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John Ward Moorehouse: Cowperwood or Babbitt?

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Abstract

The essay article one of the main characters of John Dos Passos' trilogy *U.S.A.* John Ward Moorehouse. In particular, the author of the essay claims that from the standpoint of his behavior and attitude towards life John W. Moorehouse had predecessors: the heroes of Theodore Dreiser (Frank Cowperwood) and Harry Sinclair Lewis (George Babbitt). The author supports his claim by a number of arguments showing that in particular situations Moorehouse acts like Cowperwood, while under certain circumstances he behaves like Babbitt. Who is Moorehouse in reality: Cowperwood? Babbitt? Both of them? Or has he his unique features? The essay shows that all of these assumptions are true depending on the angle which we look at them.

Keywords: Babbitt, character, Cowperwood, feature, Moorehouse, *U.S.A.*

There are a number of truly landmark characters in American literature, who in fact create the visage of this literature. The immortal trilogy of John Dos Passos *U.S.A.*, written in the 1930s, enriched American literature with such characters. There are twelve major characters in the trilogy, around which the plot revolves. This essay focuses on one of them: John Ward Moorehouse – the pioneer of the fledgling field of public relations. While reading the sections of the trilogy dealing with Moorehouse, the reader has a vague feeling that he has already read something similar before. He asks himself "does not Moorehouse resemble any characters appearing in other American novels published almost the same time as *U.S.A.*"? The answer is positive. The reader finds two mainstream features of J.W.M.: on the one hand, a terrific ability of conformism, i.e. the capability of turning the events occurring in the environment to his benefit; on the other hand, the capacity of going right through, regardless of any circumstances, however hard they may be. The reader can immediately guess that according to the first trait he reminds us of Sinclair Lewis's George Babbitt, and his babbittry becomes obvious, as one reads the novel; while according to the second feature, he is most closely associated with Theodore Dreiser's Frank Cowperwood, a predator in business, a shark who achieves his objective by whatever means it takes. The purpose of this work is to confirm the truth of this thesis, through various illustrations by quotations, taken from the trilogy, as well as through opinions expressed by different authoritative critics, both American and non-American.

From the very beginning, young Moorehouse reflects young Cowperwood. If Dreiser shows the reader the first successful speculation conducted by Cowperwood, John Dos Passos informs us that –

"Johnny went round Delaware, Maryland and Pennsylvania as agent for a book distributing firm. In September he received a congratulatory note from them saying that he was the first agent they had ever had who sold a hundred consecutive sets of Bryant's History of the United States". (Dos Passos, 1979, p. 192)

Then Passos informs us about stubbornness of Moorehouse to get a formal education. Cowperwood did not care about education whereas Babbitt cared much. In this sense, Moorehouse reveals the features of Babbitt, enrolling himself into the University of Philadelphia. However, Moorehouse's care for education is not for the sake of appearances as in case of Babbitt, but for the sake of knowledge, which is power for him.

At the same time, Johnny W. Moorehouse shows the Babbit's ability to adapt to people and circumstances, especially using the charm of his blue eyes. At his first job as an ad-agent –

"It was on this job that he found out that he had a pair of bright blue eyes and that he could put on an engaging boyish look that people liked." (Dos Passos, 1979, p. 194)

At the same time, Moorehouse repeats the steps, which Frank Cowperwood passed through. For example, he marries a woman who has lots of money and who is older than him. Although Cowperwood does not marry Lilian Sample for the sake of money, but owing to her relative sophistication and experience, Moorehouse is attracted to Annabelle Strang by exactly the same features.

"Meanwhile Lilian Sample captivated Frank and engrossed his imagination. She was twenty four, and he was only nineteen, but by body and soul she appeared as young as he was. Tall, slightly taller than him, <...> she was still very refined." (Dreiser, 1986, p. 43)

Johnny Ward Moorehouse is twenty when he

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meets Annabelle Strang, who is also twenty four. When he proposes to her, their conversation flows as follows:

"Would you marry a feller like me without any money?"

"I hadn't thought of it darling, but I might".

"You're pretty wealthy, I guess, and I haven't a cent, and I have to send home money to my folks... But I have prospects".

"What kind of prospects?" She pulled her face down and ruffled his hair and kissed him.

"I'll make good in this real estate game. I swear I will". (Dos Passos, 1979, p. 205)

If Cowperwood is bold to fall in love with a married woman, Moorehouse is bold enough to propose to a woman, who is worth a fortune, himself "not having a cent" (a bit of exaggeration – Moorehouse never stays without a job). Both of them eventually abandon their 24-year-old brides – one for another love, second for faithlessness, and continue their way.

However, Moorehouses's babbittry is just as strong as his cowperwoodism. He marries Gertrude Staple, whose mother gives her daughter 15,000 dollars a year. With these funds Moorehouse opens an agency specializing in public relations, a completely new field at the time.

"Capital and labor, as you must have noticed, gentlemen . . . capital and labor, those two great forces of our national life neither of which can exist without the other are growing further and further apart. Well, it has occurred to me that one reason for this unfortunate state of affairs has been the lack of any private agency that might fairly present the situation to the public. The lack of properly distributed information is the cause of most of misunderstandings in this world . . . "(Dos Passos, 1979, p. 284)

Of course, according to Moorehouse, his agency is exactly the right kind of such agency. Here both self-adjusting capability of babbittry and bold and risky entrepreneurship of cowperwoodism are evident. The World War I is on the way. John W. Moorehouse is extremely cynical when talking about this subject: "Why, gentlemen, I just came back from Europe; my wife and I sailed the day Great Britain declared war . . . I can tell you it was a narrow squeak. On one thing I can assure you with comparative certainty, whoever wins, Europe will be economically ruined. This war is America's great opportunity . . . The very fact of our neutrality . . ." (Dos Passos, 1979, p. 285) Moorehouse shows a perfect example of babbittry adapting the objectives of his company to the mankind's great calamity; on the other hand, he reveals adventurism and riskiness peculiar to Frank Cowperwood, being ready to take risks and make a profit from such a calamity, by whatever means it takes. "American business has been slow to take advantage of the possibilities of modern publicity . . . education of the public and employers and employees, all equally servants of the public . . . Cooperation . . . stockownership giving the employee an interest in the industry . . . avoiding the great dangers of socialism and demagoguery and worse . . . It is in such a situation that the public relations counsel can step in in a quiet manly way and say, Look here, men, let's talk this over eye to eye . . . The time for an educational campaign and an oral crusade that will drive home to the rank and file of the mighty Colossus of American up-to-date industry is right now, today" (Dos Passos, 1979, p. 286) As Dos Passos writes, there was a great deal of clapping, after which John Ward Moorehouse sat down and glanced at people with his blue-eyed smile.

Goldman (1970) says that "The public relations counsel" is almost the presiding genius over all the three parts of the trilogy. J.W.M. is obviously the key figure of *The 42nd Parallel*. "Moorehouse represents the interposition of advertising between worker and boss as a means of selling capitalism to the American people", says Goldman (p. 476). In broadest terms, he sees the plot of the trilogy as the struggle between the Party and the Bosses for total control of the country, in which the public relations counsel hands Labor over to Capital. Here Cowperwood wins over Babbitt.

Moorehouse started as a newspapers salesman and used his experience to end with public relations. Even more, he uses his skill of a publicist to combat the rising socialist movement. Corkin (1992) compares Moorehouse with another protagonist of the first novel – proletarian Mac – saying that both Mac and Moorehouse create the meaningful language for mass consumption ("Mac is a printer and Moorehouse a publicist", p. 601), the former belonging to the production system, while the latter being in charge of the production. J. W. Moorehouse demonstrates the power of the word to influence perception of the masses. Dos Passos uses J. W. "to represent the means by which the business classes come to dominance in an age of mass culture." (Corkin, 1992, p. 602)

One day Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt discovers that he has a tremendous ability of delivering his ardent ideas to the audience when he is invited to speak in front of Zenith Real Estate Board. Babbitt's speech is the hymn to Americanism as he extols the merits of his compatriots over those of Europeans. However, in his speech there is a great deal of conformist attitude to life as opposed to outright individualism expressed through the words of Theodore Dreiser's protagonist:

"Our Ideal Citizen – I picture him first and foremost as being busier than a bird-dog, not wasting a lot of good time in day-dreaming or going to sassiety teas or kicking about things that are none of his business, but putting the zip in some store or profession or art. At night he lights up a good cigar, and climbs into a little old 'bus, and maybe cusses the carburetor, and shoots out home. He mows the lawn, or sneaks in some practice putting, and then he is ready for dinner. After dinner he tells the kiddies a story, or takes the family to the movies, or plays a few fists of bridge, or reads the evening paper, and a chapter or two of some good lively Western novel if he has a taste for literature, and maybe the folks next door drop in and they sit and visit about their friends and the topics of the day. Then he goes happily to bed, his conscience

clear, having contributed his mite to the prosperity of the city and to his own bank account".

(Lewis, 1961, p. 150)

It is clearly visible that Babbitt's "Ideal Citizen" is the one caring exclusively for consumption, a consumer not looking beyond his mercantile interests and needs. Marxist critics used to refer to such people as "petty bourgeois" elements, their highest values being material prosperity and family well-being. Petty bourgeois people usually don't have high ideals or principles. They are confined to their small world, finding happiness in increasing their income. They raise their children or visit the clubs of their social layer, not allowing others to look inside. However, they are, in their own turn, denied to visit social congregations of higher level.

In the same manner, building the bridge between the Labor and Capital, John Ward Moorehouse invites the low and middle class to collaborate with the Capital, to play the rules of the last, to adjust and adapt to the circumstances, and to become Philistine rather than the Chosen People. He advises this based on his own experience: he himself had to pass a lot of conformism before having become able to open his own business meant to achieve the harmony between lower and upper classes at the expense of alternative principles these lower classes might confess. Moorehouse's very first job was sales, and he outsold all other salesmen, for which he was praised, and he never forgot this lesson of life. What comes to one's mind is Arthur Miller's Willy Loman, whose attitude explains the position of Moorehouse as far as his "babbittry" part is concerned. In "Requiem" part, Charlie tells Biff, who his father was:

"Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine (bold script is mine – G.Sh.). And when they start not smiling back – that's an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you're finished." (Miller, 1970, p. 111)

According to Diggins (1963), while Moorehouse considers himself as the driving force behind the industrial system, Dos Passos makes it explicit that his role is one of price and profit rather than production. His predisposition to manipulate and "mold" is utterly destructive. In short, he represents the "monkey wrench". How not to recall Babbitt? Praising liberty and entrepreneurship, was not he the one who had made his fortune and had been increasing it exclusively by speculations with real estate? Babbitt's inability to contribute to production overlaps with J. W.'s ability to manipulate in the "lobby" of production.

In the second book of the trilogy, *Nineteen Nineteen*, John Ward Moorehouse does not act like a protagonist, but as a secondary character. However, the reader notices that he has already become the shark of big business, as his tremendous plan to establish the first nationwide public relations office succeeded. Moorehouse appears in different parts of the country, in Paris, in Mexico, and everywhere he spreads out the net of his baby business. In fact, Moorehouse acts more as Cowperwood, than Babbitt. The second novel's Moorehouse is more like *The Titan's Cowperwood*, than the hero of The Financier. Here Moorehouse is a well-established businessman in the field of public relations just as Cowperwood is a well-established businessman in Chicago. Still, one important thing distinguishes Moorehouse from Cowperwood: that is his relationships with women. Some Internet joker once said that the more proper title for Dreiser's *The Titan* would be "The Womanizer". It is somehow true if we recall how many lovers Frank Cowperwood had in the second book of the trilogy. In the case of Moorehouse, it is quite different. When Moorehouse talks to Eveline Hutchins about his friendship with Eleanor Stoddard, it goes as follows:

"Really", said Eveline, looking J. W. suddenly straight in the eye, "I'd always thought you and Eleanor were lovers".

J. W. blushed. For a second Eveline was afraid she'd shocked him. He wrinkled up the skin around his eyes in a comical boyish way. "No, honestly not . . . I've been too busy working all my life ever to develop that side of my nature . . . People think differently about those things than they did". Eveline nodded. The deep flush on his face seemed to have set her cheeks on fire. "And now", J. W. went on, shaking his head gloomily, "I'm in my forties and it's too late." (Dos Passos, 1979, p. 314)

Such a confession would never come from the lips of Frank Cowperwood. He had been very busy all his life but that had never prevented him to set his eye on different women and take them as they were. Even Babbitt would not say that. By his forties he had already had a "cosy" family along with children and led a very chaste life. It is true, Sinclair Lewis shows us how he went astray at some point of his life, but it was so chancy, so temporary, that he quite soon realized that he ought to resume his normal course. In this sense, John Ward Moorehouse resembles neither Cowperwood, nor Babbitt. Still, eventually, we learn that he becomes the lover of Eleanor Stoddard, when Eveline notices him lying in the bed in Eleanor's room as if wishing to make up leeway.

Conclusion

Proceeding from above, we can sort the authors writing about John Ward Moorehouse into two groups, conditionally calling these groups as "pro-Babbitt" or "pro-Cowperwood".

Such authors as Footman (1939) consider that "Charlie Anderson, Dick Savage, John Ward Moorehouse, and any of the major characters, are alive, but they are also painfully mediocre." (p. 378)

Masteller (1989) mentions Moorehouse an "opportunist".

On the other hand, Seed (1984) calls Moorehouse "the image-promoter par excellence" adding that "Moorehouse is... crucial as a front man. Behind him

stand massive organizations like Bessemer Steel and even government itself. <...> His activities involve deception (in hiding the facts about strikes) and a sinister exercise of power." (pp. 188-189)

Geist (1952) sounds even mystical, saying that "As the scope of this operation widens to embrace every aspect of American life and culture, Moorehouse becomes the high-priest of a new national religion: Publicity. <...> At the center of this world, continuously renewing it, keeping it in motion, is Moorehouse – messiah, prophet, wizard, high-priest, and mediating god." (Geist, 1952, p. 208)

Gelfant (1961) is also rather mystical, although neutral, saying that: "In U.S.A. Charlie Anderson, Dick Savage, and Ward Moorehouse (whose name suggests materialistic grasping) seem caught in Faustian bargain. They pay with their souls for their success, and at the end, though their souls are lost, their success is tenuous and under threat." (p. 145)

The opinion of Soviet Russian critic A. Startsev (Старцев, 1934) provides brilliant summary of the ideas expressed throughout this essay. Startsev writes:

"Most significant here are two characters, created by coryphaeuses of realism. Dreiser described him in the character of Cowperwood as a magnificent and mighty predator. Sinclair Lewis ridiculed him in the character of average representative of the kind – famous Babbitt. J. W. Moorehouse is located somewhere in between these two types, his dependency from them is obvious, but he bears principally different social properties. Cowperwood fought like a wolf for his fate and provoked admiration by his perseverance. Moorehouse fights like a wolf, and does not provoke admiration. Babbitt was laughable and miserable by his claims, self-conceit, prejudices and eventually aroused indulgence and pity. Moorehouse is laughable and miserable for the same reasons, but does not arouse pity. Babbitt was an ignorant "civilized savage" in his ideals, tastes, characteristic reactions – here lies the attack of the satirist against "booboisie". Cowperwood worships pieces of art and beautiful women – this "ennobles" his nature of a predator. Moorehouse is not a stranger to art and willingly wins over beautiful women; - this does not ennoble his character and does not camouflage his narrow-mindedness and banality but, on the contrary, creates a sharp unmasking element in his features. Lewis underestimated Babbitt, Dreiser overestimated Cowperwood, although both of these writers gave these characters undoubtedly essential elements of a depicted social type." (Старцев, 1934, p. 128)

Taking into account that in the 1930s, while writing U.S.A., John Dos Passos was a devoted socialist, evidenced both by his novels and interviews, we can agree with the final statement of Startsev:

"Dos Passos gave in Moorehouse the character of class adversary, character of the representative of avant-garde of ruling class, character of "advanced" capitalist of imperialism era, deadly enemy of working people. Such is a concrete historical unmasking purpose of Dos Passos: in its tangible concreteness there are both strength and social significance of the character of Moorehouse" (Старцев, 1934, p. 128)

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