

# Techniques of conveying 'meaning' in john dos passos' 'manhattan transfer'



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“ Oh I know everything is dead.” So says Billy Waldron to Ruth Prynne in chapter two, ‘ Nickelodeon,’ of the third section of John Dos Passos’ ‘ Manhattan Transfer’. This statement embodies several techniques Dos Passos uses throughout his novel – such as an almost insignificant ‘ throwaway’ line of dialogue, a dour comment, an observation made about people which is representative of the city as a whole, an instance of foreshadowing whose importance comes into play later on techniques that sometimes linger for only a scene before their pay-off arrives, while others linger for the span of several chapters before we understand their purpose.”

Oh I know everything is dead.” Billy speaks these words after Ruth tells him she has “ had a terrible run of bad luck.” We are sympathetic towards Ruth – she has a sore throat, she feels “ like the wrath of God,” and then when she runs into her old friend Billy and he tells her he has not heard from her in a good while, she knows he has put her down “ as a back number.” She is not in the best of health, feels tired, has been cut off from a former companion, and has fallen on hard times. However, rather than allaying Ruth’s bad luck or ill health, and rather than allowing this reunion between Billy and Ruth to delve into sentimental reminiscences on good times now past, the author twists the screw in further after Ruth confesses to Billy she has had her throat x-rayed. “ Ruth I wish you werent taking that X-ray treatment,” Billy tells her. “ I’ve heard it’s very dangerous. Don’t let me alarm you about it my dear... but I have heard of cases of cancer contracted that way.” Ruth brushes it off as “ nonsense,” but later, “ sitting in the uptown express in the subway,” her fears play on her. “ She looked up and down the car at the joggling faces opposite her. Of all those people one of them must have it.

FOUR OUT OF EVERY FIVE GET... She put her hand to her throat. Her throat  
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was terribly swollen. ...Maybe it was worse. It is something alive that grows in flesh, eats all your life, leaves you horrible, rotten.” And with these words we recall those earlier spoken by Billy: “ Oh I know everything is dead.”

Ruth’s reunion with Billy and the events that frame it illustrate the way Ruth is slowly, slowly being crushed by her society. Dos Passos’ naturalist technique depicts Ruth as a ‘ human animal.’ She steps out of a doctor’s office feeling faint, calls a taxi, realizes she is light on money. The taxi driver doesn’t have any change “ All right keep the change,” she says, only to find she is down to thirty-two cents. Then she runs into Billy, who is “ fatter and whiter than he used to be” – and thus, it is implied, wealthier – and Billy, in turn, remarks to Ruth that she herself looks “ distingue” in her fancy hat. After they part, Ruth, made increasingly more obsessed and paranoid by Billy’s comments about cancer, takes a crowded train home alongside “ a trainload of jiggling corpses.” The author’s emotional distance from Ruth allows us to peer into Ruth’s life as though she were an animal in a zoo, and indeed we are witness to a short vignette that is representative of the whole of Ruth’s downfall: as if to exemplify just how ill and poor she is, a figure from her past re-enters her life, is noticeably well-off, compliments her on the one symbol of wealth on her person, then tells her that her situation may be worse than she suspected, and finally he leaves her to rot amongst the population of living corpses on her way home. With his emotional distance from his subject in check, Dos Passos is able to inflict upon Ruth the harsh, unforgiving turns of ‘ real life’ that are the typical problems of real people more-so than mere characters, so we may therefore better empathize with her in our own way than we might have if the author had passed some kind of authorial judgment on her; and Ruth, then, becomes one of ‘ us,’ while we,

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as readers, become part of her. Dos Passos twists this notion further by cutting to – and contrasting Ruth’s story with – a scene of rising fortunes for another character. From a crowded jostling train and the confused, disorganized thoughts of a woman who may be dying and whose once-good fortunes are growing progressively worse, Dos Passos cuts in a flash to a comparatively more serene setting, a fog-covered bench on Brooklyn Bridge where Dutch Robertson sits, browsing a newspaper for a job, and where, with his fortunes already down, he attempts to turn them around for the better. By the same token, Ruth’s dreams and Dutch’s aspirations are also polar opposites: Ruth has a waking nightmare about slowly dying from cancer while Dutch promises his girlfriend Francie that he’ll “ get a job this week... we’ll get a nice room an get married an everything.” Such juxtaposition between two scenes (their comparative fortunes) and within each of those scenes (Dutch’s fortunes rising, Ruth’s fortunes falling) underlines the novelist’s naturalist portrait of Manhattan: the outside world of Ruth’s scene progresses from calmness to calamity as her interior thoughts do likewise, while, on the other hand, the outside world of Dutch’s scene progresses from calmness to calamity as his interior thoughts do the opposite. Dos Passos’ objectivity in these scenes suggests we should take it upon ourselves to compare and contrast them, to find their similarities and their differences in order to reveal two utterly opposed outlooks on the world from two people whose initial situations are almost identical. Both Ruth and Dutch have been crushed and swallowed up by the great metropolis of Manhattan, but while one slips and goes down almost willingly, the other refuses to give up or to go down without a fight; Dos Passos illustrates, then, the difference between determination and depression, and the way two people in similar financial

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and social situations can approach their respective futures from a perspective of either oppression or of opportunity. Most interesting is the way they both value the basic necessity of money, but for different reasons: Ruth values it for purposes of her health and welfare and social status, while Dutch values it only as a means with which he can eat and dance and take care of Francie. Moreover, although Dutch makes a very conscious decision to improve his fortunes, he only does so within the limits of Manhattan; that is, unlike Jimmy Herf at the end of the novel, Dutch makes no effort to transcend the boundaries of his environment, but chooses instead to simply remain afloat within them. This is naturalism, the 'human animal' in its natural environment – imprisoned but yearning to be free, varied and unpredictable, and both self-destructive and self-preserving in its methods of achieving that freedom. A similar use of juxtaposition is evident again in the third chapter, 'Revolving Doors,' when calamity once more gives way to calmness, but with a different effect, to illustrate a different point. Consider the end of Anna Cohen's scene in the diner:" " The stools are all full. Girls, officeboys, grayfaced bookkeepers." " Chicken sandwich and a cup o caffee." " Cream cheese and olive sandwich and a glass of buttermilk." " Chocolate sundae." " Egg sandwich, coffee and doughnuts." " Cup of boullion." " Chicken broth." " Chocolate ice cream soda." People eat hurriedly without looking at each other, with their eyes on their plates, in their cups. Behind the people sitting on stools those waiting nudge nearer. Some eat standing up. Some turn their backs on the counter and eat looking out through the glass partition and the sign HCNUL ENIL NEERG at the jostling crowds filing in and out the subway through the drabgreen gloom."

The hustle-bustle of the human pig-trough switches immediately to a quiet,  
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leisurely but important conversation between Gus McNeil and Joey O'Keefe over the state of the workers' union. Gus asks Joey to give him the details, "puffing a great cloud of smoke out of his cigar and leaning back in his swivel chair," with both the cigar and the chair indicative of status, power, success, wealth, and respect. Contrary to the juxtaposition between Ruth and Dutch, which illustrates two individuals in states of environmental transition, the juxtaposition between Anna and Gus instead illustrates two individuals who find their own personal states changed, yet somehow unchanging, while the state of the broader picture remains the same: Anna loses her job but is still inundated with customers at the diner, and Gus is still involved in workers' union disputes and discussions even though civic virtue is at an all-time high. Rather than underlining the differences between 'human animals' like Ruth and Dutch – two people in similar situations who take different approaches to overcome those situations – the technique of following Anna's scene with Gus' scene underlines the similarities between two people in different situations, in order to illustrate the overbearing anonymity of the city, Manhattan. Both characters disappear into their jobs, in a haze of business: Anna is swarmed over by customers even after she has been fired, while Gus remains, through success and failure, enveloped in a haze of cigar smoke, enveloped completely in his business. If Ruth and Dutch both fear they will physically decay, at least they both retain the dignity that has rotted away in Anna, the fading beauty queen who loses her job for focusing less on work and more on make-up, and Gus, the self-made entrepreneur who has lost himself in a plight of negotiations with still more anonymous people who appear before him not as human beings, not even as 'human animals,' but only as dollar signs. These characters exist in a disproportionately capitalist

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environment which forces them, like the author, to distance themselves from the anonymity of those that surround them – but, ironically, that same capitalist environment in turn renders them anonymous within its own hierarchy; they believe they can distinguish themselves by doing a good job, by succeeding, by becoming wealthier, but the futile energy that this requires of them forces them to go in the opposite direction. Here, then, Dos Passos illustrates an inversion of prioritized values: if these characters seek such material success but are ultimately crushed in the process, then they should be seeking the opposite. The author's message here is brought full-circle in the final pages of the novel." She sways from the hips as she scolds in an endless querulous stream of Yiddish at Anna sitting blearyeyed with sleep over a cup of coffee: " If you had been blasted in the cradle it would have been better, if you had been born dead. ...Oy what for have I raised four children that they should all of them be no good, agitators and streetwalkers and bums...? ...May you wither in your chair, picketing for garment workers, walking along the street shameless with a sign on your back." So says Mrs. Cohen to her daughter Anna in an argument after Anna has lost her job, in chapter four of the third section, ' Skyscraper.' In the next scene, Martin Schiff asks Roy rhetorically " You want a job? ... You want to sell your soul to the highest bidder?" This occurs moments after Jimmy Herf enters the scene, just as Roy refers to Jimmy as " the wanderer." Consider the relevance of these comments to the final scene of the first section and the final scene of the third section of the book. The conclusion of the novel in chapter five, ' The Burthen Of Nineveh,' of the third section, sees Jimmy Herf finally leaving Manhattan for a new life somewhere down the road; exactly where, he cannot say:" Say will you give me a lift?" he asks the redhaired

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man at the wheel [of the truck]." How fur ye goin?"" I dunno. ...Pretty far.""

For a novel that is essentially about death – whether it be the death of a dream, a career, a person, or a system of values – Jimmy's story might just as easily have ended the same way as that of Bud Korpenning's, when, in the final pages of the first section, Bud leaps off a bridge to end his life. Dos Passos' eye for foreshadowing is acute to the point where it persuades us to believe that Jimmy's death is coming long before we reach the end of the book – whether it be a literal death, as in Bud's case, or a prospective death, as in Ruth's case, or a figurative death, as in Gus' case – but what we anticipate by way of this foreshadowing is given a reverse treatment in the final scenes, wherein Jimmy is defeated by his society but ultimately escapes from it rather than allowing it to destroy him completely; and this act, and the decision that enabled it to take place, are made all the more powerful when set against the backdrop of a city that finds its very identity in expansion, growth and development, construction, and the promise of 'opportunity.' We realize, in the final pages, that Jimmy's abandonment of Manhattan at the end of the book is the first relevant conscious decision that any of the characters have made throughout the course of the novel; that is, a decision that has a bearing on their entire life, not merely on the continuation of their petty existence. The irony of this is that Jimmy, "the wanderer," becomes exactly what Mrs. Cohen warned Anna not to become – a vagabond, a bum – and as was the case with Anna, Mrs. Cohen might wish that Jimmy too "had been born dead." This is where all of Dos Passos' carefully planned elements are brought together, and the foreshadowing that has pervaded not just one scene but rather the entire novel comes to a head. The ultimate irony is that Jimmy, in his previous 'wanderer's' life, was <https://assignbuster.com/techniques-of-conveying-meaning-in-john-dos-passos-manhattan-transfer/>



dead; and only now, leaving Manhattan behind, is he alive and conscious, aware and awake. He too was a 'human animal' – one of Ruth's living corpses – when he was a working man migrating from job to job, and he had "[sold his] soul to the highest bidder," but in the instant of Jimmy's turnaround, Billy Waldron's earlier assertion that "everything is dead" is no longer true. By maintaining a distance from his characters, Dos Passos guides our impressions of those characters, and conveys his story and the society in which it takes place through use of juxtaposition, comparison and contrast, through foreshadowing and pay-offs and reversals of our expectations, through snatches of overheard dialogue and one-line throwaway comments that later display some relevance to the overall narrative arc, through impressions that characters make on other characters, through judgments that characters pass on other characters, with the author always remaining 'outside' the story so that, by story's end, the society of which Jimmy is a member is both overwhelming and potent, but more potent still is his decision to leave that society, to escape from the overheard words, throwaway lines, impressions and judgments that were the bars imprisoning him in the 'human zoo' of Manhattan. Essentially, Dos Passos' objective, sometimes emotionally-cold structure and style are of the highest relevance to his story in order to build a world that is all the more convincing because of its objectivity, and to reward the patience required to believe in that world with one character's escape from it that is of the utmost power because it justifies and necessitates the use of all of the stylistic and structural elements that allowed that character to make his decision in the first place; Jimmy's choice to leave ultimately justifies countless lines, remarks, and stylistic variations that, on first reading, appear to be insignificant, but <https://assignbuster.com/techniques-of-conveying-meaning-in-john-dos-passos-manhattan-transfer/>

which, by story's end, are noticeably the signposts of what was ultimately an inevitable - and inevitably optimistic - fate.