing of motors, carburetors, magnetos, jigs and fixtures, punches and dies; he had ideas about sales;

that the big money was in economical quantity production, quick turnover, cheap interchangeable, easilyreplaced standardized parts;

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it wasn't until 1909, after years of arguing with his partners, that Ford put out the first Model T.

Henry Ford was right.

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That season he sold more than ten thousand tin lizzies, ten years later he was selling almost a million a year.

In these years the Taylor Plan was stirring up plantmanagers and manufacturers all over the country. Efficiency was the word. The same ingenuity that went into improving the performance of a machine could go into improving the performance of the workmen producing the machine.

70

In 1913 they established the assemblyline at Ford's. That season the profits were something like twentyfive million dollars, but they had trouble in keeping the men on the job, machinists didn't seem to like it at Ford's.

Henry Ford had ideas about other things than production.

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He was the largest automobile manufacturer in the world; he paid high wages; maybe if the steady workers thought they were getting a cut (a very small cut) in the profits, it would give trained men an inducement to stick to their jobs,

wellpaid workers might save enough money to buy a tin lizzie; the first day Ford's announced that cleancut properlymarried American workers who wanted jobs had a chance to make five bucks a day (of course it turned out that there were strings to it; always there were strings to it)

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such an enormous crowd waited outside the Highland Park plant all through the zero January night

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that there was a riot when the gates were opened; cops broke heads, jobhunters threw bricks; property, Henry Ford's own property, was destroyed. The company dicks had to turn on the firehose to beat back the crowd.

The American Plan; automotive prosperity seeping down from above; it turned out there were strings to it.

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But that five dollars a day paid to good, clean American workmen who didn't drink or smoke cigarettes or read or think, and who didn't commit adultery and whose wives didn't take in boarders,

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made America once more the Yukon of the sweated workers of the world; made all the tin lizzies and the automotive age, and incidentally, made Henry Ford the automobileer, the admirer of Edison, the birdlover, the great American of his time.

John Dos Passos, USA: *The Big Money* (1936), pp.70-73

CORRIGE

In the second section of his novel U.S.A., a.k.a. The Big Money, John Dos Passos wrote biographies of well-known personalities, from politics, business and the arts. This excerpt entitled “Tin Lizzy” (the nickname of the Model T car) is about the very famous American manufacturer, Henry Ford.

It does not take long for the reader to realize that this is a rather uncommon biography : the gap that subtly widens between what we expect from the genre and what we get is one of the tools of the narrator’s irony. The result is a satire of the automobile epic (*épopée*) epitomized by Ford.

Although the text is based on facts and efficiently illustrates the American Dream, we can feel the underlying discrepancy between information and ironical distance and the gradual switch from narrative to poetic satire.

I. The American dream, exemplified by Henry Ford in the industrial world:

1. The man

- Henry Ford is a man who left his mark on History: everyone knows about his inventions – the Model T in particular - and Ford is still a brand. When Dos Passos wrote his biography in 1936, Ford had already gone down to posterity / he was already “the great American of his time” (98).
- This man with a religious background (his mother was “the daughter of a prosperous Pennsylvania Dutch farmer” (22) and his father was “an Irish immigrant” (21)) had everything of the puritan, as the narrator insists: “His mother had told him not to drink, smoke, gamble or go into debt, and he never did.” (29) + line 39.
- He was the typical self-made man, whose passion for mechanics (“ever since he’d left his father’s farm (...) Henry Ford had been nuts about machinery.” (2-3)) and hatred for “the heavy work” (29) naturally led him to climb up the working ladder (“he’d worked his way up from night fireman to chief engineer” (8)). Another characteristic of the self-made man is his obstinacy/doggedness: “to put all his time into working on a new gasoline engine” (9) + 41-43.

2. The automobile epic

- Industrial development in this field consisted in going from horses to cars (first §) and Ford is shown “scaring the big brewery horses” (17) while driving his “mechanical buggy” (14).
- His development as a character echoes this epic: he is a man of movement, who likes speed (50) and he came from farming (2) – and hated it (24-26) – before going into the industrial world: from “sogging through mud” (25) to “automotive prosperity” (88) at “the Highland Park plant” in Detroit. So that movement and speed also refer to social mobility.
- His success story is based on “ingenuity”(67). It relied on standardized production (the Model T is the result of “quick turnover, cheap interchangeable, easilyreplaced standardized parts” (59)). It also relied on a new form of work management: “the Taylor Plan was stirring up plantmanagers and manufacturers all over the country” (66-67). Taylorism – a definition of which can be read in lines 67-69 – meant work efficiency and wage control (“five bucks a day” (80)). It was also the birth of profit-sharing (incentives) in which “a cut (a very small cut) in the profits)” is given to the workers as “an inducement to stick to their jobs” (76-77).
- What men like Ford expected from such a work organization was that it would have a trickle-down effect (“wellpaid workers might save enough money to buy a tin lizzie” (78)). This effect is mentioned in line 88: “automotive prosperity seeping from above”.

Transition: But one of the first striking elements as one reads this biography is that the narrator resorts to an informal register (“five bucks a day” (80) ; “nuts about machinery” (3) ; etc) and we may wonder why because it is not a generic component of biographies.

II. A very uncommon biography: a tribute or a mock-epic? Praise/Eulogy or caricature?

1. **Dos Passos plays with the conventions of a genre > irony: gap between what you expect and what you get**

- What is very surprising is the chronological deconstruction: in the first part of the text especially and because of prolepses and analepses, the reader has to reorder the facts to get the actual timeline of events. Besides, dates are sometimes expressed in figures (“by 1900” (44)) and some others in letters (“in ninetyeight” (7) + “in the late eighties” (10)), which impedes the reordering.
- In the first paragraph, Ford’s mechanical progress is conveyed through accumulation (“First (...) then (...) then (...) then (...) at last, (...)”) and the pronoun “he” seems to be trapped in the list of mechanical inventions. Sometimes the grammatical subject “he” even disappears from the narrative (Cf. The use of non-finite verbal forms from “to put all his time working” (9) to “automobiles” (20)). Ford, the man, is literally absorbed in the mechanical world he has created.
- As chronology is restored, from line 21 on, changes in the way the narrator refers to the main character gradually induce distance: from “Young Henry” to “he” and from “he” to the more distant “Henry Ford”.

2. **From praise to caricature > irony: gap between what is said and what is meant.**

- The reader can identify line 44 (“By 1900 he had a practicable car to promote.”) as a pivot-line, when the narrative voice switches to ironical distance. The word “speed” is a typical example of the narrator’s underlying questioning of Ford’s motivations: “Speed was the first thing the early automobile manufacturers went after” (48) is shortly followed by “The speed he was busy with was speed in production, the records in efficient output” (52-53).
- This wordplay on “speed” and “records” inaugurates a succession of rise-and-fall effects in the text: after that, every time a new innovation is mentioned, it is immediately debunked: for example, “In 1913 they established the assemblyline at Ford’s.” (70) is followed by “but they had trouble keeping the men on the job”. Or again, “cleancut properlymarried American workers who wanted jobs had a chance to make five bucks a day” (79) precedes a comment between brackets: “(of course it turned out there were strings to it; always there were strings to it)”.
- “strings” is one of the numerous recurrences in the text: “what he liked was to tend the machinery and let the others do the heavy work” (28-29) is also a recurrent idea (Cf. lines 36, 52-54). Little by little, the narrator infuses criticism into his piece of feature writing. The result is a negative epic in which what prevails is the exploitation of man by man. Delegating the “heavy work” to the men and the machines is the core of industrialized production.
- And as the reading goes on, incremental repetitions combined with hyperboles stand as clear instruments of sarcasm: “Henry Ford had ideas about other things than the designing of motors (...); he had ideas about sales” (56-57) > “Henry Ford was right” (63) > “Henry Ford had ideas about other things than production. / He was the largest automobile manufacturer in the world;” (75).

Transition: Repetitions are like a narrative hammering, which of course is not fortuitous in a text dealing with industrial production. Rhythm and word-choice, among other things, make this text poetic and self-reflexive.

III. The poetic and self-reflexive dimension of Dos Passos’s work: a taylorized narrative

1. **The poetic dimension of the text**

- The poetic dimension is blatant in the last paragraph because of its layout and its run-on-lines / enjambments. But it can be felt in other aspects of the text. To begin with, the use of punctuation, making the reading movement uninterrupted, is metaphoric of the assembly line and progress.
- Besides, the rhythm accelerates throughout the text: from slowness in the farm to the speed of the machines. Acceleration brings destruction, which can be perceived in the fragmentation of the last §. The construction of the character (Ford) induces the deconstruction of the narrative, the final poem being a climax in the mechanical process because it visibly divides written production into “parts”.

2. The highly self-reflective dimension of the final poem > satire

- The way the narrator piles up qualifiers to refer to the workers in the poem (lines 91-94) recalls the same process of taylorized production, each worker adding a standardized part to the previous one. So we get the impression that the workmen are standardized, too, and all resemble Young Henry Ford himself with his puritan ethics (echo with line 39).
- Anaphoras (“made”) are another way of imitating the repetitive gestures of the workmen in this new industrialized world, while at the same time illustrating the *making* of Henry Ford. This is particularly ironic since the expression “automotive prosperity seeping down from above” opens the poem.
- Behind the example of Henry Ford, it is all American capitalism that is the target of irony (“made America once more the Yukon of the sweated workers of the world”: America is a promised land, a land of opportunity just as Yukon attracted gold diggers in the past). One should not forget that Dos Passos wrote U.S.A. during the Great Depression and that American success stories such as Ford’s must have felt ironic.
- After reading the text, “the great American of his time” seems clearly sarcastic > hyperbolic.

Historically, satire was written in verse. Here Dos Passos seems to renew with the genre as he gradually takes his distance from that the generic conventions of biography. The narrative is satirical because it reveals the underside of the very well-known and successful inventor of the car. But it is also poetic because its shape, its prosody and its style all contribute to a textual representation of industrial progress and taylorization. The resulting text fragmentation is reminiscent of cubism in painting. No doubt the author was highly influenced by this medium.