

ANALYSIS

Manhattan Transfer (1925)

John Dos Passos

(1896-1970)

“In *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) Dos Passos returned to the narrative method of *Three Soldiers*, applied this time to a metropolis. The narrative is not a continuous story but a flashing procession of incidents in which particular characters often recur, though with only occasional connection. It is several stories, arranged in the hit-or-miss of city life, as if several films had been cut into irregular lengths and all the parts joined together in a jumbled continuity. Some readers were mystified by the sharp impressionism of the style, others repelled by the novel’s candor about the hidden lives of its characters. Dos Passos wrote like a newspaper reporter who had gone behind the headlines and had turned the inside of many lives to the light. He moved with ease and knowledge through various social groups, but with special attention to the drifting, rootless people who make up so large a part of New York. The city as a whole might elude him, as it had eluded all novelists, but the parts he touched come in *Manhattan Transfer* to a vast sprawling life...

In the final chapter the poet Jimmy Herf, as much a hero as the book has, leaves New York in disgust to go on an uncertain hunt for reality and freedom elsewhere. Dos Passos had lost interest in the plight of his artists—architect, musician, poet—in the harsh world and grown increasingly concerned with all the victims of the troubled times. In the midst of a flushed prosperity there were fierce industrial wars—strikes—and fierce arguments. The Russian revolution affected American opinion as the French revolution had done in the first decade of the republic. Communists in America looked forward to an international revolution.... Dos Passos belonged to no strict party but preferred, as an old-fashioned believer in liberty, equality, fraternity, he said, to assemble critical documents on the age.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(1921; Macmillan 1940-68) 336

“It is in the construction of this sort of sociological fable that Dos Passos particularly excels. The strength of his novel, *Manhattan Transfer*, lay in the thoroughness and the steady hand with which he executed a similar anatomy on the city of New York as a whole. As a dramatist he is less expert; and [his play] *Airways* suffers in certain ways from comparison with *Manhattan Transfer*. Dos Passos sometimes interrupts his action with long passages of monologue, which, though they might go down easily in a novel, discourage our attention in the theater; and his last act, though the two separate scenes are excellent in themselves, fails to draw the different strands together as we expect a third act to do. But, on the other hand, *Airways*, at its best, has an eloquence and a spirit that *Manhattan Transfer* largely lacked. It is one of the best written things that Dos Passos has so far done—perhaps freer than any other of his productions both from rhetoric doing duty for feeling and from descriptions too relentlessly piled up. Dos Passos is probably only now arriving at his mature prose style.”

Edmund Wilson
“Dos Passos and the Social Revolution” (1929)
The Shores of Light
(1952; Random House/Vintage 1961) 430-31

“*Manhattan Transfer* is one of the most brilliant and original American novels of the century.... The narrative covers the period from about 1898 (date of the birth of the heroine, and of the passing of the Greater New York Bill), through the World War, down, roughly, to the date of writing. Many major events are implied, if not actually recorded. The heroine, Ellen, is three times married—to the actor Oglethorpe, to Jimmy Herf the newspaper man, and to the lawyer and politician Baldwin, not to speak of her affair with the Harvard man, Stan....without regard for plot.... The chapters are made up...of a considerable number of sections, but in passing from one group of persons, from one social milieu to another, as in the paintings of Leger and other cubists we pass from one block to another of contrasting color....

A point is made of introducing a good many people who have nothing whatever to do with either Ellen Thatcher or Jimmy Herf, people they never come in contact with and have never heard of.... Bud Korpenning who after years of cruelty at the hands of his father, has killed the old man and come to New York to lose himself in the crowd.... Dutch Roberson, returning so hopefully from the war, but incapable of finding employment or even a place to make love, and finally ending up as a convicted bank robber; Anna Cohen, beloved of a Socialist, sweat laborer herself in a dressmaker's establishment, the victim of inadequate fire regulations; Jake and Rosie of the shady Prudence Promotion Co.; Densch and Blackhead, speculative business men, caught in the slump. And then, besides the recurrent figures, there are others who make but one appearance, contributing their single note to this tone-poem of life in Gotham. Such is the 'small bearded bandy-legged man in a derby' who buys himself a Gillette razor outfit in a drug-store and goes home to shave off his beard. In a world so largely made up of laborers and industrialists, he may be said to represent the consumer.

There are of course many characters more or less associated with the principals but quite unnecessary to the development of a plot. Such is Congo Jake, a poor French boy who goes into bootlegging and makes a fortune; various ward politicians associated with Baldwin; various actor-folk associated with Ellen and Oglethorpe; and Jimmy's cousin Merivale, captain in the American Army and successful business man. Many of these stand for such as profit honestly or dishonestly by the system which victimizes... Dos Passos favors those middle reaches of society where the great masses live, and, morally considered, from those levels far below ideal beauty of character, and considerably above the merely mean and vile.... Not before the middle of the book can we say with assurance that the leading male character is Jimmy Herf and the leading woman Ellen Thatcher, now Oglethorpe. The other characters, though they may in time come to be more or less remotely associated with Ellen or Jimmy, are introduced quite independently. They are numerous and diversified, and, not being related in a plot, they give all the more the impression of a section cut straight across the social organism of New York City....

We plunge invariably into the midst of the new moment with the character in question as if no one else existed and as if there were no such thing as a past lying back of this moment.... We see them only at moments that have some particular importance or significance.... The author does not tell us what has happened, but lets us infer it from allusions made by the characters in conversation or in reverie—for in the world of thought we do not tell ourselves what has happened to us, but make as if it were allusions to it... [We] are full in the middle of the movement begun by Miss Richardson and Joyce: the suppression of the author and his explanations, the effort at intimacy and immediacy, the elliptical, allusive manner of narrative, the sudden transitions—past and present, thought and speech, real and imaginary, all jumbled together, as in the impression we have of life itself.... It is hardly necessary to point out the story-telling effectiveness of this succession of shifting views, once we are reconciled to the absence of plot and drama. There is a kind of exhilaration in the rapid passage from one act to another such as is cultivated by the producers of vaudeville, of revues and moving-pictures."

Joseph Warren Beach
The Twentieth-Century Novel: Studies in Technique
(Appleton-Century-Crofts 1932) 437-41, 443-44

"*Manhattan Transfer* [is] the first full-fledged collectivist book. This time the protagonist is the city itself, which is portrayed from the 1890's up to the time the book appeared. Of the multitudinous characters, many appear but once, some several times, a few repeatedly. The 'leading' characters, if there are such, are Jimmy Herf, a newspaperman, and the actress Ellen Thatcher, whom he loves and loses. Even when a 'story' is suggested, it is told in terms of climactic scenes, the development that lies between them being inferred. The principle of organization suggests the cinema's montage: separate 'shots' combine into an over-all impression of the metropolis but not into a plot. There are lyrical epigraphs and something of what in U.S.A. was to be called 'Newsreel' material. Commercialism is already a force for evil, but the revolutionary feeling of U.S.A. has not yet been developed. Basically, *Manhattan Transfer* seems aesthetic, rather than social, in its inspiration."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 384

“*Manhattan Transfer* is a cross-sectional panorama of a city at work. The action begins in 1904 and continues through the era after the First World War, the ‘Jazz Age.’ There is no consistent plot, neither are there protagonists in the ordinary sense; the novel is a checkerboard composed of the careers of diverse and disconnected characters each wandering his way through life in an aimless and despairing fashion. None of these characters are acquainted in the beginning, but their lives become linked through a curious set of coincidences. In the end their destinies are intricately interwoven; each is a part of society, and what each does has its due impact on the others.

The most important of these characters are: Jimmy Herf, a frustrated reporter who suffers from the same sense of purposelessness that many of Scott Fitzgerald’s characters do; Stanwood Emery, a young playboy who burns himself out pursuing a succession of women and eventually dies in an apartment fire; George Baldwin, an excessively ambitious young lawyer; Oglethorpe, a degenerate capitalist; and Congo Jake, a French seaman who becomes a successful restaurateur and, with the advent of Prohibition, a bootlegger. Knitting the whole story together is Ellen Thatcher, a sensitive and unhappy actress who marries two other characters of the novel in succession and whose fortunes become linked with most of the others before the novel ends.

Manhattan Transfer is in many respects a careless and immature work; the documentation is often inaccurate, and there are an improbable and astonishing number of fatal fires, auto accidents, crimes, suicides, and speakeasy brawls crammed into the action. The attempts to reproduce New York dialect are also unimpressive, especially in the case of the rich. Dos Passos attempts to evoke the tempo of the era by quoting snatches of popular songs, headlines, and public speeches, a device he was to develop more fully in *U.S.A.*”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 135-36

“For several years of the 1920’s, the Pennsylvania Railroad maintained a station in the New Jersey meadows between Newark and Jersey City which it called Manhattan Transfer, where passengers between New York City and points south and west changed trains. The title of Dos Passos’ novel is symbolic; ‘Manhattan Transfer’ stands for the shifting and variegated life of New York City. The novel is composed with the newsreel and cinema technique Dos Passos often uses, and includes a staccato succession of descriptive and narrative scenes. The novel is in essence an imaginative sociological study, intended to give a panoramic impression of a swarming metropolis. The story revolves around an actress who marries, loves, is divorced. Many other characters appear only fleetingly. The final effect is one of frustration and defeat. It was Dos Passos’ first mature work, and set the technical pattern and the philosophy for the novels that followed.”

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

Michael Hollister (2015)