

The Aeroplane as a Modernist Symbol: Aviation in the Works of Virginia Woolf and John Dos Passos

Rinni Haji Amran

Independent Scholar

meisana@hotmail.com

This paper investigates the rise of aviation and its influence on modernist literature in the first half of the twentieth century, arguing that the emergence of heavier-than-air flight facilitated experimentation and innovation in modernist writing. Previous critical discussions largely focus on militarist and nationalist ideas regarding the uses of the aeroplane, and in doing so overlook the diversity of attitudes towards aviation that had greater influence on modernist thought. Through a historicist reading of modernist texts by Virginia Woolf and John Dos Passos, this study extends scholarly debates on transport technologies and literature by uncovering connections between alternative views of aviation and modernist literary and narrative experimentation.

For Woolf, I argue that the aeroplane's all-encompassing aerial view offered her a new way of seeing the connections between living things, leading to an expanded narrative scope in her later writings. I note her diary entry in which she mentions reading famed American aviator Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *North to the Orient* (1935)—an account of her journey to Japan—and draw intriguing parallels between Lindbergh's refreshing take on the aerial view of the world below and Woolf's later writing. Dos Passos, in contrast, saw the effects of air travel as harmful to the human senses and perceptions of the world around. I argue that his unpleasant first experience of flight and the burgeoning American aviation industry influenced his incorporation of aspects of flight into his fast-paced, multi-modal narratives in order to convey and critique the disorienting and alienating experience of flight. Both these writers show that as much as the aeroplane was capable of causing mass destruction, it was also constructive in the way that it enabled these new ways of thinking, and it is this complex and paradoxical nature, this paper proposes, that makes the aeroplane an important modernist symbol.