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# Universidad de Valladolid

FACULTAD de FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS  
DEPARTAMENTO de FILOLOGÍA INGLESA  
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## TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

City of Destruction: Representation of New York City  
in John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*

Eduardo Sánchez Palencia

Tutor: Jesús Benito Sánchez

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“The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the misery and the beauty in the world.”

— F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*



## ABSTRACT

The modern city was negatively represented by the Modernists, who considered it to be the source of both the alienation and frustration that characterized the modern man. In the present study, an analysis of John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* is undertaken in order to determine if the way in which New York City is depicted in the novel falls within the Modernist perception of the modern metropolis as an abominable urban space. The analysis will focus on the various descriptions of New York City that are present in the novel, placing an emphasis on its representation both as a wasteland and as a modern Babylon, as well as on the influence that Oswald Spengler's philosophical notions in relation to the modern city had on Dos Passos when writing the novel.

Key Words: Modernism, modern city, New York City, urbanization, wasteland, Babylon.

## RESUMEN

La representación que los Modernistas dieron de la ciudad moderna fue muy negativa, siendo ésta considerada la fuente de la alienación y de la frustración que caracterizaban al hombre moderno. En el presente estudio se realiza un análisis de *Manhattan Transfer* de John Dos Passos para determinar si la representación que se da de Nueva York en la novela entra dentro de la percepción Modernista de la metrópolis moderna como un espacio urbano abominable. El análisis se centrará en las diferentes descripciones de Nueva York que aparecen en la novela, haciendo hincapié en su representación como una tierra baldía y como una Babilonia moderna, así como en la influencia que las ideas filosóficas de Oswald Spengler en relación con la ciudad moderna tuvieron sobre Dos Passos a la hora de escribir la novela.

Palabras clave: Modernismo, ciudad moderna, Nueva York, urbanización, tierra baldía, Babilonia.



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## 1. Introduction

The modern city played a major role in Modernism, being criticized and negatively represented by numerous Modernist authors and philosophers. It was perceived by the Modernists as a reflection of both the materialism and the mechanization that marked the twentieth century. According to Lehan, “as the city became more materialistic, it engendered a hostility in the literary imagination” (5). The modern metropolis was considered to be a mechanical wasteland that caused the sorrow of the modern man by separating him from the natural world. Several philosophers and literary authors, such as Oswald Spengler, T. S. Eliot, and John Dos Passos, blamed the modern city for the alienation and hopelessness that characterized the modern man.

John Dos Passos’ novel *Manhattan Transfer*, published in 1925, revolves around the lives of a large number of characters who vainly attempt to achieve success in New York City in the early decades of the twentieth century. The fate of the characters is determined by the modern city, the “City of Destruction” (Dos Passos 327), which can be considered the antagonist of the novel, since it prevents them from fulfilling their aspirations and leads many of them to death. The novel is replete with extensive descriptions of New York City, which is represented as an abominable machine whose dehumanized and soiled appearance repulses its inhabitants. Dos Passos, who “spent his whole career depicting an urban America that was moving toward decline” (Lehan 241), therefore wrote *Manhattan Transfer* with the purpose of criticizing the modern metropolis, which, for him, was a symbol of the materialism and ambition that dominated the twentieth-century American society.

The aim of this study is to analyse the way in which New York City is represented in Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* in order to demonstrate that the novel follows the Modernist tradition of portraying the modern city as a monstrous urban space, source of the alienation, frustration, and unhappiness of the modern man. The analysis will focus on the various depictions of New York City that appear in the novel, as well as on the use Dos Passos makes of both the Wasteland myth and the myth of

Babylon when representing the metropolis, and the influence that Oswald Spengler's philosophical ideals in relation to the modern city had on the writing of the novel.

## **2. The Perception of the Metropolis in Modernism**

A large number of Modernist authors and philosophers, such as Oswald Spengler, believed in the notion that, since the roots of human existence are grounded in the natural world, the only way for men to achieve happiness is to live in the countryside. They believed that men were spiritually connected with the natural world and that, as long as they lived in harmony with nature, they would be happy. Urbanization was therefore considered to be a terrible phenomenon that would destroy the spiritual connection between man and nature (Lehan 134). The perception that the Modernists had of the modern city was that of a grotesque barren land that would cause the misery and despair of the modern man.

The massive migration towards the cities that took place in the nineteenth century after the Industrial Revolution resulted in a disproportionate growth of modern metropolises, which, in turn, led to the devastation of numerous natural areas. As a consequence, the modern city started to be perceived as a symbol of materialism. Both Oswald Spengler and T. S. Eliot believed that men had forgotten that they had been created to live in harmony with nature. They believed that the modern man was being driven by his covetousness to such an extent that he was capable even of destroying the natural world with the purpose of fulfilling his economic interests (Lehan 135). According to Spengler, the excessive ambition of the modern man led him to believe that he was in need of money and material possessions in order to be joyful, whereas, if he were living in the countryside, his soul would be filled with happiness just by contemplating a wonderful natural landscape (94-95). The soul of the modern man was thus considered to be depraved and corrupt.

The origins of the dichotomy between the countryside and the modern city can be traced back to Romantic literature. According to Peer, “Romanticism clearly represents a desire for identification with the elemental natural world” (1). The purpose of the Romantics was to recover the spiritual connection between man and nature, which resulted in the idealization of the countryside (Lehan 134). Several Naturalist authors, such as Émile Zola, addressed the issue of the migration movement towards the cities as well. For Zola, “money and bureaucracy had replaced the workings of nature

and natural feelings” and, therefore, the modern man “had become more and more distanced from the rhythms of the natural life” (Lehan 61).

For the Modernists, the modern city became a symbol of industrialization and mechanization. The process of urbanization transformed urban areas into gigantic machine-like metropolises fraught with colossal skyscrapers made of glass and steel. Modern cities were constantly modified and refurbished with the purpose of increasing both their practicality and their habitable space. Such technological and mechanical advances led, however, to the problem of dehumanization. The functionality of the metropolises was enhanced, but, at the same time, they became less homelike and pleasant for their inhabitants. According to Lehan, “the rise of the machine [...] separated humans from nature, transformed the landscape, helped create the modern city, and enlarged the scale on which people lived as life became less human” (214). Spengler defended this idea by stating that the modern man built fountains and used floral print fabrics in a desperate attempt to imitate the natural world, since he was unable to stand the mechanical hideousness of the modern city (94).

The Modernists defended the idea that the individuality of the modern man was inhibited by the modern metropolis. They believed that the inhabitants of a modern city felt frustrated and alienated from society to such an extent that they had lost their will to live and they had eventually forgotten who they were. Their individual traits, thoughts, and beliefs had gradually vanished and they had finally become a homogeneous mass. Spengler supported this idea and added that the only possibility of survival that the modern man had was to escape from the city in order not to become part of the crowd (103-104). According to Lehan, “[w]hat gets lost in mass society is the individual: alienation is inevitable; the individual feels alone even in the crowd. And a mass society, when controlled, is a totalitarian society” (72). The Modernists thus related the emergence of societies based on totalitarian ideals to the alienation of the modern man in the city.

The use of myths was frequent among the Modernists when representing the modern metropolis in their works. According to Michel de Certeau, “the rationalization

of the city [led] to its mythification,” which was “based on the hypothesis or the necessity of its destruction” (95). A myth that was very recurrent in the Modernist literature of the twentieth century is that of the Wasteland. The modern city was portrayed as a wasteland that would eventually cause the mental and physical infertility of its inhabitants. T. S. Eliot made use of the Wasteland myth in his poem *The Wasteland* in order to illustrate the decadent state of society after the First World War. The myth was also used by Spengler, who associated the sterility of the modern man with the modern metropolis (92). The Biblical myth of Babylon played a major role in Modernist literature as well. The modern city was compared to Babylon and its skyscrapers to the Tower of Babel. The metropolis was believed to be doomed to an imminent apocalypse caused by the enormous ambition of its inhabitants, who erected colossal skyscrapers in an attempt to demonstrate their power and superiority. The tradition of the myth of Babylon did not die with Modernism, since it can also be found in later Postmodernist works, such as in Paul Auster’s novel *City of Glass*, among many others.

John Dos Passos’ novel *Manhattan Transfer* is an illustrative example of the negative way in which the modern city was perceived by the Modernists. The novel represents New York City as a mechanized modern metropolis inhabited by corrupted people who are driven by their ambition and materialism. It creates a contrast between the modern city and the countryside, the former being depicted as a dehumanized machine that inhibits the individuality of its inhabitants and the latter as an idealized space where people live in harmony with nature.



### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1. Representation of New York City in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*

The modern city is considered to be a perfectly working machine by several twentieth-century authors and philosophers. Jane Jacobs claims in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* that the modern metropolis requires the motion of its inhabitants in order to continue operating. She compares the walking of pedestrians to “an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole” (50). The modern city can be therefore interpreted as a mechanism whose impeccable functioning is due to the way in which its gears, although not rotating in unison, complement each other and create a unified mechanical system. This notion is opposed to the representation of New York City given in John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*. The novel also portrays the metropolis as a machine, but in this case it is a deadly and chaotic one that grinds down its inhabitants.

The representation of New York City in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* is that of a gigantic machine that is constantly operating. The novel is replete with descriptions of vehicles in motion, whether cars crossing the streets at full speed or ferries entering and leaving the harbour, which give the metropolis the appearance of an intricate mechanism composed of millions of rotating gears that keep it functioning steadily. The aesthetics of the city are those of an emotionless factory: columns of smoke emerging from hundreds of chimneys, constructions in progress, and buildings made of brick, glass, and steel. According to Bradbury, “Manhattan [is] a vast collective motion, a mechanical womb, a machine for living and suppressing life [...] Mechanism and destructiveness are dominant, and characters become like the impersonal environment through which they move” (107). The modernization of the metropolis has dehumanized it: the characters in the novel feel as if they are living inside a colossal engine where there is no place for beauty or cosiness. Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* thus represents New York City as a mechanized modern metropolis where the characters are not able to feel at home.

The novel contains numerous depictions of building sites, construction machinery, and skyscrapers being erected. New York City is continuously being developed and modified with the purpose of increasing its size and functionality. The transformation of the metropolis has a negative impact on its inhabitants, who remember with nostalgia the times when the land was covered with vegetation instead of with skyscrapers:

The leaden twilight weighs on the dry limbs of an old man walking towards Broadway. Round the Nedick's stand at the corner something clicks in his eyes. Broken doll in the ranks of varnished articulated dolls he plods up with dropping head into the seethe and throb into the furnace of beaded lettercut ligh. 'I remember when it was all meadows,' he grumbles to the little boy (Dos Passos 227).

The old man laments the fact that what used to be a marvellous natural land has been turned into Broadway, a dreadful heated oven in which he and his grandson are going to be baked. Since people were cheerful living in the wilderness, the massive expansion and refurbishment of the metropolis is thus the cause of their sorrow.

New York City is also represented in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* as a hideous modern metropolis that makes its inhabitants feel nothing but repulsion. The city is compared in the novel to a landfill, since its streets are filthy and full of dust, its air is polluted by the exhausted fumes from vehicles, and its waters are cloudy and strewn with rubbish: "Three gulls wheel above the broken boxes, orangerinds, spoiled cabbage heads that heave between the splintered plank walls, the green waves spume under the round bow as the ferry, skidding on the tide, crashes, gulps the broken water, slides, settles slowly into the slip" (Dos Passos 15). New York City is also described in the novel as a dreary and tedious metropolis where all the buildings look the same: "On the way back to the station the grimy brick and brownstone blocks dragged past monotonously like the days of his life" (Dos Passos 235). The wearisome aesthetics of New York City negatively affect the emotional state of the characters, who dream of a colourful city: "Imagine this city when all the buildings instead of bein dirty gray were ornamented with vivid colors [...] If there was a little color in the town all this hardshell



inhibited life'd break down" (Dos Passos 234). New York City is thus represented in the novel as a modern city whose inhabitants are grieved by its hideousness.

Another depiction of New York City in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* is that of a living monster whose only purpose is to devour its inhabitants. The metropolis seems to come to life at certain moments in the novel: "Seeping in red twilight out of the Gulf Stream fog, throbbing brassthroat that howls through the stiff-fingered streets, prying open glazed eyes of skyscrapers, splashing red lead on the girdered thighs of the five bridges, teasing caterwauling tugboats into heat under the toppling smoketrees of the harbor" (Dos Passos 332). The city is described as if it were a gargantuan living creature with anthropomorphic features. It is a malevolent urban machine that perpetually monitors and controls the characters and also torments them with its grotesque shrieks. The characters in the novel are nothing but food about to be swallowed by the monstrous metropolis: "Gates fold upwards, feet step out across the crack, men and women press through the manuresmelling wooden tunnel of the ferry-house, crushed and jostling like apples fed down a chute into a press" (Dos Passos 15). New York City is thus represented as an evil mechanical beast in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*.

The metropolis is also compared in Dos Passos' novel to a prison from which the characters are not able to escape. The characters in the novel emigrate to New York City with the purpose of achieving happiness and success but in the end they realize that the city is not going to make things easy for them. It is then that they start feeling as if they were prisoners from a modern metropolis where their dreams are never going to come true: "The terrible thing about having New York go stale on you is that there's nowhere else. It's the top of the world. All we can do is go round and round in a squirrel cage" (Dos Passos 202). New York City makes the characters feel frustrated and helpless to such an extent that all of them dream of escaping from it: "I'm going to light out of it all [...] and go to Mexico and make my fortune ... I'm losing all the best part of my life rotting in New York" (Dos Passos 165). Nevertheless, Jimmy Herf is the only character who is able to liberate himself from the chains of the city. The rest of the characters continue living their miserable and meaningless lives in a modern metropolis

where they are nothing but little birds trapped in a cage made of steel. Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* thus depicts New York City as a prison in which the characters are incarcerated.

### 3.2. Recreation of the Myth of Babylon in the Novel

John Dos Passos' novel *Manhattan Transfer* recreates the biblical myth of the Tower of Babel by representing New York City as a modern Babylon where the principles that once formed the basis of American society have radically changed. David L. Vanderwerken writes that “[t]he myth’s attractiveness for Dos Passos lies in the way it lends itself to his special understanding of American experience. Essentially, the myth provides him a convenient framework for drawing historical parallels” (254). According to the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America (1776), “[l]ife, [l]iberty and the pursuit of [h]appiness” are the major “unalienable [r]ights” that men have been granted by God. Thus, the Founding Fathers’ ideal when releasing the United States from the yoke of the Kingdom of Great Britain was to create a nation where the individuals could be free and happy. Nevertheless, *Manhattan Transfer* depicts New York as a modern metropolis where the morals of society have been rotten by its inhabitants’ obsession with money and success. Instead of seeking happiness, the characters in the novel are so desperate to be prosperous and become rich that they have fallen into a spiral of depravity and misery. For Dos Passos, “the original idea and the original promise of America have been diverted into an empty and superficial materialism” (Vanderwerken 264). While gargantuan skyscrapers that recreate the Tower of Babel are erected in an ambitious attempt to make New York the greatest metropolis in the world, a large number of apocalyptic plagues threaten to submerge the city into chaos. Therefore, Dos Passos’ purpose when reproducing the myth of Babylon in his novel is to criticize the corruption of modern American society.

According to *The Bible*, the construction of the Tower of Babel dates back to ancient times when “the whole world had one language and a common speech” (*New International Version*, Genesis. 11-1). In their migration to the Orient, men found a flatland in the region of Mesopotamia where they decided to build a settlement that eventually became the city of Babylon. Their ambition was so great that they aspired to erect a colossal tower “that [reached] to the heavens” in order to “make a name” for themselves (Genesis. 11-4). When God descended from Heaven to witness the raising of the tower, He realized that men’s strong desire for success would eventually corrupt their souls. Therefore, God decided to “confuse their language, so that they [would] not

understand each other” (Genesis. 11-7) and He “scattered them from [Babylon] over all the earth” (Genesis. 11-8) in order to make men unable to continue building the tower and the city.

The majority of characters in *Manhattan Transfer* are people who emigrate to New York in order to start a new life just like the men who migrated to the East and found the city of Babylon in the Book of Genesis. The characters in the novel come from different parts of the world but all of them share the same objective: achieving success. Consequently, New York City is the ideal place to fulfil those dreams as it is one of the largest metropolis in the world and “if a man’s a success in New York, he’s a success” (Dos Passos 114). The novel is filled with statements made by different characters which show how all of them share the same hopes and aspirations. For example, Emile is a French young man who moves to New York City because he is “through with [the] dog’s life” he is living and he believes that “[in] America a fellow can get ahead” (Dos Passos 30). The characters’ ambition increases throughout the novel and what began as an innocent dream turns into an obsession that tortures their minds. An instance of this is a thought that haunts Jimmy when he is arguing with Ellie about whether he should look for a job at an editorial company: “In the empty chamber of his brain a doublefaced word clinked like a coin: Success Failure, Success Failure” (Dos Passos 274). As a consequence of this fixation with money and prosperity, the characters cease to worry about their moral principles and their relationships with other people and they become miserable and deranged beings. For Dos Passos, “the behaviour of modern Americans [...] would disappoint [the] founding fathers” (Vanderwerken 267). Jimmy is the only character who is aware of how society is falling apart and he criticizes the New Yorkers’ ambition throughout the novel: “Why the hell does everybody want to succeed? I’d like to meet somebody who wanted to fail. That’s the only sublime thing” (Dos Passos 163). Characters in *Manhattan Transfer* therefore symbolize the men who migrate to the Orient and whose enormous ambition leads them to build the Tower of Babel.

The novel compares New York City and Babylon in the sense that the former is fraught with mammoth skyscrapers similar to the Tower of Babel. In one of his letters,

Dos Passos tells Germaine Lucas-Championnière that New York is identical to “Nineveh and Babylon, [to] Ur of the Chaldees, [to] the immense cities which look like basilisk behind the horizon in ancient Jewish tales, where the temples rose as high as mountains and people ran trembling through dirty little alleys to the constant noise of whips with hilts of gold” (qtd. in Ludington, 200-201). Throughout the novel there is a large number of descriptions of gigantic skyscrapers that invade the city and fascinate and even terrorise the characters. As the skyscrapers are the fruit of the New Yorkers’ aspirations to make New York City the greatest metropolis in the world, they are the direct materialization of the hunger for power and success that characterize the modern man. In the chapter called “Skyscraper,” Jimmy Herf is wandering through the city streets when he has a vision of a particular skyscraper that has a strange influence on him:

Pursuit of happiness, unalienable pursuit ... right to life liberty and ... [...] All these April nights combing the streets alone a skyscraper has obsessed him, a grooved building jutting up with uncountable bright windows falling onto him out of a scudding sky. Typewriters rain continual nickelplated confetti in his ears. Faces of Follies girls, glorified by Ziegfeld, smile and beckon to him from the windows. Ellie in a gold dress, made of thin gold foil absolutely lifelike beckoning from every window. And he walks around blocks and blocks looking for the door of the humming tinselwindowed skyscraper, round blocks and blocks and still no door [...] Young man to save your sanity you’ve got to do one of two things [...] one of two unalienable alternatives: go away in a dirty soft shirt or stay in a clean Arrow collar. But what’s the use of spending your whole life fleeing the City of Destruction? What about your unalienable right, Thirteen Provinces? His mind reeling phrases, he walks on doggedly. There’s nowhere in particular he wants to go. If only I still had faith in words (Dos Passos 327).

Jimmy Herf is aware of the way in which the principles of happiness and liberty are no longer the pillars of American society and he “realizes that America has built its own Tower of Babel when he has his vision of the skyscraper” (Vanderwerken 264). In his vision, Jimmy imagines the skyscraper as a modern Tower of Babel full of prostitutes. Ellie in particular symbolizes the Whore of Babylon, who, according to *The Bible*, is the “mother of harlots” and the originator of the vices and sins of men (Revelation. 17). Jimmy’s vision thus illustrates that “he is bewildered, disordered, and confused”

because “no relationship exists between the ‘old words’<sup>1</sup> and this towering symbol of modern America” (Vanderwerken 265). *Manhattan Transfer* thus represents New York City as a modern Babylon overrun by skyscrapers that, just as the Tower of Babel, are the objectification of men’s desire for success.

The novel recreates the destruction of Babylon by foretelling the annihilation of New York City as a consequence of the ambition of men. It is told in *The Bible* that Babylon was destroyed by God because He was furious with men as their hunger for power had perverted their souls and they were living a sinful and immoral life: “Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her: death, mourning and famine. She will be consumed by fire, for mighty is the Lord God who judges her” (Revelation. 18-8). Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* contains numerous references to the Apocalypse suggesting that New York is doomed to an inevitable devastation. Arrington writes that Dos Passos compares New York City to Babylon and Nineveh, “cities corrupted by their own wealth and success” and that he is “warning New York, and America of a similar fate” (438). The “apocalyptic and prophetic tone [that] informs the novel” (Vanderwerken 253) is discernible in the chapter “The Burthen of Nineveh” when a tramp predicts the way in which New York will be annihilated by God:

Juss set here a minute an look at her Gabriel ... Look at the old bitch if you’ll pardon the expression. Earthquake insurance, gosh they need it dont they? Do you know how long God took to destroy Babylon and Nineveh? Seven minutes. There’s more wickedness in one block in New York City than there was in a square mile in Nineveh, and how long do you think the Lord God of Sabbotah will take to destroy New York City an Brooklyn an the Bronx? Seven seconds. Seven seconds” (Dos Passos 340).

The boys who are told the tramp’s divination believe that they are just listening to the hallucinations of a crazy old man. Nevertheless, it can be seen throughout the novel that New York City is being ravaged by both fire and sickness in the same way as Babylon, which was “consumed by fire” and devastated by “plagues” (Revelation. 18-8). The city is experiencing a wave of arson attacks. The novel includes numerous descriptions of

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<sup>1</sup> The principles of “[l]ife, [l]iberty and the pursuit of [h]appiness” that appear in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America (1776).

burning buildings, fire engines crossing the streets at full speed, and firebugs being arrested by the police:

A fire engine, a hosewagon, and a hookandladder passed him, shattering the street with clattering roar. Three blocks down smoke and an occasional gasp of flame came from the roof of a house [...] Two policemen were dragging out a negro whose arms snapped back and forth like broken cables [...] ‘They caught the firebug’ (Dos Passos 110).

At the end of the novel, Ellie witnesses how Anna, a girl who works at a clothing boutique, bursts into fire:

Red hands clutch suddenly out of the tulle, she cant fight off the red tulle all around her biting into her, coiled about her head. The skylight’s blackened with swirling smoke. The room’s full of smoke and screaming. Anna is on her feet whirling round fighting with her hands the burning tulle around her (Dos Passos 355).

A high proportion of New Yorkers are dying from different types of diseases that are spreading throughout the city. It is said in the novel that “fiftyfive percent of the people you meet on the street have a syphilitic taint” (Dos Passos 260) and it is also said that a large number of people have cancer:

Cancer he said. 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 ... A trainload of jiggling corpses, nodding and swaying as the express roared shrilly towards Ninetysixth Street (Dos Passos 266).

Thus, the novel depicts New York City as an apocalyptic metropolis that, just like Babylon, is about to be annihilated by God because of its inhabitants’ undeterred ambition.

Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* can be regarded as a modern jeremiad because the novel laments the immorality and corruption of American society and prophesises that New York City is condemned to destruction. The jeremiads were sermons used by Puritans in New England during the sixtieth and seventeenth centuries to convince people that the depravity of their souls had provoked the wrath of God and that the only

way to prevent the downfall of society was to behave morally. “Taking their texts from Jeremiah and Isaiah, these orations followed – and reinscribed – a rhetorical formula that included recalling the courage and piety of the founders, lamenting recent and present ills, and crying out for a return to the original conduct and zeal” (Elliott 257). Over the course of centuries, jeremiads continued to be composed in the form not only of sermons, but also of “other texts that rehearse the familiar tropes of the formula” (Elliott 257). *Manhattan Transfer* reads as a modern jeremiad that reflects Dos Passos’ preoccupation with the decadence of American society.

Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* thus creates an analogy between the biblical Babylon and New York City with the purpose of criticizing modern society. Babylon was founded by men who wanted to become famous and for that reason they decided to erect the Tower of Babel, an immense building that would allow them to reach God Himself. In the same way, New York is inhabited by people whose only desire is to be successful and the city is replete with gigantic skyscrapers that are a symbol of the power and wealth of the metropolis. Just like God devastated Babylon by sending plagues and setting the city on fire, Dos Passos suggests that New York City will be annihilated in the same way.



### 3.3. Recreation of the Wasteland Myth in the Novel

John Dos Passos recreates the Wasteland myth in *Manhattan Transfer* in order to illustrate his Modernist vision of the American city as a destroyed and barren land. In the novel, John Dos Passos represents the modern American metropolis as “a correlative of the mythical Waste Land” in order to symbolize “the chaos, desolation and hopelessness” (Gualberto 215-216) that the Modernists saw in life after the Great War. New York City is depicted in the novel as a modern wasteland inhabited by frustrated and miserable people who do not want to have children. The female characters are negatively affected by the barrenness of the city to such an extent that when some of them become pregnant, they resort to abortion instead of having their babies. The novel creates a contrast between New York City and Europe, the latter being depicted as a natural and fertile land where the characters are cheerful and want to have children. T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*, in which the world is represented as a chaotic and sterile land after the First World War, had a major influence on Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer*. The novel is replete with references to the poem. Both works are similar in several aspects, such as the fire and water symbolism and the descriptions of the wasteland and the city. Therefore, Dos Passos makes use of the Wasteland myth to epitomize his negative vision of the modern American metropolis.

The Wasteland is a myth of Celtic origin that associates the barrenness of a territory either with a jinx or with its ruler’s health problems. During the Middle Ages, the myth was used in a large number of Arthurian romances. The most relevant one is Chrétien de Troyes’ *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*, in which a land that is infertile because its king has been wounded in the genitals needs to be saved by the knight Perceval (Lacy 506). The myth had a great influence on Modern literature and it was used by numerous authors to represent their hopeless vision of the world as a wasteland after the First World War. One of the most illustrative examples is T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*, which “appropriates the wasteland as a metaphor applicable to the city, the modern world, and the human condition” (Lacy 506).

Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* represents New York City as a barren land where people do not want to have children. The female characters in the novel are

terrified at the idea of having children and the ones who become pregnant resort to abortion. For instance, Ellen Thatcher gets married several times and she has numerous lovers over the course of her life in New York City but she does not have children with any of them. When Ellen is still very young, she marries John Oglethorpe, a homosexual actor and theatrical producer. The only reason why she marries him is because he is very influential in the world of theatre and she wants to become a renowned actress. As a result of her sham marriage, Ellen begins an extramarital affair with Stanwood Emery. They have sexual intercourse on a regular basis and Ellen finally discovers that she is pregnant with Stan's baby shortly after he died in a fire. Nevertheless, she has doubts whether she should have the baby:

The sky above the cardboard buildings is a vault of beaten lead. It would be less raw if it would snow [...] Out of a sick mask of fatigue she watches fruitstores, signs, buildings being built, trucks, girls, messengerboys, policemen through the jolting window. If I have my child, Stan's child, it will grow up to jolt up Seventh Avenue under a sky of beaten lead that never snows watching fruitstores, signs, buildings being built, trucks, girls, messengerboys, policemen [...] O God the rotten joke they've played on me, taking Stan away, burning him up, leaving me nothing but this growing in me that's going to kill me. O God why won't it snow? (Dos Passos 238).

In the end, Ellen decides to have an abortion because she refuses to raise her baby in New York City, a metropolis that has given her nothing but frustrations and misfortunes. She describes the city as a wasteland where it never snows and where the amount of atmospheric pollution is such that the sky is completely covered by dark clouds. Cassie is another character who becomes pregnant without wanting to. Cassie tells Ellen that she does not want to have the baby because “[she] can feel the howor of it cweeping up on [her], killing [her]” (Dos Passos 174), and she is finally convinced by Ellen to abort. The female characters in the novel are therefore physically capable of conceiving children but it is the barrenness of New York City that forces them to abort their babies. The reason why the “citizens are portrayed as sick” is because “they are all afflicted by the sterility, the frustration, and the moral degeneration that characterizes the entire community” (Gualberto 220). The characters in the novel thus do not want to have children because of the negative influence that New York City has on them.

Contrary to the negative representation of New York City, Europe is depicted in *Manhattan Transfer* as an idealized territory where people are joyful and fertile. The characters in the novel think of European towns as picturesque communities surrounded by nature where people enjoy their lives cheerfully:

Onct I get a chance I'll make a whole lot of jack and you and me'll go back an see Château Teery an Paree an all that stuff [...] the towns are old and funny and quiet and cozylike an they have the swellest ginmills where you sit outside at little tables in the sun and watch the people pass an the food's swell too once you get to like it an they have hotels all over where we could have gone like tonight an they dont care if your married or nutten. An they have big beds all cozy made of wood and they bring ye up breakfast in bed (Dos Passos 270).

The characters thus fantasize about the idea of travelling to Europe and escaping the miserable lives they have in New York City. Europe is represented in the novel as a rich place where the characters want to have children. For example, Ellen becomes pregnant again when she and Jimmy spend their honeymoon in Europe:

Before the kid was born Ellie sometimes had toobright eyes like that. The time on the hill when she had suddenly wilted in his arms and been sick and he had left her among the munching, calmly staring cows on the grassy slope and gone to a shepherd's hut and brought back milk in a wooden ladle, and slowly as the mountains hunched up with evening the color had come back into her cheeks and she had looked at him that way and said with a dry little laugh: It's the little Herf inside me (Dos Passos 290).

Ellen is enthusiastic about her pregnancy and this time she has no doubts whether she should abort. In the end, Ellen has the baby and she and Jimmy are jubilant until they return to New York City. When they go back to the metropolis, their lives are invaded again by the barrenness of the wasteland and their contentment fades away. Jimmy then remembers their time in Europe with melancholy and regrets that they returned to the city: "Why did we come back to this rotten town anyway?" (Dos Passos 273). It is thus observable that "the dichotomy between Waste Land (Manhattan) and Eden (anywhere outside Manhattan) is made evident through Jimmy's idealized recollections of his time in Europe, which his hyperaesthetic point of view transforms into a mythic space of peace, fertility and fruitfulness directly taken from an archetypal pastoral tale" (Gualberto 231). *Manhattan Transfer* thus creates a contrast between New York City, a

wasteland where the characters do not want to have children, and Europe, a *locus amoenus* where the characters recover their desire to have them.

*Manhattan Transfer* contains a large number of elements from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* that show how Dos Passos was influenced by the poem when writing the novel. Firstly, the descriptions of the Waste Land in T. S. Eliot's poem seem similar to the ones of New York City given in Dos Passos' novel. The Waste Land in the poem is depicted as a "stony rubbish" (Eliot 20) where "there is not even silence" but "dry sterile thunder without rain" (Eliot 341-342). This description clearly matches the one of New York City in *Manhattan Transfer*: a barren land made of "steel, glass, tile [and] concrete" (Dos Passos 229) where it "never snows" (Dos Passos 238). While the speaker in the poem wonders how the land would be if it rained, Ellen in *Manhattan Transfer* begs God for snow when she is thinking about aborting her baby. When describing the Waste Land, T. S. Eliot also mentions "falling towers" (374), which could be understood as an allusion to the Tower of Babel. This reference is thus similar to the comparison made in Dos Passos' novel between the skyscrapers in New York City and the Tower of Babel. T. S. Eliot uses abortion in his poem to illustrate the impact that the Waste Land has on people: "It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said / (She's had five already, and nearly died of young George) / The chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been the same (Eliot 159-161). As explained previously, Ellen also resorts to abortion when she becomes pregnant in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*. Fire and water are two elements that symbolize death and destruction in both works. Just as the Phoenician sailor who drowns in the section of *The Waste Land* entitled "Death by Water," Bud drowns after jumping off a bridge in *Manhattan Transfer*. And just the speaker in the poem is burned by God in the section "The Fire Sermon," arson attacks take the life of a large number of characters in Dos Passos' novel. Nevertheless, fire in *The Waste Land* has a sense of resurrection, while in *Manhattan Transfer* both fire and water "are automatically associated to a death that, far from being regenerative, is a testament to the deleterious force of the city upon the life of those who attempt to live in it" (Gualberto 227). Dos Passos was therefore inspired by T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* when writing *Manhattan Transfer* inasmuch as both works share a large number of similar elements.

### 3.4. Influence of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* on Dos Passos

John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* portrays a large number of Oswald Spengler's ideals regarding the modern city and its influence on the modern man. Spengler was a German philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century whose work *The Decline of the West*, which was published between 1918 and 1923, illustrates his vision on the Western world. Among other ideas, the philosopher claims that the roots of human existence are in the natural world and thus the modern city is "a closed system, entropic, which [leads] to the decline of civilization" (Lehan 6). Dos Passos was influenced by *The Decline of the West* when writing *Manhattan Transfer* inasmuch as numerous Spengler's philosophical views are represented in the novel. Dos Passos' novel illustrates the notion that people need to be connected with nature in order to be happy, since the decadence of society is caused by the modern city. The novel also reflects the idea that the only possible way to survive the modern city is to escape from it.

Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* illustrates Spengler's idea that men can only be joyful in the countryside since the modern city is a wasteland that attempts unsuccessfully to imitate nature. According to Spengler, the migration movement towards the cities is the cause of the sufferings and misery of the modern man. The philosopher claims that farmers in country villages are cheerful because they live in harmony with nature and their connection with the rural world fills their souls with peace and joy. Nevertheless, the peasants' bond with nature is lost when they move to cities in search of jobs in the industrial sector. The farmers' lives are thus dominated by frustration and despair because they are unable to establish a similar connection with the city (Spengler 94-95). Spengler's vision of the modern city is that of a "daemonic stone-desert" (99) that "sucks the country dry, insatiably and incessantly demanding and devouring fresh streams of men, till it wearies and dies in the midst of an almost uninhabited waste of country" (102). The modern city is a wasteland, Spengler claims, where people are doomed to become sterile themselves. According to the philosopher, "[w]ith the Civilization there sets in the climacteric. The immemorially old roots of Being are dried up in the stone-masses of its cities" (92). Spengler thus relates the infertility of the modern man to the barrenness of the metropolis, a phenomenon that "is to be understood as an essentially metaphysical turn towards death" (92). As discussed

in the previous section, Dos Passos makes use of the Wasteland myth in *Manhattan Transfer* to represent New York City as a barren land where the characters do not want to have children. Spengler's dichotomy between the modern city and the natural world is thus observable in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* since the novel creates a contrast between New York City, a wasteland that sucks the life out of the characters, and the European countryside, a *locus amoenus* where the characters are euphoric.

Spengler also maintains that the modern city is aesthetically hideous to such an extent that its inhabitants feel forced to build fountains and use floral print fabrics in an attempt to imitate the wondrous natural landscapes that they used to see when they lived in the countryside (94-95). The philosopher states that although the modern city "defies the land, contradicts Nature in the lines of its silhouette [and] *denies* all Nature," it also seeks to reproduce it by displaying "fountains in lieu of springs, flower-beds, formal pools, and clipped hedges in lieu of meadows and ponds and bushes" (Spengler 94). This notion is also illustrated in Dos Passos' novel when Ellen uses a floral print curtain to cover the dismal and desolate scenery that can be seen from her window: "Ellen had just hung a chintz curtain in the window to hide with its blotchy pattern of red and purple flowers the vista of desert backyards and brick flanks of downtown houses" (172). Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* thus represents the philosopher's ideals regarding the contrast between the modern city and the countryside.

Spengler's notion that the modern city is a mass that absorbs the individual is also represented in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*. According to the philosopher, people's lives become meaningless when they move to the metropolis because they abandon the ancestral roots of their existence that connected them with nature. As a consequence, people lose their will to live and they become a crowd devoid of thoughts, hopes, and feelings. The individuality of the modern man is thus devoured by the horde of living dead that invades the streets of the city (Spengler 103-104). Spengler claims that "the last man of the world-city no longer *wants* to live – he may cling to life as an individual, but as a type, as an aggregate, no, for it is characteristic of this collective existence that it eliminates the terror of death" (103-104). This idea is illustrated in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* through numerous descriptions of crowds of people as a

mass and not as a group of individuals. When the characters in the novel use public transportation or drift through the streets of New York City, they perceive large groups of people as a mixture of unidentified body parts: “In a tangled clot of men and women, arms, legs, hats aslant on perspiring necks, they were pushed out on the platform” (Dos Passos 233). Pedestrians are also described in the novel as people whose faces are either blurred or darkened as if they did not have an identity of their own: “Broadway [is] full of clangor and footsteps and faces putting shadowmasks when they slid out of the splotches of light from stores and arclamps” (Dos Passos 83). Spengler’s idea that the modern city is a mass where people lose their individuality is replicated in Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer*.

Spengler thus states that the only person who is able to survive the modern city is the one who does not become part of the city itself. The alienation of the metropolis can only be battled by those who do not allow themselves to be deprived of their individuality. Therefore, people must escape from the cities and return to the countryside in order to save their own lives and achieve happiness (Spengler 103-104). This notion is clearly illustrated in Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* when Jimmy Herf leaves New York City at the end of the novel. Jimmy is the only character in the novel who manages to abandon the metropolis. When he is waiting for the ferry that will take him away from Manhattan, he feels elated for the first time in a long while. It can be deduced that Jimmy is moving to the countryside from the wagon replete with flowers that is being transported on the ferry: “Before the ferry leaves a horse and a wagon comes aboard, a brokendown springwagon loaded with flowers [...] the little warped wagon is unexpectedly merry, stacked with pots of scarlet and pink geraniums, carnations, alyssum, forced roses, blue lobelia. A rich smell of maytime earth comes from it, of wet flowerpots and greenhouses” (Dos Passos 359). The references to spring that are observable in the quote thus indicate that Jimmy is forsaking the everlasting winter of the wasteland and he is traveling to a place where it is already spring and flowers grow everywhere. Jimmy represents Spengler’s idea that a person can only survive the modern city by leaving it and returning to the natural world.





#### 4. Conclusion

The analysis of John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* clarifies that, like many other works written by Modernist authors and philosophers, the novel represents the modern city in a negative way. As seen throughout this essay, Dos Passos' novel contains a large number of descriptions of New York City, this being portrayed as a deadly machine, as a prison, and even as a living monster. The metropolis is depicted as a hostile urban space that causes the despair of its inhabitants, who are unable to give meaning to their lives.

Dos Passos makes use of myths in order to establish a connection between the modern metropolis and the legendary cities that are portrayed in them. Dos Passos' purpose when comparing New York City to the Biblical city of Babylon is to illustrate that history is repeating itself, since the ambition of the modern man has doomed the modern metropolis to destruction. By the same token, Dos Passos relates New York City to the Arthurian wasteland in order to demonstrate that the modern city is the cause of the modern man's misfortunes and sorrows.

It is clear that Dos Passos was influenced by Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* when writing *Manhattan Transfer*, since the novel reflects a large number of the philosopher's views. It is therefore observable that Dos Passos shared the predominant perception that the Modernists had of the modern city. *Manhattan Transfer* makes it evident that Dos Passos considered New York City to be a horrendous place and that he blamed it for the decline and corruption of American society.



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