

# Innovative literary devices in 1919

[Countries](#), [United States](#)



Too often in literature, novels surrounding a specific time period lack the authenticity of *mise-en-scene* for the reader. However, author John Dos Passos commits to unique and innovative writing techniques in his novel 1919 (one of the three entries in the U. S. A. Trilogy) to deliver atmosphere, tone, and realism. Dos Passos' original use of literary devices is evident through his character development, use of historical figures or persons, intentional details in setting and tone, and through "The Camera Eye" and "Newsreel" shorts. By providing such meticulous details, Dos Passos imparts to the reader a better grasp of the setting while having a more authentic and enlightening reading experience. Dos Passos also effectively tells his story of 1919 with honesty and critiques pertaining to the American lifestyle during the early 20th century particularly for low-income citizens.

Dos Passos' techniques within the narrative surrounding character development are strategic yet gripping. The narrator seems to be omniscient and Dos Passos uses this tool uniquely to expose his characters crumbling lives and the turmoil surrounding the time period, while also subtly expressing his ironic tone. For example, when introducing Eveline Hutchins he jumbles words together to establish his irony and realism in the following passage:

On the floor below was Dr. Hutchins' study where Yourfather mustn't be disturbed, and Dearmother's room where he stayed all morning painting dressed In a lavender smock. On the ground floor was the drawingroom and the diningroom, where parishioners came and little children must be seen and not heard, and at dinnertime you could smell good things to eat and

hear and Yourfather's booming scary voice and when Yourfather's voice was going all the companiesvoices were quiet (Dos Passos 83).

The author combines common phrases together as a typical American would while speaking intentionally to grab the readers' attention. Dos Passos also wants the audience to be aware of the negatives amongst American culture, by creating a fresh take on a commonly clichéd technique.

Short biographies of historical famous persons are interjected within the story of 1919, and display another innovative writing style. Dos Passos uses these figures as representatives for the era, and often depicts them unkindly. Another important reason for these life stories is to give face to American society at the time. Specifically Dos Passos' biography on Woodrow Wilson conveys a bleak message toward the former president of the United States. One instance where this is evident is when he writes, " The smalltown bosses and the wardheelers looked at each other and scratched their heads; then they cheered; Wilson fooled the wise-acres and doublecrossed the bosses, was elected by a huge plurality" (Dos Passos 193). This passage clearly implies a negative tone toward " Meester Veelson" and explains that the once praised president was not as great as he had seemed.

" The Camera Eye" is another compilation of shorts juxtaposed with the characters environment, in which Dos Passos uses to convey his attitudes towards existence and humanity. While aiming to be a compliment to the narrative and experiences of characters, the prose style is drastically different from his mostly realist narrative style. " The Camera Eye" exhibits

poetic imagery and stream of consciousness techniques. An example that stands out is displayed in “ The Camera Eye” (29),

the raindrops fall one by one out of the horsechestnut tree over the arbor  
onto the table in the abandoned beergarden and the puddly gravel and my  
clipped skull where my fingers move gently forward and back over the fuzzy  
knobs and hollows

spring and we’ve just been swimming in the Marne way off somewhere  
beyond the fat clouds on the horizon they are hammering on a tin roof in the  
rain the spring after a swim in the Marne with that hammering to the north  
pounding the thought of death into our ears (Dos Passos 54)

The purpose for “ The Camera Eye” is for the reader to picture a cinematic scene along side the author’s tone and perception of American society. This idea becomes particularly noticeable in the last two lines of the passage. Dos Passos commendably uses imagery to evoke a specific atmosphere in the scene.

Dos Passos’ most effective new literary tool is best displayed through the “ Newsreel” clips. The “ Newsreel” portions of the book include actual newspaper headlines, article passages, poetry, popular songs, advertisements, and slogans that reflect the actual time Dos Passos is discussing. This provides readers with authentic examples of how the era was experienced. Dos Passos even uses different font styles to distinguish each line. This is exemplified on page 53,

Goodbye Broadway

Hello France

We're ten million strong

8 YEAR OLD BOY SHOT BY LAD WITH RIFLE

the police have already notified us that any entertainment in Paris must be brief and quietly conducted and not in public view and that we have already had more dances than we ought (Dos Passos)

In this text, italics represent popular songs and melodies, capitalization refers to newspaper headlines, and slightly longer passages are clippings from newspaper articles. A key component to the effectiveness of these “Newsreels” is that they were real, inducing even more realism into this thought-provoking piece. Dos Passos also uses these “Newsreels” to reflect some qualities of the characters, and perhaps providing insight into their actions.

1919 demonstrates Dos Passos innovative usage of literary devices and creates an interesting experience for the reader. An American original, Dos Passos successfully revolutionizes the act of storytelling with realism and subtle tones of irony. He expands on the theme of realism through the short interjections of the “Newsreel” adding textual evidence to his critical perceptions of American society. We learn even more of Dos Passos’ views on America through “The Camera Eye” passages, which can be argued as his own visual accounts of the time period. The biographies stamp 1919 as a historical piece, providing a more realistic feel and often portray a negative theme, completing Dos Passos’ tone and overall message of the novel. By

combining all of these innovative techniques, Dos Passos created a raw novel exposing the true injustices in American society.

### **Works Cited**

Dos Passos, John. 1919. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1946.