

Bud, not buddy: the
destruction of
individuality in john
dos passos's
manhattan t...



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“...Bud is sitting on the rail of the bridge. The sun has risen behind Brooklyn. The windows of Manhattan have caught fire. He jerks himself forward, slips, dangles by a hand with the sun in his eyes” (105) . . .

Unlike Realism and Romanticism, whose philosophical tenets were defined following these movements’ respective declines, Modernism was initially situated through the embrace of certain philosophical axioms, most notably the celebration of the individual struggling to find meaning and solidity in a chaotic world. The most prominent cause of the lack of stability in Modernity is the advent of mass industrialization and the birth of the metropolis.

Through an intricate level of wordplay, *Manhattan Transfer*, written in 1925 by John Dos Passos, establishes itself as a quintessential Modernist text by demonstrating the ability of the metropolis to pulverize the notion of autonomy. Nowhere in the novel is the metropolitan-induced loss of individuality more evident than the death of Bud Korpenning.

Bud Korpenning is introduced in the third paragraph of the novel, leading readers to believe that he is the protagonist; however, he is the first character who is slaughtered by the psychological and physical burden of the metropolis, giving his brief role in the text a level of modernist significance unsurpassed by any of the other protagonists. Thematically, the prototypical novel up to the Modern era involved a single (or perhaps limited selection) of protagonists whose salience is recognizable throughout the entirety of the text. In *Manhattan Transfer*, however, each protagonist is part of a larger dialogue in which characterization comes not from the individual’s own desires and ideals, but simply from the crushing density of metropolitan life.

The brevity of Bud's life, as well as his minimal characterization, showcases the ways in which the metropolis is able to steamroll Manhattan's denizens into psychological and physical instability. After drearily wandering around Manhattan, Bud stammers along Brooklyn Bridge and decides to rest while "sitting on the rail of the bridge" (105). A handrail's function is primarily one of protection; however, it is the act of sitting on the rail, "jerk[ing] forward," and then "slip[ping]" that leads to Bud's death. The rail, here, is a metaphor for technology being a double-edged sword. Industrialization was responsible for both the positive population boom of the early 1900s, as well as the physical sustenance of the metropolis, a city built vertically as opposed to horizontally, but mass industrialization was also the primary cause for widespread misery and never-before-considered perils in common life. Dos Passos ironically uses the image of a handrail to playfully demonstrate the precariousness of mankind in the face of industrialization.

Although the handrail prominently symbolizes the vacillations of human life in the face of social forces, it is the process of Bud's death that finally demonstrates the loss of autonomy in the Modern era. Dos Passos writes that Bud "jerks himself forward," as if to clearly suggest suicide, but he then states that Bud "slips." Although stylistically vague, this paradox elucidates the individual's complete lack of choice during modernity. Bud "jerks himself forward" in order to end his life and free his spirit, arguably the only remaining fragment of his "true self," from the shackles of the metropolis, yet even suicide, the most personal and autonomous experience someone can pursue, is beyond his control. Bud's lack of personal choice and freedom in metropolitan life, especially as these ideas pertain to his death,

authenticates the modernist notion that the individual is perpetually subjected to the oppressive environment of the metropolis, or modern life altogether.

The act of “slipping” on the handrail—an emblem, here, of the dichotomous relationship with technology among modernists—not only interferes with Bud’s prearranged emancipation from the metropolis, but the word “slipping” also suggests the downward spiral of universal autonomy in the face of myriad metropolitan impediments. In addition to the destruction of individuality, Bud’s having slipped suggests society’s increasing distance from nature, a recurring theme throughout Modernist texts. Shortly after Bud “jerks forward, slips,” he “dangles by a hand with the sun in his eyes.” Traditionally, the sunrise is a venerated beacon of hope ensuring the promise of a new day; however, in *Manhattan Transfer*, the sun, a synecdoche for the natural world, acts as a hindrance to Bud. Not only does Dos Passos’s image of the sun illuminate the ability of the environment, be it industrial or natural, to crush the individual, but it also exemplifies the unscrupulous technocentrism of modernity.

Modernist literature often admonishes mankind’s fascination with conquering natural forces as a moral pitfall. Dos Passos playfully augments these technocentric polemics by claiming that “the sun has risen behind Brooklyn,” as if the metropolis is the true source of light and the sun’s legacy is that of an indentured servant to industrialization. That “the sun has risen behind Brooklyn” also introduces the idea that the metropolis has risen in significance, even above the relationship between nature and humanity. Dos Passos, however, quickly reasserts his reproach against the metropolis by <https://assignbuster.com/bud-not-buddy-the-destruction-of-individuality-in-john-dos-passos-manhattan-transfer/>

adding that “ the windows of Manhattan have caught fire.” His lyrical expression for the refulgence of the sunrise in the city compounded with the imminent death of Bud gives this layering of images a derisive tone. The usage of the preposition “ of” as opposed to the more grammatically standard “ in” suggests that the windows are not mere constructs within the metropolis, but, rather, are active participants in Manhattan’s sentience. The entirety of the novel portrays Manhattan as an animal, so the “ windows [that] have caught fire” represent the all-seeing eyes of the metropolitan beast. Sunlight, the most revered of natural forces, is depicted here as a function of the metropolis, but the dominant image is that the reflection off the windows is conflagratory. Be it outskirts of the industrial sector, a far-off suburb, or distant rural vistas, everything the Metropolis touches—that is, everything the metaphorical eyes of the metropolis can see—is ablaze. One of the modernists’ primary objectives was the condemnation of the metropolis as a perilous, unnatural construct of society’s overexpansion, and the sunlight reflecting off the windows reinforces society’s fall from grace.

Whereas light is typically associated with redemption, the light blindness that Bud suffers leads to his subsequent fall and death, acting as an indictment against his romantic notions of autonomy. Because Bud, upon slipping, is facing east toward the sunrise, it is evident that while “ sitting on the rail,” he was facing west. In literature and philosophy, the “ west” is an archetype of freedom and individuality. After Bud’s hopes of success are crushed by the metropolis, he is sitting on a rail and staring into the sky, as though he were imagining the re-creation of his past rural life or the belief that his life will become ameliorated in a locale far away from the metropolis.

Because he refuses to act on his desires for motion and autonomy, both while sitting on the bridge and throughout the first section of *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos paints Bud as a philosophically static character whose overly romanticized notions of both metropolitan and rural life supersede his ability to sacrifice artificial definitions of individuality and success that continue to burden him until his death.

The inability of Bud to survive in the metropolis is even reflected by his name: Bud, the unflourished product of a flowering plant. Though Bud, like each of Manhattan's denizens, has the potential to develop himself into an autonomous being, he instead spends his time shuffling around the city eagerly awaiting autonomy to find him. Be it looking out west while sitting on the Brooklyn Bridge or passively attempting to escape the shackles of Modernity, Bud is intellectually and physically dormant, a broken offshoot of the larger social organism. He is a man who has been caught in the undercurrent of metropolitan life, pushed constantly in every direction by an abundance of uncontrollable social forces whose sole aim is the destruction of the individual.