

ANALYSIS

Three Soldiers (1921)

John Dos Passos

(1896-1970)

“*Three Soldiers* took another dilettante, this time a musician, through his war experiences, and with him two average Americans who share his discontent. One of them begins by being ambitious for promotion, but rises no higher than an army kitchen. Another, a mild farm boy, murders an officer who has bullied him. The musician, permitted after the armistice to study in Paris, is so resentful because his final discharge is slow in coming that he deserts and at the end faces a long term in prison. These three soldiers were not typical of the army at large, many shocked readers insisted. Dos Passos held that his story was as true as the romantic versions of the war, with their happy warriors all bravely aware that they were saving democracy. If such instances as he had chosen to present were special, such moods were not. Soldiers were not all heroes, and those who set out to be had a good chance to be disillusioned.

John Andrews, the musician and chief figure in *Three Soldiers*, has come from Harvard to the war expecting that he will find peace for his troubled mind in a large, generous cause. Instead he finds slavery and boredom. Like Carol Kennicott, in *Main Street* the year before, Andrews rebels against dullness and pettiness, aimlessness and cruelty. His own impulses are vague: he desires a perfect freedom in which he can compose a symphony on the Queen of Sheba. Once the war is over, and he is free to work in Paris, there is every reason why he should put up a little longer with the minor annoyance of being still technically a soldier. His desertion seems a heedless folly. But he has reached his limit of irritation and thinks he can endure no more. He rebels with a desperate gesture. It was a gesture with which Dos Passos and his decade could sympathize. They resented officers and officials, routine and red tape. The sympathy in *Three Soldiers* lies with the common men, whether they are heroic or not, who do the plain work of the war.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(1921; Macmillan 1940-68) 335

“John Andrews, the frustrated musician, certainly interests both the author and his readers more than either of the others. Andrews is, indeed, a typical Dos Passos hero, the aesthetic revolutionary, a beauty-devoted young man with an intense social consciousness in whom a good deal of the author’s temperament has clearly been expressed. This was the first important American fiction in which World War I was ‘debunked’—as Dos Passos saw it, American doughboys died to protect the Morgan investments—and the first to emphasize the dehumanizing horror and obscenity of war. (In Europe, it had been preceded by the work of Latzko and Henri Barbusse.) When it was published it shocked many readers by its frankness, and it is still fair to call it one-sided in the sense that unfortunately most Americans did not react to military regimentation quite like the Dos Passos protagonists.”

Edward Wagenknecht
*Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*
(Holt 1952) 383-84

“*Three Soldiers* is a pacifistic study of a cross-section of the American army in the First World War, somewhat resembling Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* in attitude and construction. The novel is interesting for its technical innovations; its form is totally ‘decentralized,’ without a central character and without a single plot to hold it together artistically. Although Dos Passos does not fully exploit the possibilities of the technique, we can see here the germ of the style which is improved in *Manhattan Transfer* and brought to perfection in *U.S.A.*

The three soldiers of the title are Dan Fuselli, a shrewd Italian-American who fits easily into army life and remains cheerfully ignorant of the wider implications of the war; Christfield, an uneducated yokel from Indiana who is a misfit in the army and who eventually succeeds in murdering a personal enemy in the excitement of combat; and John Andrews, the most important of the three, a sensitive and creative college graduate who resents the stupid discipline of the army, deserts, acquires a French girl, studies music in Paris, and is arrested by M.P.'s at the end of the novel. Although the narrative seems confused, a pattern lies underneath: all the soldiers go into the army full of naïve enthusiasm and chauvinism, and are rudely disillusioned by the experience of the reality of war.

Another process takes place simultaneously: the awakening of the more perceptive American soldiers to the sophistication and culture of Europe, the attraction of a world they never suspected in their pre-1914 provincialism. Thus Dos Passos demonstrates the formation of two important social attitudes, the disillusionment and cynicism of the postwar generation and the cult of everything European, and especially French, in America during the Twenties. Andrews, the only fully rounded and convincing character in the novel, is well done; his attitudes toward the war and toward French culture make him a symbol of the whole 'lost generation' of intellectuals."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 134-35

"One of the finest of the pacifist novels to appear after World War I. *Three Lives* deals with John Andrews, a musician just graduated from Harvard, who joins the army in the expectation of finding comfort by contributing to a righteous cause. Instead he encounters tyranny, aimlessness, red tape, cruelty, utter boredom. His two companions, an Italian-American and a gentle farm boy, are likewise disillusioned. The farmer, goaded beyond endurance, kills an officer; Andrews deserts with him and faces a long prison term. When shocked readers protested against the realism of the novel, Dos Passos replied that his story was nearer the truth than the romantic war novels then in vogue."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)