

# **Manhattan Transfer Study Guide**

## **Manhattan Transfer by John Dos Passos**

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## Plot Summary

*Manhattan Transfer* is a story about New York City from the turn of the 19th to the 20th century up to the start of The Great Depression. Ellen Thatcher and Jimmy Herf grow up in the city during the same time. Ellen has her hard-working father, Ed, who provides for her as best he can after his wife dies. Jimmy's mother dies when he is a young boy, leaving him parentless during his childhood. Ellen has a reoccurring pattern of marriage and divorce, while Jimmy cannot find his true path as a writer in the city. They have a brief marriage that produces one son, Martin. Ellen continues in her cycle of marriage and divorce, while Jimmy breaks free of the city.

Many other lives play out around the two central characters. Bud Korpening tries to live in the city, but nothing works out for him. He ends up committing suicide at a young age. Congo becomes rich as a bootlegger during Prohibition. His friend Emile marries an established businesswoman. George Baldwin wins a hefty settlement for Gus McNeal, and both men become political powers. John Oglethorpe marries Ellen and promotes her acting career on Broadway. Businessmen fail, and working people turn to crime while unemployed. World War I starts and ends. Prohibition begins, and The Great Depression follows.

While humanity lives its history, New York City becomes a metropolis. It transforms from a thriving 19th century city to a gigantic place with skyscrapers, subways and automobiles. Broadway and Wall Street become the centers of theater and finance. Individual lives ebb and flow like corpuscles in the city's lifeblood stream, and the city accepts or rejects them without emotion.



# Chapter 1, Ferryslip

## Chapter 1, Ferryslip Summary

Bud Korpenning asks how to navigate into New York City at a ferry slip and has breakfast at a nearby lunch wagon. Bud tells the server that he is from upstate New York and is looking for a job. The server advises that Bud needs to clean up if he expects to get a job.

Ed Thatcher visits the hospital where his wife Susie is delivering their first child, a girl. They decide to name the child Ellen after Ed's mother. Susie has a fit of doubt that the child the nurse brings into the room is actually Susie's. The nurse takes the situation in stride and advises Ed to leave Susie alone for the night. Ed meets a man with a heavy German accent on his way down the hospital stairs, and the two of them go out for drinks to celebrate their newborn children. Ed tells the man, Zucher, that he is studying to be an accountant. Zucher says that he is a printer. They discuss how children cost a good deal of money to raise and that saving money is necessary to retire. The barkeep comments that saving money does not work if the bank it is saved in goes broke, and he suggests that taking big chances to make large profits is the way. Ed disagrees, calling such practices gambling. Zucher agrees, but he departs without paying for the drinks. The barkeep comments that he must believe in saving.

An unidentified bearded man, possibly Jewish, walks into a drugstore and buys a safety razor. He returns to his home and shaves. When his wife and children enter, they are highly surprised with the man's new look that, if he is a traditional Jewish man, is against his religion.

## Chapter 1, Ferryslip Analysis

New York City at the turn of the 19th century into the 20th is a tough place. The story opens with three scenes. One portrays Bud Korpenning and his ambition to find a job. The second portrays Ed Thatcher and his ambitions for his new family, and the third portrays an unidentified man who makes an important move in his life by shaving off his beard. A significant thematic point is revealed in the conversation among Ed, Zucher and the barkeep. Should a person work hard and save money, or should a person take big chances and go for quick riches? Zucher and the barkeep agree that taking big chances is the way to go, although Zucher walks away without paying for the drinks that he invited Ed to have with him. This action of Zucher's is both impolite and hypocritical, and the irony is not lost on the barkeep.

Bud's ambition to make his way in New York City after traveling and walking to it from upstate New York is simply stated, but the action of shaving for the unidentified man, a possible abandonment of a traditional religious practice, shows that Bud will need to both clean up and change his ways to be successful in the city. Bud might be

unprepared for the city, while Ed has a strong grasp on urban survival. The banking systems of the day do not offer any guarantees as the Federal Reserve System does today, and so the barkeep is justified in his attitude about saving money.



# Chapter 2, Metropolis

## Chapter 2, Metropolis Summary

Ed makes junior partner in his firm and starts building a savings account for Ellen. He notices that an article in the paper declares that New York City is now an official metropolis after a bill is signed into law. A fire breaks out in the night, and Ed goes out to watch. A six-story tenement building is burning with people hanging from the ledges. Ed observes an Italian man who has a wife trapped in the fire, and as Ed works his way through the crowd back to his apartment, he catches the scent of coal oil on the clothing of the man who probably started the fire, an impression that lingers.

Mr. Perry studies a piece of real estate with an agent who claims that the land is a sure investment. Mr. Perry does not seem convinced as he finds a ram skull on the property. Bud sits in a barber chair for a shave and haircut, after which he reads a newspaper story about a murder. He leaves the barbershop and feels lost in the crowd.

Ed plays piano on a Sunday afternoon while Ellen dances, now grown into a child of some years. Susie watches on, but she is ill. When Ellen's dancing tears the newspaper, Susie tells her to stop, but Ellen pays no mind. Ed supports his wife's call to Ellen, and when he is ignored, he picks her up and talks to her about being constructive, not destructive. Ed then goes back to playing the piano while Ellen dances carefully. Something in the play that Ellen saw causes her to wish to be a boy.

A young man in a lunchroom makes a comment about a news story, discovers the time and rushes out. When he arrives at his workplace, he speaks to Emily about his recent raise. Emily is not impressed, and the young man declares his hatred for her because she rejects him.

Two cabin boys, Congo and Emile, talk while on a ship in New York harbor. Congo plans to skip out on his military duty to France and go to the city. His prime motivation is to find women. Emile wants to work in the city where he can get ahead due to the egalitarian nature of capitalism.

Susie lies in her bed as an argument develops next door and noise from the street disturbs her. She takes a pill to help her sleep, but Ed arrives with Ellen. Father and daughter saw a play that excited Ellen. Susie expresses despair that her family does not love her, and Ed tries to comfort her.

Bud walks through the city and talks with an old man about finding a job. The old man asks if Bud has a union card for the building trades, and Bud answers that he does not. He walks away thinking that he needs to be more in the center of things. He stops and watches an altercation between a pedestrian and an automobile driver. Bud asks a nearby young man who wears a butcher's apron where to find jobs, only to be given a sarcastic answer. A group of men play craps and gamble.



Emile works as a waiter in a fancy restaurant. A group of men and women dine, and some of the men become embarrassingly drunk. Emile notices a young woman who is with a much older man and cannot keep his eyes off of the woman. Another attractive woman talks about her portrait being painted, and the men start talking about real estate. Emile tries to catch the eye of a female restaurant employee after the dinner is fully served, but she rejects him. The headwaiter and Emile listen to the dining group through a closed door, and the headwaiter teases Emile about one of the young women in the room. Emile comments that waiters are just animated dress suits. Fifi Waters starts dancing in high kicks and injures one of the dining men. She leaves the restaurant with a military man in a horse-drawn cab that Emile called.

Emile and Marco, the headwaiter, find Congo waiting outside the back door of the restaurant. The three go to a lunch wagon for coffee and doughnuts, and they talk about Congo losing his job and how tough it is in the city. Marco is an anarchist and speaks about revolution. Emile defends the present system while Congo expresses sympathy for Marco's political view. Emile and Congo go to their room. Congo falls asleep right away, and Emile stays up thinking about Marco's political views and how he needs to better his life.

William Olafson and his wife, Bertha, rent an expensive apartment overlooking the Hudson River. William has recently been promoted, thus allowing the rental. However, their present address is in the Bronx, and this embarrasses Bertha. She insists that the present address be recorded as the Hotel Astor, an action with which William does not agree.

Bud takes a job washing dishes, but he does not like it and feels the work is below him. After a man who looks like a detective enters his work area, Bud walks away from the job. Meanwhile, Ellen sits on her bed as Susie pleads with her to go to sleep. Ellen wants her father home, fears the shadows, gives a shriek and starts crying. Her crying leads to sleep.

Gus McNeil drives a horse-drawn milk wagon. He stops in a bar for a beer and talks with Mac, the barkeep. Gus talks about giving up the city for a farm in North Dakota, but his wife is against the idea. Mac talks about how he is also sick of his job. Gus leaves to finish his milk run, and while daydreaming about moving West, a train hits his wagon and injures him.

## Chapter 2, Metropolis Analysis

New York City has attained metropolis status by an official decree, and being the center of economic and demographic activity supports the claim. Many people live in the city, and all have their unique stories, although some things are universally human. Few people like their jobs and most want a better life somehow. Ed seems happy with what he is doing, and Ellen appears to be growing up relatively safe and secure. Still, she has her childhood fears of the dark and must cry to relieve them. Susie has a chronic illness of some sort, and she suffers from insecurities. Congo sleeps soundly even though he





lost his job, and Emile cannot stop thinking about anarchism and revolution. Bud finds work but cannot keep the job because he wants something better, something more toward the center of things. Gus is injured in an accident that might not have happened if he were paying attention and not daydreaming about having a farm out West. The people of a large city are variously restless, fearful, insecure, dissatisfied, overworked, underpaid and eternally looking for something.

The two sidebars of Mr. Perry and the Olafsons deal with real estate investment and moving up in the economic classes. Mr. Perry seems to be walking away from a sure investment, possibly unimpressed with the moneymaking potential and more interested in nature as symbolized by the ram skull. The Olafsons' apartment contrasts sharply with the room that Emile and Congo share and also with the vision of the old decaying farmhouse. The city will soon swallow up what was once there as if the ram and the farm never existed. Meanwhile, others have already made their fortunes as represented by the dinner guests at the restaurant where Emile works. Emile expresses disgust in their drunken behaviors and morally corrupt society, and yet he desires a piece of the action. The metropolis of New York City is ugly and beautiful, depressing and uplifting, repulsive and attractive.



# Chapter 3, Dollars

## Chapter 3, Dollars Summary

George Baldwin is a new lawyer in town who has been trying, unsuccessfully, to build a practice for three months. He leaves his office with a disgusted attitude to take lunch at a chophouse and reads about Gus' accident in the paper. This gives George an idea to take the case and win a large settlement for Gus, from which George will receive his fee. The newspaper story gives Gus' address, and George goes to see him. Gus is still in the hospital, but his wife and baby are home. George explains to Nellie McNeil how Gus can sue the railroad for a big settlement, and during the conversation, George falls in love with Nellie.

Ellen suggests that she and her friend Alice walk down a path into Central Park, but Alice is afraid of kidnapers. Ellie accuses her of being afraid, which causes Alice to run away crying. Ellie heads down the path where a man with an eye patch starts following her. Very frightened, she runs through the park to her neighborhood.

George brings Nellie flowers for Gus, and she warns him not to come around so often or the neighbors will start talking. George and Nellie are having a mutually impassioned affair, and although Nellie feels it is wrong, she cannot help herself. George cannot help himself either, but he is not bothered with guilt.

Emile and Congo listen to stories being told in a barroom. Emile asks Congo to step out to the main bar, where he informs Congo that he is heading to his new living quarters where he is favored by the landlady. When at his new place above a delicatessen, Congo sings for the landlady, a stout woman named Rigaud. Emile seems to be acting as a surrogate husband for the landlady. She likes him because he has an ear for music, which her former husband did not.

Out of money and eating peanuts, Bud witnesses a suicide in the street that deeply affects him. He saves the rest of his peanuts for later that evening.

Ellen and Ed watch the harbor as an old man describes some of the boats. Ellen wishes her father were rich so she could travel on an ocean liner. The old man asks for a little money, which Ed gives to him, and this frightens Ellen. She has been taught never to speak to strangers due to kidnapers, and she asks Ed if she will ever be able to speak to strangers as he has just done. Ed tells her that she will never be allowed to do this, at which Ellen asks if she could if she were a boy. Ed confirms that as a boy she could.

Bud happens upon a woman who has received an order of coal, but the delivery man neglected to bring it into the house. Bud offers to do the chore, and the woman agrees to pay him a dollar. She fixes him a cold, stale and partly spoiled lunch but only pays him a quarter for the job. The lunch makes him feel sick.



A family consisting of a mother and her son, Jimmy, return to their home in Manhattan by way of steamship. Jimmy is excited to be coming home and also because celebrations are taking place for the Fourth of July. The mother explains that Manhattan is on an island and that the Statue of Liberty symbolizes freedom. The boy's uncle and aunt greet the family at the dock and take them to the relatives' home, where they celebrate the holiday with firecrackers.

Gus and Nellie wait in George's office and discuss Gus returning home from the hospital. George enters, declaring that the legal settlement has been reached out of court for a sum of \$12,500. Nellie tries to attract George's attention while Gus signs the papers, but George ignores her. She leaves her purse as an excuse to come back and confronts him about their affair. He turns her down, and she angrily slams the door. George calls a friend for lunch and meets a successful businessman on his way down the stairs. The businessman invites him to dinner. George and his friend have a martini and oyster lunch while talking about success in New York City. George asks his friend about a woman he dated, and his friend complains about the money she cost him while ironically admiring George for staying away from women.

A group of immigrants consisting of an old woman, an old man and a young woman are at the entrance to the ferry and have received disturbing news. The women leave the old man at the ferry entrance.

## Chapter 3, Dollars Analysis

George starts his legal practice by successfully suing for damages on Gus' behalf, but his affair with Nellie is heading for the rocks. His monetary success contrasts with the hopeless love that he holds for Nellie. Ellen expresses her desire that Ed become rich, and Emile has taken a better place to live for a different price than money. Meanwhile, Bud struggles to survive. The overarching need in New York City is money. Love either slides away or takes second place to riches, and in some cases the need for love in others brings what money can buy, such as Emile's new living space with the landlady. In Bud's situation he has neither money nor love, and his witnessing of a suicide foreshadows his fate.

The returning family that celebrates the Fourth of July with relatives is free of the entanglements that happen in the city. Jimmy is too young to have made adult mistakes, and the mother seems to be open to new relationships with men. Somehow the father is out of the picture, possibly by death or divorce. Contrasting with their joy at returning home, the immigrants at the ferry entrance represent the tragedy of being rejected by the new world of opportunity. Apparently the old man must return to his country of birth. Ed's conversation with the old sailor brings out how difficult the city can be for old men, but the immigrant old man at the ferry does not have a chance to find out. Meanwhile, Ellen develops a phobia about talking to strangers in the city. She still wishes to be a boy in order to be free from her fears and restrictions. Jimmy celebrates until exhausted, but Ellen must constrain herself.



The Statue of Liberty is New York's primary icon to people all around the world, and yet the city's inhabitants are far from free. They all struggle to make the almighty dollar and pay the price of loveless, sometimes pathetic, existences. Ed has the strongest position with his family and his good relationship with Ellen. Congo has taken an aloof attitude toward emotions while Emile sells his affections for better living conditions. The returning family is free for the moment, but the immigrating family is torn apart. Bud is the pauper of the city, a farm boy who cannot get a break and whose options are narrowing rapidly.



# Chapter 4, Tracks

## Chapter 4, Tracks Summary

Jimmy Herf attends to his ill mother's needs during their hotel-provided dinner. He straightens out the silverware, detects that his mother might be worse off than before, fetches butter for her mashed turnips and engages in conversation. His mother asks Jimmy to go out and buy an amount of chocolate creams. Jimmy leaves and buys the candy, his head full of childhood fantasies. He returns to find his mother in bed and very bad off. She asks him to call her sister, Emily. Aunt Emily arranges for a doctor to see Jimmy's mother and sends him to bed, where he reads and worries about his mother before crying himself to sleep. When he wakes up, he checks in on his mother. The doctor allows him to see her, and she does not look very well.

Emile and Madame Rigaud work in the delicatessen as customers come in to purchase prepared chickens. Madame Rigaud tells Emile that she thinks all men are brutes and that she does not get along with women either. Emile tries to argue for friendship and love using history and literature, but Madame Rigaud laughs this off. He then appeals to her loneliness in the city, but she explains that she will never put herself into a man's power again. Emile says that she is cruel, and she laughs at this too.

Nellie goes to George's office to say goodbye. George tries to talk her out of it and offers to marry her if she leaves Gus. Nellie does not believe him and leaves for good. George ponders the situation and turns back to his law books.

While Bud reads the paper in the Seamen's Union, he meets Matty from Lapland. Matty befriends Bud and takes him out drinking, during which time Matty punches a man and asks Bud if he'll ship with him. The two end up in a backroom with women.

Phineas P. Blackhead watches as a ship arrives in the harbor with a cargo of manganese. He orders Schmidt to attend to the import inspection and talks to union officials about a strike, where Blackhead represents the railroad and docking business interests.

Jimmy's mother has had a stroke, and he is in a room at Aunt Emily's. His cousins pick a fight with him that he loses. He locks his door to read an adventure book, falls asleep and is woken by Aunt Emily. He meets his cousins Maisie and James, and then he has dinner with the family. Uncle Jeff complains about immigration, and Mr. Wilkinson adds that the country is too tolerant of corruption in politics. Jimmy's mind wanders to his own concerns. A drunken Joe comes to visit, a cousin of Aunt Emily's and a failed investment broker. Jimmy and the other children attempt to play after dinner, but the play turns into failure at the expense of Jimmy. He bolts out of his aunt's apartment house and runs to his bedroom in his mother's hotel.



Congo stops by to visit Emile after Congo has come back from his work as a seaman. He has four months' pay. Emile works at Delmonico's, a high-class restaurant, and has saved \$200. Congo suggests that Emile, in order to gain her hand in marriage, try to make Madame Rigaud jealous. Congo decides to find May, a prostitute, in Hell's Kitchen. Emile dresses for his job and warns him not to spend all his money.

A man named Viler tries to convince Ed to risk money on an investment, a sure thing claims Viler. Ed resists his pleas, arguing that working for money is better than risking it on investments that often do not work out. His primary concern is for his daughter, Ellen. Ed daydreams about making big money on Wall Street, with his wife leaning over to him in the daydream. This thought disturbs him, since Susie has died.

## Chapter 4, Tracks Analysis

The chapter opens with a railroad scene and includes Jimmy Herf's interest in trains. He collects pictures of them. The stories are about other tracks, though, the inevitable outcomes of earlier choices. Emile is on a course with Madame Rigaud that might lead to marriage, and if he decides to cause jealousy, he will start down a particular track with a specific end. Nellie leaves George due to her guilt, and George has little trouble abandoning his love affair. What starts in a lightening bolt of passion ends with a shrug. Bud parties with Matty and agrees to ship out with him, another possible start in a direction. Ed stays on his conservative track of working for his money rather than taking risks that might make him rich. Of the characters, only Jimmy is on a track not of his own choosing. His mother is dying, and there is nothing he could have done to prevent this. As with Ed's wife Susie, death is the universal and natural end of all life tracks.

The theme of capitalism and how some win while others lose in the system develops with the two characters, Uncle Joe and Ed. Joe is an alcoholic and a family embarrassment, something that Jimmy cannot understand at his young age. Ed is a hardworking employee who sees through his job how often businesses collapse into bankruptcy, taking down those who have invested. He might feel trapped into his role due to Ellen, but he is aware that taking high risk is not in Ellen's best interests. Uncle Jeff and Mr. Wilkinson bring out the political corruption that abounds, while Blackhead confirms the truth of the matter.

Jimmy does not control his own fate at this time. He must face up to the childhood horrors of children's cruelties to one another and the growing specter of his mother's impending death. She has had a bad stroke and is no longer the person he knew as his mother. Despite the dreary hotel, he chooses to return there from his aunt's place after being taunted and accused by his cousin Maisie. These early childhood experiences are shaping what Jimmy will become in adulthood, especially his interest in reading and his active imagination.



# Chapter 5, Steamroller

## Chapter 5, Steamroller Summary

Jimmy walks past workers laying down pavement on his way from the cemetery where his mother was just buried. A song runs annoyingly through his head as he notices his surroundings in great detail, and he cannot remember what his mother looked like. He feels the memory of her hands and tenderness one last time while thinking about the glories of the sun, moon and stars.

Emile talks to a prostitute who helped him make Madam Rigaud jealous enough that she agreed to marry him, just as Congo predicted. She complains about how Congo treats her, and Emile steals a kiss and then walks off. As he approaches the delicatessen, he sees a fire and firefighters across from Madam Rigaud's shop. He asks about her insurance and tells her that he wants to marry her soon.

Ellen marries John Oglethorpe, which changes her name to Elaine Thatcher Oglethorpe. She and her new husband are traveling by train to Atlantic City on their honeymoon. The marriage already has a sense of impending doom about it, and Ellen becomes sick from anxiety.

Jimmy, who is now sixteen years old, listens to Uncle Jeff as he explains Jimmy's situation and what he should do regarding his future while having lunch at a businessman's restaurant. Jimmy has inherited enough money to see him through Columbia University, after which he should work at Uncle Jeff's office for the rest of his life. At first Jimmy agrees, but when he reconsiders the offer, he rejects the idea of working for his entire life in an office for the same firm.

Bud tries to sleep in a flophouse and engages in conversation with another man. Bud tells the man the story about why he left home. His father whipped him regularly with a light chain until Bud ran away at thirteen years of age. He is now twenty-five. Before he ran away, he killed his father and took ten dollars from a large roll of bills. The other man expresses interest in going back upstate and retrieving the large roll of bills. Bud agrees and leaves the flophouse to eat. After eating, he walks to the Brooklyn Bridge, and with fantasies about being a rich city alderman, he drops to his death in the river.

## Chapter 5, Steamroller Analysis

After describing Jimmy leaving his mother's funeral and Emile's manipulating success with courting Madam Rigaud, the story jumps forward in time. Ellen is now married and full of anxiety with her new situation. Jimmy collects his inheritance and decides not to follow the sure, safe path upon which Uncle Bud wants him. Bud ends up committing suicide by dropping off a railing on the Brooklyn Bridge into the river. The steamroller image at the beginning of the chapter can be taken as symbolic of how time marches on from childhood to young adulthood, from adult life to old age and from old age to death.



In Bud's situation, nothing has ever worked out for him. The steamroller smashes him down to destruction. For the other characters, the steamroller constructs their future paths.

Ellen has moved from being called Ellie to Elaine Thatcher Oglethorpe, a young married woman, joined together with John, who is equally as young. Both are still children. Ellen draws away from her new husband and cannot feel happy about their marriage. Perhaps they have married too young, or her feelings could be the normal lows after experiencing the drama and crescendo of the wedding ceremony. Paralleling this is Emile's courtship of Madam Rigaud, which is not based on love as much as his strong ambition to be a success in New York City. Uncle Bud lectures Jimmy that to become a success in New York City is to be successful. Jimmy observes the people coming in and out of the building in which they had lunch and comes to an opposite conclusion. He wants no part of this predictable and boring life.





# Chapter 6, Great Lady on a White Horse

## Chapter 6, Great Lady on a White Horse Summary

Jimmy visits Ruth Prynne and wants to have lunch with her. He works as a cub reporter covering Hell's Kitchen, a notorious area of New York City. Cassie Wilkins, a dancer, answers the door to the apartment building where mostly entertainers live. Jimmy meets John "Jojo" Oglethorpe, a man who talks in a careful Oxford drawl and shakes hands limply. He and Cassie are working on a reading and dancing act. Jojo is married to Ellen, who has taken up acting. Jimmy is not impressed with Jojo Oglethorpe, but Ruth defends Ellen's husband as having advanced his wife's career.

Ellen watches the lady on a white horse make her way through city traffic. The lady wears a broad green hat with a red plume, and the name *DANDERINE* is imprinted on her saddlecloth. Ellen walks through Central Park and feels the eyes of sailors watching her leeringly. A young man in a car suggestively opens the door, and Ellen walks on by with her chin up. She takes a Washington Square bus to the Brevoort where she meets with George Baldwin. They seem to be having a casual affair, although George is taking it more seriously than Ellen. Stanwood Emery, the son of a senior partner in George's firm, sits at their table to avoid being recognized and then leaves abruptly. He has been drinking, which George attributes to having too much money. George starts talking about Ellen and him going out to the country, but she spots Jojo. He sits with them, which causes discomfort in George. Ellen leaves for her theater rehearsal and accepts a ride from Stan.

## Chapter 6, Great Lady on a White Horse Analysis

The great lady on a white horse rides above and aloof of the city crowds, an icon that draws attention and brings comment. This happens to be a living ad for a hair product of the time called Danderine, a growth stimulation tonic. The great lady's long hair in even phony waves is likely a wig. She represents the facades that the people of New York City wear for the public while turmoil goes on beneath the surface. Her greatness is phony.

Jimmy starts to cross Ellen's path as a side event to his relationship with Ruth. George has already crossed the path and seems to be a fading love interest in Ellen's life. Her marriage with Jojo is uninspired, but the presence of Stan might have a greater meaning for her. In essence, Ellen is like the great lady on a white horse. She draws the attentions of people, especially men, with insincere promises that they invent within their own minds. She does not need to make up lies or say anything at all. She simply rides above and aloof of the crowd.



# Chapter 7, Longlegged Jack of the Isthmus

## Chapter 7, Longlegged Jack of the Isthmus Summary

Joe Harland sits and considers his finances after losing his job at forty-five years of age. An old man talks about the photos of actresses in the paper he reads, and Joe argues that many people like the photos. The old man is stuck in the same monologue, and Joe walks away. He stops in a bar for drinks and the free lunch. He talks about his good luck charm, a particular necktie, and how he lost his luck in trading stocks when a woman he loved threw the tie into a fire.

A Western Union messenger boy sneaks into an apartment and steals what he thinks is a roll of money. He then goes into another apartment and is caught. Ellen holds a revolver on the messenger boy as Stan watches on. She tells the boy to leave and earn money honestly, and upon Stan's suggestion, she gives the boy a dollar. The messenger boy leaves on the L train and goes to the apartment of a woman he knows. He gives her the roll of money, but it turns out to be stage currency. Ellen and Stan are having a serious affair. They talk about the burglar and other subjects and then go to a restaurant. Stan drinks, but Ellen wants to go home because she needs to get up early for rehearsal. She takes an uptown car to her apartment and feels disgust before entering. She likes Stan's taut and young body over Jojo's aging softness.

Ruth tells Jimmy about a scene at her apartment house, when Jojo brandishes a gun and claims that he will shoot Ellen if somebody does not take it away. Tony Hunter grabs the gun, after which Ellen goes into her room and locks the door. Jojo asks if he can spend the night in Tony's room. The rest of the tenants and the landlady, Mrs. Sunderland, discuss whether or not to kick Jojo and Ellen out. Jimmy learns that both Jojo and Tony are homosexual and that Ellen married Jojo only to advance her career.

Joe Harland worries about his fate in his rented room. He decides to do something and departs, but the landlady catches him in the hall. She demands the rent or the keys to his room. He hands over the keys. Joe walks to a stationary store and asks for a loan from a former employee, Felsius. He refuses but does give Joe a half-dollar coin.

Cassie and Morris come out from a movie theater. They walk to a drugstore and then to Central Park. Morris talks about needing to get a job and how terrible it is to be broke. Cassie only wants to dance, and she believes that if one wants something hard enough, it will come. Ellen leaves her marriage with Jojo to take her own hotel suite. She talks with Cassie on her way out. Cassie and Morris have broken up, and although Ellen thinks that he will be back, Cassie believes that a spiritual bond has been broken. Ellen calls a cab, and on the way to the hotel, the cab driver describes how his wife locked him out of their apartment. At the hotel Ellen puts away her things, and at first she feels happy with her freedom. Then, she feels adrift on an ocean.



## Chapter 7, Longlegged Jack of the Isthmus Analysis

Ellen becomes sick of her marriage to Jojo after starting her affair with Stan. He is young and athletic, which physically pleases her much more than Jojo. She leaves him in a way that avoids confrontation or challenge, which could be her usual way of dealing with messy issues. After doing so, she takes on her childhood comfort behavior of drawing her knees up to her chin while in a hotel bed that feels like a raft on an ocean. She drifts with the tide to wherever she is to be next, like the man who survives the Biblical flood, Longlegged Jack of the Isthmus.

Joe Harland and Morris have hit upon hard times. Joe has run out luck in his forties, while Morris is broke and unemployed in his thirties. Joe tries to put on a defiant attitude by drinking his way to courage, but he ends up begging for money. Morris wants Cassie to move in with him, probably to live off her income, but he leaves her when she refuses. Ellen predicts that he will return, but Cassie believes in her art and her spiritual love. Morris might return to patch things up, since he depends on her money. It is doubtful that Cassie will have anything to do with him.



# Chapter 8, Nine Day's Wonder

## Chapter 8, Nine Day's Wonder Summary

Phil Sandbourne complains about the murder of an architect to an associate. The associate dismisses the murder because it does not affect him directly. The two go out for lunch and comment on the pretty women dressed up in fashionable clothing. Phil becomes distracted by a very beautiful woman and a car strikes him down. An ambulance arrives and takes him away to the hospital.

Jimmy awakens in his room to Stan's knocking. Stan has been dismissed from college, and he wants to drink. Jimmy wants to go to his job as a newspaper reporter, although he hates the job. He would rather be adventuring in the world than working in New York City where he has always lived, except when he was very young. The two drive to a restaurant in Stan's car, which has a loose muffler, and drink absinthe cocktails. They take the car to a garage to have the muffler fixed, and then they take a taxi to the Hotel Lafayette. Ellen is sitting with Jojo at the hotel, which disturbs Stan. He introduces Jimmy to Ellen and makes a hasty exit. Jojo leaves shortly afterward, and Jimmy drinks a gin fizz while Ellen drinks her tea.

Joe tries to sleep in a lunchroom. An alcoholic old woman sits at his table and annoys him until he leaves. Joe simply wants some peace, but people will not leave him alone. The scene abruptly changes to Ellen in a reception party, possibly for one of her plays. Men come around her, and she seals herself from them like a lighthouse.

George has an argument with his wife, Cecily. She has heard that he had an affair with Ellen. George denies the accusation and pleads with her to not file for divorce. She leaves and tries to take a taxi, but George follows and brings her back. He convinces her to stay in the marriage regardless of her misery. Ellen decorates her first apartment of her own. Cassie comes to see her with the disturbing news that she is pregnant. Ellen counsels Cassie to seek an abortion and takes her to a woman who can help.

Joe finds a job as a night watchman for a construction company. He remembers himself as a dressy Wall Street man and compares his memory with his present situation. He feels fine about his new job. He discovers a union organizer, Joe O'Keefe, wandering around the site and confronts him. The organizer tries to convert Joe, but he refuses. He then gives O'Keefe advice to quit the union in order not to be associated with something that will keep him down. O'Keefe leaves before the company detective makes his rounds.

Jimmy sits reading in an apartment that he is taking care of while the tenant travels abroad. Stan comes to visit, drunk as usual, and takes a bath. He wants to use one of the rooms to make love with Ellen, and Jimmy lets him have the whole apartment except for his own bedroom. While Stan and Ellen are making love, Jojo comes to the window, which causes Ellen to seek refuge in Jimmy's bedroom. Jimmy joins Stan while



Jojo carries on outside the window on the fire escape. Finally, rain drives Jojo away. Stan laughs about the situation, and Jimmy returns to his bedroom as Ellen brushes by him.

Ellen travels to visit her father and brings him red roses, the same kind her mother liked. She tells her father that she and Jojo are getting a divorce. A neighbor, Mrs. Culveteer, drops by and chats about the Sunday church service. She invites them both to visit later in the day. Ellen and her father go out to eat at a restaurant where he is well known.

## Chapter 8, Nine Day's Wonder Analysis

Happiness is a feeling that is situational and relative to desire. Joe is miserable and near rock bottom until he finds his night watchman's job in which he feels comfortable and happy. He no longer needs to fight as the union organizer O'Keefe wants him to. His job is secure because the company will need his services whether or not a strike occurs, and he feels that his present life is just as good, if not better than, his Wall Street life. Stan is happy to be drunk most of the time, although he is starting to find it monotonous. His affair with Ellen seems to be satisfying for them both, and he finds Jojo's ranting to be humorous. Jimmy is not happy with his life at all. He wants to travel and experience adventure, but he is still stuck in New York City with people like Stan and Ellen disturbing his fantasy pleasures in reading, a coping activity that he has carried with him since childhood.

Ed is happy to see Ellen and regretful that she ever met Jojo. His widower life seems peaceful enough, and he is well-known around town. Still, age is catching up with him and manifests as a painful back, and he carries more regrets than he expresses. He has dedicated his life to Ellen, but has Ellen become the woman he envisioned? Cassie's pregnancy and her neurotic reactions disturb Ellen inwardly. She mutters that she hates women when Cassie is out of the room, and her feeling might include herself. She closes off men and yet seems to delight in teasing them. Her childhood desire to be a boy might have followed her into adulthood in the form of resentment for being born a female.



# Chapter 9, Fire Engine

## Chapter 9, Fire Engine Summary

Ellen walks through Central Park with Harry Goldweiser, a theater producer. His talking gives her a feeling of being entrapped. He talks about how he worked constantly as a younger man to make money, but now he has enough to spend on Ellen. They end up on the terrace of the Casino. As Harry talks about Coney Island, Ellen suggests that they go there.

George talks with Gus McNiel about the upcoming strike, political intrigues and how Gus should be careful with the unions. Joe O'Keefe comes into the office. He brings information that the union will fight and then leaves. He encounters Joe Harland and offers him a cigar. Harland takes the cigar, and they talk about money, women and Wall Street. Harland borrows a dollar from O'Keefe on the pretense that his stomach feels out of sorts. O'Keefe gives him the dollar, which Harland spends in a bar.

Ellen and Stan walk into her dressing room at a theater as she talks about a song that she remembers hearing in childhood. Stan wonders why people ever have children in the first place. He has been drinking, as usual. He wants to pass out in Ellen's dressing room, but she forbids it. Milly comes into the room to help Ellen prepare for her performance. Stan lies down in the bathtub and passes out in his clothes. After the show, Harry gushes over Ellen's performance, and she tells him that Jojo coached her into the role. After discussing Harry's new musical and how Ellen could do musicals as well as drama, Harry leaves with the entertainment journalist who accompanied him into the dressing room. Ellen and Milly wake up Stan, who somehow managed to fill the bathtub in his sleep. Soaking wet, he snaps awake. Ellen tells him to remove his wet clothes and put on one of her dresses and a cape. They quickly leave the theater in a taxi and head to her apartment.

## Chapter 9, Fire Engine Analysis

Ellen feels happiness when she rides in the taxi with Stan on the way to her apartment, and he says that he loves her very much. Yet Stan is heading into alcoholism, similar to how Joe Harland became addicted. The scene of Stan waking up in a full bathtub is humorous, and the solution to the problem - making him dress as a woman - is amusing. Still, Ellen senses the seriousness of the problem. The fire engine that clangs by just before they enter Ellen's apartment punctuates the developing catastrophe.

George does not want to get wrapped up in city politics, but his professional association with Gus is drawing him toward what could become his own catastrophe. The wheels seem to have already been put into place, and they spin toward inevitable fates. O'Keefe is not aware of where this can lead, but George is. He knows that the anti-union forces could become trouble.



Stan and O'Keefe represent two sides of youth, one privileged and wasting his life away, and the other ambitious but with possibly misplaced idealism. The older men, Goldweiser, George, Gus and Harland, were once young but followed certain routes to their present positions. They all were ambitious at one time, and the choices they made also bring regrets. Stan's directionless life involves only the choice not to make choices. Meanwhile, Ellen is dissatisfied with her present professional life and wants to branch out, similar to the way Jimmy feels about journalism and the city but not nearly as strong.



# Chapter 10, Went to the Animal's Fair

## Chapter 10, Went to the Animal's Fair Summary

George and Ellen talk about the impending war in Europe as they ride in a taxi toward a roadhouse where he introduces her to Gus and his wife. Over clams, George tells Ellen the story of Gus' accident and how that started his legal practice and also about the brief lover affair with his wife. Their conversation turns to success, and George starts down a path about his desire for Ellen. She asks him not to go further. Jimmy and Bullock drink at a table in the same roadhouse with Tony and another man. The conversation involves a recent local murder and the war. Jimmy and Bullock talk with Congo, who works as a barkeep at the roadhouse. Congo tells about hearing a car the night of the murder.

George presses Ellen again about his feelings for her, and she begs him off. Gus talks about how the war could become an opportunity to make money. Congo talks with Jimmy and tells how he came to America. Ellen approaches Jimmy and asks him to dance, telling him that she needs to leave the roadhouse because of George. George confronts Ellen and tries to shoot her with a pistol. Gus takes the pistol away and talks the crowd down. Ellen asks Jimmy about Stan, whom she has not seen lately, as they walk to the nearby crime scene. She then takes her taxi, leaving Jimmy behind.

Tony walks with Jimmy outside the roadhouse and tells about his troubles with his sexuality. He claims that he will kill himself that night. Jimmy responds and sympathizes with Tony's predicament and how the society of the day remains silent on sexual matters. He leaves Tony at a subway station and walks home in the rain, feeling desperation.

## Chapter 10, Went to the Animal's Fair Analysis

The animal fair is the crowd at the roadhouse. The brewing war has everyone talking about it, which might be making some edgy. George reaches a zenith in his feelings about Ellen and attempts to shoot her. Ellen must escape from the encroaching George, while Jimmy falls into her spell while dancing with her. Gus talks loudly about the war in the presence of O'Keefe. Tony bears his soul to Jimmy, and Jimmy finds himself walking home with the world's concerns running through his head. From a distance, the roadhouse crowd resembles the milling animals at a fair, some of them stressed to the breaking point.

Most of the primary characters encounter one another at the roadhouse. Each has developed a life theme. Gus is now a power in politics, and his wife is his business support. George wants Ellen, but Ellen does not want to be owned by any man. Congo has established himself as the friendly bartender, and Jimmy yearns to be a war correspondent. Tony feels terrible about his life and wishes to end it, although this could



be his way of garnering attention from Jimmy. The lives of these people, their tensions and entanglements, are on display at the roadhouse, similar to the animal displays at a county fair.



# Chapter 11, Five Statutory Questions

## Chapter 11, Five Statutory Questions Summary

Joe Harland goes with O'Keefe to his mother's house. O'Keefe fixes food for Joe, but he cannot eat very much. His drinking has cost him one job, and he's looking for another. O'Keefe's brother comes home, a large younger man, drunk. An argument starts which brings in the mother. The mother tells Joe Harland to leave.

Ellen wakes up and remembers that she has not seen Stan for too long of a time. In a panic, she sets out to find him, but she turns back. She talks with Dick Snow about her divorce at a restaurant, and Harry walks up. They sit down to eat while Rachael, Harry's sister, joins them. The conversation turns to the New York theater, but Ellen's mind is on Stan. After dinner they go to the Astor roof garden and take a table. Harry asks Ellen to dance, and while doing so, he presses her for marriage once the divorce is settled. Ellen puts him off. Stan suddenly appears, drunk. He has come back from a road trip, during which time he married a woman he had just met, Pearline.

Jimmy encounters his cousin, Joe Harland, while looking over the harbor. Joe is in bad shape and talks to Jimmy about how important his decisions over the next few years will be in his life. Jimmy notices an article about Ellen and a new theater role she has taken. Jimmy and Joe walk off together to get something to eat, as Joe is very weak from not eating for days.

## Chapter 11, Five Statutory Questions Analysis

Joe's descent into alcoholism and defeat proceeds as Ellen's affair with Stan evaporates into nothingness. Soon Ellen will be legally divorced from Jojo, and this brings in ovations of marriage from Harry. The sudden appearance of Stan, who has irresponsibly gone on a long, drunken road trip with a strange woman without telling anyone about it, shocks Ellen. The news that he has married the strange woman flattens her. Meanwhile, Jimmy kindly acknowledges his cousin's presence, although Joe expected to be ignored. Jimmy's ability to connect with people contrasts starkly with Ellen's self-centered world that invites the uncaring and irresponsible Stan. Ellen is also becoming a target for men who want to marry her as her divorce finalizes.



# Chapter 12, Rollercoaster

## Chapter 12, Rollercoaster Summary

Stan enters the Louis Expresso Association annual dance, tipsy drunk. He works his way into the bathroom and begins making a speech on a chair to the mirror. Several members of the association come in and decide to eject Stan from the dance. Stan finds himself near the Ellis Island ferry boats when he sobers up enough to know where he is. His mind swings about in garbled and disjointed thoughts. He goes to Pearlline's apartment and drunkenly sets it on fire. Pearlline comes home to the burning apartment after telling another woman how ambitious Stan is.

## Chapter 12, Rollercoaster Analysis

Stan, at twenty-two years of age, has a pathetic alcoholic life. His mind has deteriorated to be a mass of incoherent babblings and tune fragments with mangled lyrics. His farcical marriage to Pearlline bothers him, and he loses control and starts a fire that should have killed him. The police officer claims he only has smoke inhalation, but this is unlikely, since he strikes a match while lying in a pool of kerosene in a room filling with gas. Stan is probably dead, if not burned enough to die later.

This short chapter dovetails with the previous, bringing Stan to his untimely but inevitable crash into drunken hallucination and self-destruction. He might have felt genuine love for Ellen, but he could not stop his addiction to drink long enough to feel much of anything. Life is a joke to Stan. He has no concern for making a living, his future, his lover or his wife. One might argue that Stan is a victim of being born into a family with too much money, and this could be the author's intention. Nevertheless, Stan leads a meaningless and wasteful life that ends pathetically, and this is only accentuated by the fact that of all the characters, he is the most privileged.



# Chapter 13, One More River to Jordan

## Chapter 13, One More River to Jordan Summary

George and Phil Sandbourne ride the New York City subway while standing and holding onto straps. Phil is out of the hospital after he was struck down when distracted by the beautiful woman in a cab. He has an idea to make colorful tiles that could be used to decorate skyscrapers and asks if George can invest money into the project. George claims that his finances are very complicated, and he will not be able to make any new investments for a year. He is worried that scandal might erupt from his association with Ellen, which could lead to divorce from Cecily.

In Ellen's apartment, she is under stress from her job and the fact that Stan has died. She wishes she could cry but cannot, and she would like to get out of New York City if possible. Cassie and Ruth come by her apartment with their condolences about Stan's death. Ellen gruffly says that we all must die at some point and runs into the bathroom where her tension lifts. The three women take a taxi together to Eugenie's.

Ellen listens to Harry talk about the theater and city as they watch people dance. She suddenly asks if he can understand a woman who would want to be a harlot. She does not hear his answer, counts to twenty to hold in her anger and asks to dance. She takes a taxi to an address on West Fifty-seventh, rides the elevator and enters a room full of women.

Ellen sits with Jimmy at a table of young men in an Italian restaurant. The young men argue about politics. She asks Jimmy to walk her home, and during the walk, she tells him that he is the only one that she can talk to now that Stan is dead. At the steps of her apartment, she tells Jimmy that she is bearing Stan's child and that she intends to quit the theater and raise the child. Jimmy thinks that this is very brave. Ellen runs up the stairs, unlocks her apartment and slams the door. Jimmy kisses the step where she so recently stood and leaves into the night, saying that everything is hellish.

Ellen listens to Larry speak about marriage, success and love as they take a ferryboat. She declares that these are just words and that she feels numb and is happy to be back in the center of things. A woman, presumably Ellen, visits a doctor and has her baby aborted in time for a tea party.

## Chapter 13, One More River to Jordan Analysis

Ellen reacts to Stan's death with anger and tension. She wavers between wanting his child and wanting to abort it, finally going through with the abortion. Meanwhile, George starts to fade from her life. Jimmy brushes past this period, as he brushed past Tony, and he feels terrible about what is happening. With the abortion, Ellen removes a powerful reminder of Stan and a major responsibility, clearing the way for another man to enter her life.



# Chapter 14, Rejoicing City That Dwelt Carelessly

## Chapter 14, Rejoicing City That Dwelt Carelessly Summary

Jimmy's cousin, Captain James Merivale, returns home after the end of World War I, which occurred November 11, 1918. He sports the DSC (Distinguished Service Cross), a recently created medal that is just below the Medal of Honor. He goes to a barber for a shave and haircut, and afterward he stops to look at himself in a mirror on his way to his mother's house. A comrade of his from the war, Jerry, invites him to go drinking, but James refuses. He is now the head of the family because his father died from an epidemic in the city that took place in parallel to the war.

Anna kisses her boyfriend goodnight after an evening of dancing. She tries to get to her bed without waking her uncle and aunt, but she bumps the kitchen table, which awakens her aunt. She slips into her bed with a dance tune running through her head.

Ellen and Jimmy, now married, return from an overseas trip with Martin, Ellen's new baby. Prohibition is on in the United States, which started in 1920 and will end in 1933. They pass customs with smuggled liquor and go with Frances and Bob Hildebrand to their hotel. Ellen prepares formula for Martin over an alcohol stove, which smells domestic.

George walks along the street thinking about what he will do at home or if he should see Nevada, apparently his mistress. He thinks of sending her flowers but instead has them sent to Mr. and Mrs. Herf, Jimmy and Ellen. He writes a long message offering the couple any help that he can give.

Sergeant-Major Joe O'Keefe returns home from the war on a ship and talks with Private Robertson. They discuss their plans now that the war is over. Robertson wants to get married and settle down, while O'Keefe wants to play around. Both are thinking about making good money.

Jimmy and Ellen eat diner at his cousin James Merivale's house. James talks of his job opportunity in Piping Rock, which reminds Ellen of Stan because his father used to go there on Sundays. The talk turns to Jimmy writing about the war and how he and Ellen got together because they worked in the same Red Cross department.

O'Keefe organizes war veterans to put pressure on the government. The vets have war bonus pay coming, but the government is holding back. He has office space lined up and wants to use office stationary to make the right impression on people. After the meeting, he stops by Dr. Gordon's office and is told that he has syphilis. The treatment is a series of mercury and arsenic injections.



George sits with Gus and a man named Densch. They are trying to talk George into running for office. After the war the two men see an opportunity for the United States to lead the world. George is doubtful about running for office because politics would keep him from his law practice and might not benefit him afterward. As the conversation ensues, politically undesirable people are being deported in the harbor and sing about the human race becoming international.

## **Chapter 14, Rejoicing City That Dwelt Carelessly**

### **Analysis**

The end of World War I brings the beginning of prohibition and the Roaring Twenties, which will lead to the Great Depression in the 1930s. For veterans like Captain James Merivale, the end of the war also brings lucrative career opportunities, but for other veterans the work situation has not improved. The short scene of Anna coming in from a night dancing with her boyfriend represents how those who did not go to war have not changed much. This segues into the scene where Jimmy and Ellen are married and have a new baby, but their economic future is not as certain as Captain Merivale's. They worked together for the Red Cross, a nonmilitary organization, and probably will not benefit from their service after the war. On the plus side is that they are not crippled or expecting anything from the government.

O'Keefe meets with other veterans who are due their bonuses but cannot get the government to come through without organizing, which foretells the union struggles that will explode during the Great Depression. Some of the veterans are missing limbs or have been wounded in other ways. The country's leadership is worried about the rise of the working class and what this might mean if a revolution comparable to the Russian Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 breaks out in the United States. The movers and shakers behind the scenes try to recruit candidates for office who will maintain the status quo and encourage actions such as the deportation of politically undesirable people.



# Chapter 15, Nickelodeon

## Chapter 15, Nickelodeon Summary

Ruth takes a taxi to the Old English Tea Room and meets with Billy Waldron, a fellow actor who once proposed marriage to her. She has some kind of throat problem that a doctor recently X-rayed. They talk about old times and how making money is very difficult. Ruth is down to her last pennies. Her impression of Billy is that he has become a ham actor, and despite her problems, she is glad that her acting has not turned so insincere. Later on in the subway, she thinks about cancer and how so many people have it.

Dutch Robertson looks for a job in the want ads as Francie, his girlfriend, comes up to him. Francie has enough money to buy two meals at a Chinese restaurant and dance hall. They eat and start to dance, but a waiter asks them to stop because Dutch is not dressed properly. He wears a khaki military shirt. They finish their meal and go for a walk. Dutch has lost his room because he is broke and unemployed, and he wants to sleep with Francie in her room. This is against the rules, so Dutch sneaks in with the idea of sneaking out before dawn.

Ellen and Jimmy drink and have dinner at a speakeasy in which Congo tends bar. Congo has lost a leg in the war. They drink together, and Congo tells them about his bootlegging career. As they sit down to dinner, Ellen seems far away. Jimmy goes into an imaginary trip on a train and then talks about his being unemployed. Ellen has taken an editorial job. She assures him that the unemployment is temporary. At home, Ellen goes to bed while Jimmy paces with only the two ideas of success and failure in his otherwise empty mind.

Anna dances for a living. She is very tired from dealing with men who try to make advances or get her alone. She tells them to stop or that her boyfriend is nearby.

## Chapter 15, Nickelodeon Analysis

Men depend upon their girlfriends and wives to survive, which is difficult for everyone. Ruth faces her financial and health troubles alone, while Dutch and Francie cling to each other and, as Dutch states, feel treated like skunks. Ellen is supportive of Jimmy, but she is distant and nearly untouchable. Jimmy takes some solace in his imagination, but the ideas of success and failure, two sides of the same coin, haunt him. Anna works hard for her money by providing her dancing partners with a level of company that too many of them want to elevate to prostitution. Pride and security are two commodities no longer available to many people, possibly most people.



# Chapter 16, Revolving Doors

## Chapter 16, Revolving Doors Summary

Jake and Rosie are two cons who are pulling a wildcat scheme, where they claim to have assets or cash, but in reality the assets or cash have not yet been secured. This has something to do with a lake that is supposed to contain borax, probably involving a loan of cash based on the sale of the lake. Nichols, the debtor, is demanding money or will prosecute charges. Jake's plan is to dress up and convince Nichols not to prosecute. Rosie is very nervous and would like to stop getting into this kind of risky business.

James Merivale comments on a falling stock while having breakfast with his mother and sister. The conversation turns to Jack, Maisie's fiancé, who does publicity for a theater group. Maisie complains about having breakfast as a family because nobody does this any longer. James gets ready for work and walks to the subway.

Tony and Nevada Jones dance. He is seeing her along with his psychological therapy to help turn him away from homosexuality. Nevada is also George's mistress, and when he calls and wants to come up to the apartment, she asks Tony to leave by the stairs so the two will not meet in the elevator. George arrives with Gus, and they talk about how George, who is the state attorney general, will run for office as a Reform Party candidate. Gus protests that his party has the votes. Nevada asks if Tony can go with them to a matinee.

Anna Cohen works at the Green Line Lunch counter. Before the lunch rush, she looks at herself in a compact mirror and applies powder. The owner catches her and fires her on the spot, but he agrees to let her finish the workday. The lunch rush arrives.

Gus talks with O'Keefe about his political organization of World War I veterans. The organization is growing, and O'Keefe promises that the membership will support the mayoral candidate that Gus supports. Gus gives O'Keefe cigars from Havana, and after leaving, O'Keefe gives one of the cigars to a friend. They walk across City Hall square, and O'Keefe points out the ongoing construction of a statue, ironically named Civic Virtue.

Dutch walks across Union Square, hungry and broke. He talks tough to a boy delivering milk, demanding a drink. The boy tells him about an open bottle under the seat of the milk wagon. Dutch feels badly about talking tough and thanks the boy in a sincere manner. He then reads about a half-million-dollar robbery as described in a discarded newspaper story.

Jimmy and Congo walk from the end of the L line to a deserted poolroom near Sheepshead Bay. They enter and eat with Mike Cardinale and his family. Congo runs his bootlegging business from the poolroom and expects a shipment of champagne for





the holidays, but hijackers try to take the shipment. A fight breaks out that the hijackers lose, and Jimmy starts composing his story in his head for the Sunday paper. As Jimmy makes his way home, he thinks of Ellen and when she gave birth to their baby. He goes to Roy Sheffield's apartment, where Alice Scheffield and the Hildebrands are drinking. Jimmy tells them the story about the bootleggers and hijackers, inserting himself into the action although he did not actually witness the fight.

While James Merivale works at his bank, his mother calls for him to come straight home, where he discovers that the man who is to marry Maisie is already married. James tries to call the man, but he is out of town.

Phineas Blackhead complains to Densch about their company backing George in his political campaign. Blackhead does not trust the reformers. He also complains about the commodity markets being unbalanced. On his way to dinner with his daughter, he tells her about certain securities that she should keep and not to trust reformers.

Jimmy comes home after his night shift with the newspaper. He falls asleep and has a disturbing dream that wakes him up. He falls back to sleep and later awakens to Ellen bringing him coffee and corn muffins. She asks him to take a room closer to his work because their office schedules are so different.

Anna and Elmer stroll and talk. Anna has stopped paying her union dues for the sewing job she got after the dancehall job. Elmer talks about how the workers do not know how to live or how to protect their rights. He buys her a chocolate soda.

Nellie tells George that he should not go against Gus' interests. George refuses because he has made campaign promises, and Nellie leaves unsatisfied. He goes to Nevada's apartment unannounced and discovers that Tony is with her as a lover. George cuts off his relationship with Nevada, and she starts creating a stage act with Tony.

James Merivale is having a suit fitted. Jack Cunningham, Maisie's fiancy who is already married, walks into the clothing store. They have both picked out the same suit, and they flip a coin to decide who must get a different style and fabric. James wins. Jack invites James to have dinner with him at the Salmagundi Club, and James accepts. He then calls his mother and tells a somewhat guarded story. He uses the name Randolph Perkins rather than Jack Cunningham when he tells her with whom he will be dining.

Ellen and Ruth talk over lunch. Ruth invites Ellen to a party, and she accepts reluctantly. At the party, she talks with Cassie and Jojo, wishing all the while that she had not come. The party is mistakenly raided. Ellen calls George, and the mistake is corrected. Ellen slips out of the party and calls George to thank him.

Jimmy walks in a cold wind to his room. He drinks hot rum and water until he is drunk and then decides to confront Ellen. He walks to their apartment and asks whether she loves him. She responds that she does not love anyone for long, unless they are dead. He offers divorce, and she neither accepts nor rejects the idea. Jimmy returns home.



Anna works in a dressmaking shop. She talks with another worker about their body shapes and what men like about them. They overhear a girl talking about a murder that recently happened in the neighborhood.

Jake and Rosie come home to their apartment to find the police with a warrant for Jake's arrest. The charge is using the mail to defraud. Jake tries to work his way out of the predicament, but the wheels of justice have started turning and cannot be stopped. While the police search his apartment, he tells Rosie to call a man named Shatz and tell him everything. After Jake and the police leave the apartment, Rosie finds a note on the desk blotter that Jake quickly wrote. She is to sell everything and move away.

## Chapter 16, Revolving Doors Analysis

Things are changing and coming to a head for people. Jake tries to avoid prosecution but is arrested. Rosie must sell everything and move away, so Jake can at least keep her out of the justice system. Anna changes jobs regularly. The political intrigues that George is involved with swirl around him and bring him to Nevada's apartment, where he discovers Tony and decides to break off the relationship with her. Jimmy is losing his marriage, and Ellen is growing up. James Merivale is angry, and Maisie is distraught. The group of thespians is mistakenly raided. Jojo seems to be having an affair with Cassie and has not changed much over the years. Congo's bootlegging business is attacked, but he comes out of the fray with only a broken false leg and smashed case of champagne.

The revolving door lets people in and out. Almost all the characters are going through the door except Congo. Some return to old relationships, while others leave relationships, and some, like Anna, maintain the revolving door as a condition of living. Jimmy is going through the revolving door of Ellen's affections, following Jojo's footsteps. Nevada picks up with Tony after losing her sugar daddy, George. Jake goes with the police as he must have done many times before, perhaps expecting to escape serious punishment. Everyone seems caught in the revolving door, and the only way to get out of it is to leave New York City altogether.



# Chapter 17, Skyscraper

## Chapter 17, Skyscraper Summary

Jimmy walks through New York after quitting his job. His imagination creates surrealistic scenes as he feels excited in the spring day. One scene includes Ellen and a court that plays music on fantasy instruments, including a xylophone made up of bald heads. Another has his youth being deported. Jimmy realizes that his imagination must be expressed through writing.

Dutch and Francie converse in Central Park during a foggy evening. He has a pistol and is contemplating some sort of crime. Francie does not want him to be arrested and imprisoned, but Dutch feels that he will not be arrested.

Mrs. Cohen, Anna's mother, complains about how her children have turned out, which leads to an argument with Anna. She runs to her bedroom and cries. Anna then she puts on makeup and leaves the apartment. She encounters two friends who talk about how gunmen trashed a dress shop where they work and knocked out the owner, Ike Goldstein. The conversation turns to a freak accident in which a falling rivet killed a passing fireman. Elmer approaches Anna, and they talk about the ongoing strike. Elmer thinks the strike will eventually benefit the workers or the workers' children. Anna does not want to have children.

Jimmy and Alice walk to an Italian restaurant. She complains about her husband Roy not looking for a job hard enough and how she admires Jimmy's decision to quit his newspaper career to travel and write. At the restaurant, they join Roy and his brother Martin, who is very drunk. The table conversation revolves around making a living, society in general and that their generation is thought of as being directionless and purposeless. Martin starts waving his arms and lecturing, upsetting two glasses of wine. He becomes agitated and runs out of the restaurant while claiming that he will commit suicide. Jimmy and Roy run after him, and then they stop and return to the restaurant with the belief that Martin is making a scene and has no serious intent.

Francie sees Dutch in a new outfit when she comes out of a store into the end-of-day crowd. He tells her that the money for the outfit came from holding up a cigar store. Francie becomes very nervous that someone might overhear what he just said, but Dutch ignores her concern.

Mr. Densch ponders a telegram that indicates the failure of his business. The maid walks into the room with a box containing a new dress for Mrs. Densch. Mr. Densch demands that it be returned. He looks out the window and sees an errand boy, which reminds him of his youth. Mrs. Densch becomes angry over his worry about money and has the new dress redelivered.



Jimmy's imagination creates a symbolic skyscraper with no doors. He sees Ellen in every window, a figure made of gold foil. He sees Ziegfeld girls in the windows. Around and around the skyscraper he walks, seeking the door. He does not know where to go and has lost faith in words.

A reporter interviews Mr. Goldstein about a robbery that happened at his store. Mr. Goldstein at first does not want to cooperate until the reporter tells him that this will be a human interest story and will likely help business. Mr. Goldstein tells of a well-dressed couple, a woman in a veil and a man with a gun, coming into the store and cleaning out the till. Mr. Goldstein shows the reporter a new revolver for protecting his store from any further robberies.

Ellen talks with Mr. Harpsicourt in a restaurant, and the subject is a new woman's magazine that highlights fashion. He tries to explain the concept using language that Ellen finds amusing for its dowdiness. She then puts the concept into her own words with a sense of sarcasm and feels the eyes of the restaurant crowd on her.

While eating pancakes in a restaurant, Jimmy reads a newspaper story about the police arresting Dutch and Francis. When Francis went to the hospital to have her baby, the staff became suspicious of how much money Dutch had and notified the police. A girl at a nearby table throws a biscuit on Jimmy's paper, which he takes in stride and with humor. He leaves the restaurant thinking about how he wishes the robbers had not been caught and then comes back when a commotion breaks out. The bouncer ejects a tall man, and a police wagon arrives. The police arrest three Italians who were quietly talking on the corner, and Jimmy and the tall man walk away.

## Chapter 17, Skyscraper Analysis

The symbolic skyscraper in Jimmy's imagination is a metaphor of New York City. He can see attractions within the city but cannot gain entrance. He also cannot imagine leaving the city behind, and therefore he cannot stop circling the skyscraper. Dutch decides that he will get a piece of the action through robberies, but this kind of life cannot go on for long. The police eventually arrest both him and Francie. Jimmy wishes that they would have continued with their criminal careers since this makes for good stories to read, reflecting the Bonnie and Clyde attraction of The Great Depression years. Anna and Elmer represent the working class that continually struggles to survive and improve its conditions, if not for itself right now, then for generations to come.

All is not peaches and cream for those who have found entrance to the skyscraper. Mr. Densch faces financial ruin as his business fails. Ellen draws very much into herself, while her sense of sarcasm flows out of her own insecurities. Martin wants to kill himself, or so he claims while drunk and bombastic. Nobody believes him, indicating that this is not the first time he has made a scene and ran out. Along with entrance to the city come prices to pay, such as the health of Mr. Densch, and burdens to bear, such as Ellen's neurosis and Martin's self-loathing that he extends to include his entire generation.



Jimmy's generation is known as the Lost Generation, and his character best represents this notion. He hates where he lives, wants something better but does not know what, circles around aimlessly and drifts from place to place within the city. His one act of courage is to quit his newspaper career to become a writer, but his courage has not been followed by a leap of faith into full submersion. He doubts the power of words, and yet his imagination continues to create whether he writes or not. He is still emotionally tied to Ellen, although she does not care for his affections. Somehow Jimmy must break out of his constant circling of a skyscraper with no doors.



# Chapter 18, The Burthen of Nineveh

## Chapter 18, The Burthen of Nineveh Summary

Mr. Densch paces on the deck of a steamship that is departing from New York. His business is ruined. He and Mrs. Densch are on their way to Marenbad, a spa and resort town in Czechoslovakia. He goes below to talk with his wife in their stateroom. She cries quietly while he tries to comfort her. He decides to send his partner Blackhead a radio message.

While a nanny cares for Ellen's baby, Ellen takes a taxi to meet with George. She arrives late due to heavy traffic, and on her way she realizes how numbers help people to remain sane. Over dinner, George announces that Cecily has granted him a divorce. He proposes marriage to Ellen, and she accepts. She feels herself becoming hardened like a porcelain doll.

An old man drunk on bad Prohibition liquor sits on the stoop of a townhouse and shouts that he cannot do something. People walk by him and comment that the police will soon be there to take him away.

Alice Sheffield shops for clothes even while her husband Roy is out of work. She meets with Buck, a man who wants her to go to Canada with him. She tells him the story of how a woman in an apartment above her clogged the plumbing with aborted babies. This is the last straw for her, and after cashing a check that takes most of the money out of her joint account, she leaves with Buck.

Two tramps cook ham over a fire as another tramp speaks about the end of the world through God's desire to punish wicked humankind. The man babbles on while eating chicken and disturbs the other two tramps. They leave because the other tramp is insane and frightening.

Congo gives Jimmy a ride in his Rolls Royce. Congo is now married and up on charges for conspiracy. Jimmy tells Congo that Ellen served him divorce papers in the morning. Congo invites Jimmy to have a drink in the library of his new apartment where Jimmy's tongue is loosened with bourbon. He speaks about dropping down in society, how his birth into wealth stopped him from becoming more than he is and Ellen's marriage to George. Congo replies that Jimmy thinks too much. On his way out, Jimmy bumps into Nevada, who is now married to Congo and wants Jimmy to keep quiet about Tony and George.

James Merivale sits in the Metropolitan Club and thinks about the Great Depression, how banks always make money despite business collapses, Maisie's husband and what a good business connection he is, Jimmy and his dreamer ways, failure and success. James is now the president of his bank. He remembers a speech that he delivered to the American Bankers Association and reads an article in the *Wall Street Journal*.



A young man sits with another on stools at a lunch wagon. The older man gives the young man a hard time for quitting his night clerk job to take a job on a steamship. The young man talks of how he enlisted for the war at age sixteen and now has the itch to see more of the world.

Anna talks with Dick, a paying customer for her prostitution services and apparently a regular, about her life. Her mother has thrown her out of the house, and she is working for Madame Soubrine while the unionized workers strike, which makes her a scab, a non-union worker who does not respect the strike.

Mrs. Cunningham looks at a newspaper photo of her husband and Maisie as the two leave in a seaplane for their honeymoon. She complains about the injustice to Florence, the maid. Mrs. Cunningham kisses a framed picture of her husband and pokes a hole through the newspaper photo of Maisie.

Francie listens to the judge give out his verdict of guilty and assign the maximum sentence of twenty years. The courtroom spins as the judge makes a moralistic speech and states that he must make an example of Francie and Dutch. Francie feels sick and faints.

Phineas Blackhead sits up in his bed, issuing orders and demands to his East Indian servant, and then pitches a glass pitcher at him. His daughter enters the bedroom, and he begins demanding a drink of rye whiskey. She reminds him that the doctor said one more drink will kill him. He complains about his partner, Mr. Densch, destroying his business. His daughter leaves in tears. The servant brings him the whiskey, which he drinks. He continues his blustering talk and dies in his bed. The servant leaves, informing the family that Blackhead is sleeping.

Ellen goes to Madame Soubrine's shop to pick up a dress. While Madame Soubrine hems the dress, Anna works in a backroom and thinks about marrying Elmer and what the revolution might be like in New York City. A fire breaks out in the material that she is sewing, severely burning her. Madame Soubrine puts out the fire with an extinguisher and asks Ellen to tell the other customers that everything is all right. Ellen does this and steps out of the shop. Fire engines arrive, followed by the ambulance. She asks if Anna is terribly burned. A police officer tells her that Anna will live. The accident deeply disturbs Ellen. She remembers a dinner engagement and thinks about how Anna will be disfigured for life. Ellen's mind whirls uncomfortably.

Jimmy talks with Bob Hildebrand during a party. The conversation turns to a man who was clubbed to death for wearing a straw hat out of season. Jimmy dances with a girl and leaves the party. He takes the ferry, upon which he sees a wagon loaded with spring flowers. Off the ferry, he walks a road with burning trash at its side to a lunch wagon and buys breakfast with his last quarter. He asks a truck driver for a ride, and the truck driver asks how far he's going.



## Chapter 18, The Burthen of Nineveh Analysis

Jimmy finally leaves New York City to follow his fate wherever it may take him. Ellen continues her life as usual, except that she knows that age will eventually take away her beauty and thus her advantage in the city. Anna is horribly burned in a fire, which impacts Ellen's emotions not so much for Anna's tragedy, but for her own if she were to be so disfigured. Francie and Duke are convicted and sentenced to the maximum jail time allowed. Mr. Densch sends his radio message to Blackhead, who drinks himself to death. Congo offers Jimmy money, and Alice leaves her unemployed husband. The lives of these characters spin in predictable ways or come to inevitable ends, except for Jimmy. He leaves his youth and all its fruitless efforts behind in the city. How far he will go is not known, only that it is pretty far.





# Characters

## Ellen Thatcher

Ellen, also known as Elli and Elaine, is a main character who represents the working actor and editor that is always in the public view. She marries and divorces regularly, starting with John Oglethorpe, who is instrumental in bringing her into an acting career. She is married to Jimmy for a period and has a child by him named Martin. At the end of the novel, Ellen agrees to marry George Baldwin, a longtime admirer.

Ellen's childhood desire to be a boy represents a growing feminism during the rapid rise of New York City to its metropolis status. Women won the right to vote in the 19th century, and as the society turns from rural to urban, further strides in gender equality follow. Money and power go together, and when wielding the power, gender makes little difference. Ellen does not consciously seek her own power anywhere but on the stage. She is content to yield to her men, but this does not mean that she lets them control her emotions. Her power is in being inaccessible, where her men are allowed to look but not touch, admire but not dominate.

By Ellen's brief marriage to Jimmy, she reveals a deeper side. She is a woman who must have children and who selects a father that will provide strong genetic traits. She does not love Jimmy in the way that she loved Stan, but Jimmy is alive while Stan is not.

## Jimmy Herf

Jimmy, also known as Herf and Jimps, is a main character who grows up in a wealthy family, loses his mother at an early age, has no father present, works as a newspaper reporter and hates New York City along with his job. His life unfolds near to Ellen, but it does not intersect with her life until they are in their twenties. As with most men, he finds Ellen irresistible and maddening in her distant, untouchable coldness. Their brief marriage ends with Ellen in her apartment and Jimmy living in hovels.

Jimmy finally breaks away from his meaningless and directionless life in the city, walking away to become a writer. His constant reading, curiosity, empathy with others and vivid imagination are the fundamentals for becoming a good writer. What he lacks is experience. New York City could provide him with more experiences than he could ever write about, but the city will not let him in. After divorcing Ellen, he has only one way to go, and that is out of the city and into the unknown.

The story ends before telling of Jimmy's travels and writings. He is heading straight into The Great Depression with nothing, and so he has nothing to lose, possibly the best preparation for a life on the road, drifting through a nation in crisis. Where he goes and what he does with the people he meets are other stories. For now, his story in New York City has ended.



## George Baldwin

George is a lawyer who builds his practice upon the accident that Gus McNiel has. George has a short and torrid love affair with Gus' wife and eventually marries Ellen. He enters politics with the help of Gus and others, trying to bring progressive ideas to a corrupt government. Caught in a loveless marriage of his own making, George pursues Ellen and has an affair. His wife threatens divorce, which cannot happen in George's mind because scandal will damage his career. Once established and running for office, he allows the divorce to proceed.

As a young man just starting out, George has no qualms about building his business on work injury lawsuits. He finds himself embroiled with corrupt politics in his midlife, and as he approaches his senior decades, he tries to fix the problems that he has found. His obsession with Ellen nearly costs him his career and future when he pulls a gun with the intent of killing her. Gus intervenes before George does anything rash and calms the crowd to help build an illusion that nothing happened. Without Gus, George could have become a common prisoner.

## Gus McNiel

Gus comes into a sizeable settlement for his accident with the help of George Baldwin. Gus becomes a union organizer and backroom politician. He helps George to enter politics and saves him from trying to shoot Ellen.

As a staunch union man, Gus is highly respected among the rank and file. He still limps from his milk wagon accident, and yet he is strong and full of determined leadership. He stands for the union movement that gains momentum during The Great Depression and becomes an American institution up to the 1980s and beyond.

## Congo

Congo is a bootlegger who was once a cabin boy. He gains great wealth during Prohibition by taking advantage of the black market that the amendment creates. His approach to life is lighthearted and without driving ambition. Yet he becomes very rich, and as the fortunes of others around him collapse, his trade continues to be strong. Congo generously offers Jimmy an easy way out of a tight situation, and although Jimmy refuses, the offer shows how big Congo's heart is. He is a combination of gritty reality and saintliness without the godliness. He does not elevate himself, nor does he allow reality to smash him down.

## Bud Korpenning

Bud comes to New York City to escape his father and to make his way. He fails miserably and takes his own life, demonstrating the cruelty of life in the city. The cruelty



he endured at his upstate home was harsh, but he at least had somewhere to go. Once in the city, his survival abilities are shown to be deadly lacking.

Contrasting with Congo and Emile, Bud does not have much of a chance. He has too much trust, and his skin is far too thin, the typical traits of a country boy who moves too quickly into the city and who has no allies to help him. Congo and Emile arrive in the city as friends, each with a good amount of weathering on the ocean and in the ports. They survive and eventually thrive, while Bud sinks steadily like a ship taking water.

## **Joe Harland**

Joe is Jimmy's cousin and a failed Wall Street trader. He becomes a hopeless alcoholic when his trading luck fails, a walking reminder of the fall that often follows the pride. His family does not like his presence because he drinks too much and is always mooching. Joe tries to bring his life together with the watchman's job, and for a while this works. What destroys him is his addiction to drink, although Jimmy gives him a hand toward the end of the story.

## **Ed Thatcher**

Ed is Ellen's father. He works hard and avoids chances throughout his life, the direct opposite of Joe Harland. Joe goes for the big gambles with high payoffs, while Ed realizes that the only sure thing is a steady paycheck, something that is often not very sure either. Ed does keep working up to his retirement, an uninteresting but stable character who raises Ellen without bringing her young life into the trauma that other characters experience. She invents her own crises, something that bothers Ed. He exemplifies the growing numbers of suburbanites who lead stable but uninteresting lives.

## **Stanwood Emery**

Stan is the only man that Ellen ever truly loves, but he is a young alcoholic who takes his own life by starting a fire in his apartment. Stan does not take life seriously. He has too much money from his family, and this makes life too easy. Others must struggle to survive within the city's constant challenges, but all Stan needs to do is hit up his father for more money. He represents the degeneration of the privileged class that brings reactions of contempt from the working and professional classes. On the other hand, Ellen finds that she can love him, and this might be because he is funny and always numb from drink.

## **Dutch Robertson**

Dutch is a World War I veteran who cannot find a decent job. He turns to crime and is arrested, but not before making a reputation with Francie as a team of swashbuckling



city pirates. Their characters manifest the desperation that drives people into lives of crime, but their style and color captivate the imaginations of honest citizens, much like Bonnie and Clyde will do during The Great Depression. Dutch also brings forth the idea that desperation is a characteristic of capitalism, indicating that crime must be expected.

## **Anna Cohen**

Anna is a young woman who tries to survive as best she can. She represents the working class that hopes unions will improve their lives and the lives of their children. She works at whatever jobs she can, from dressmaking to prostitution. Nothing pays very well, and a fire accident at her dressmaking job disfigures her for life, something that Ellen witnesses. In an instant one's life can be hopelessly destroyed, and the implication is that nobody will be there to help. Anna is the working class' tragedy.

## **Mr. Densch**

Mr. Densch is a powerful businessman who experiences the failure of his business. He leaves the United States afterward, but not without leaving a message to his partner, Blackhead. Blackhead drinks himself to death after receiving the message, an outcome that Mr. Densch might find entertaining. Mr. Densch represents the amorality of capitalism. When the ship starts sinking, it is every man for himself, and as an added appeal to base human nature, a chance to practice sadism.

## **Emile**

Emile is a friend of Congo's who wants to become successful and does it by marrying an established businesswoman. Emile differs from Congo in that he has ambition to reach the middle class by any means available. Congo has no such ambition and ironically becomes rich. Emile listens to the socialistic and revolutionary ideas that the headwaiter talks about, but his success with Madame Rigaud keeps him from becoming a radical. Emile's situation is common in capitalism. Often the only difference between a radical and a content citizen is a job or other form of income.

## **John Oglethorpe**

John Oglethorpe is Ellen's first husband and an actor. He is responsible for Ellen's success in the theater, a fact that she does not deny or promote. Ambivalently homosexual, John is the stereotypical Broadway actor, a man who can make a scene on a fire escape while his wife carries on her affair with Stan, but then quickly departs when it starts to rain. His dramatic mannerisms do not mesh with his convictions or the lack thereof, nor does reality justify his overacting. This results in a rolling comedic performance with tragic overtones.



# Objects/Places

## New York City

Everything happens in New York City. It is the place to come to and the place to leave. The city sparkles, punishes, builds, threatens, distracts, comforts and grinds like a massive skyscraper mill.

## Ellis Island

People come to America through Ellis Island, and when deported, they leave by Ellis Island. It is the gateway to New York City from other countries, and immigration is an ongoing process.

## Broadway

Ellen and her acting friends center their lives on Broadway. Few scenes actually take place here, only references to events, but Broadway is always on their minds.

## Wall Street

The Street is where wealth is created and where wealth is lost. It can be a harsh environment with big winners or losers on a single day, or it can be a tide that raises all ships. The Street can also crash into a million worthless pieces. If Wall Street is the heart of capitalism, it has an unpredictable beat, fibrillations and coronaries.

## Skyscrapers

Skyscrapers define the New York City skyline and house most of the city's working inhabitants. Office workers flow in and out of the skyscrapers in streams that defy resistance. Once in a stream, going with the flow is the only option other than being crushed.

## The L

The L has a strong presence in the first part of the novel. It is a raised electric train system similar to the Chicago L.



## The Subway

The subway replaces the L and keeps the above ground city quieter, although automobile traffic tends to make up the difference. As if a trade-off, the subway has a sinister quality about it.

## Restaurants

A good portion of the novel happens in various restaurants, some classy and others sleazy lunch joints. Eating in restaurants with friends, enemies and neutrals is a common practice in a large city. In New York City, it is nearly a requirement of survival.

## Hotels

The hotels of New York City become residences for many of its wealthier citizens. Jimmy grows up in the Ritz hotel, and Ellen takes a suite in a hotel when she leaves Jojo.

## Apartments

Single-family dwellings do not exist within New York City. Most of the characters live in apartments, some having only a single sleeping room. Ellen rents a nice hotel suite. Jimmy lives in hovels.



# Social Sensitivity

Nothing in John Dos Passos's previous books, two studies of the American war effort and a fin de siècle narrative about the aimless lives of artistic youths in Cambridge, foreshadowed the originality displayed by this study of the life of a growing metropolitan center. It was a breakthrough for its author in terms of theme, social consciousness, and literary technique.

He creates in *Manhattan Transfer* an indictment of a city that is indifferent, merciless, or cruel to its inhabitants, yet throbbing with hypnotic energy and restlessness.

Nothing quite like *Manhattan Transfer* exists in Dos Passos's writings up to this point, and nothing exactly like it existed in English or American literature. One central social issue Dos Passos invented with this new mode of writing expressed concerns about the degree to which institutions created to nurture human happiness actually worked to destroy it. His portrait of the first decades of the twentieth century exhibits a brooding, ominous, energetic city that doles out rewards and frustrations with an arbitrary lack of concern for the recipients' merit.

Dos Passos suggests the anonymity and alienation that are byproducts of modern industrial society. But the deterministic tone of the novel also suggests that our destinations may not in themselves matter, for many characters' destinies depend less on their choice of a direction than on unacknowledged or unknown forces conveying them toward their ends. The first explicit reference to the literal *Transfer* (although the subway system has been mentioned several times) occurs when one character, Ellen Thatcher, uses the phrase as a mantra on her honeymoon journey to block her apprehensions about this first of several marriages.

As well as a study in the alienation and anonymity of the modern city, *Manhattan Transfer* initiates the author's lifelong exploration of political corruption as a nearly inevitable consequence of such personal and societal isolation.

Some of the most dramatic evolutions among the characters involve George Baldwin, whom we first meet as an unscrupulous ambulance-chaser, and Gus McNeil, the client whose lawsuit jump-starts Baldwin's flagging career.

He encourages McNeil, injured when he drunkenly steered his milk-delivery wagon into the path of an oncoming passenger train (a symbolic collision of traditional agrarian and modern technological means of transport), to sue for an exorbitant amount of money, launching both his and the client's careers in politics. McNeil becomes a ward healer, whereas Baldwin, having seduced McNeil's wife while representing him, is guilty of several breaches of professional ethics as well as conventional morality. Eventually, he becomes a New York's District Attorney and serves his stint as one in a series of husbands for the omnivorous Ellen Thatcher. In depicting this rise from sleazy lawsuit-monger to unethical politician, Dos Passos constructs a satiric model exhibiting the failures of the political system behind *Manhattan Transfer*. Baldwin is the first in a series

of lawyers who are scoundrels and experts in political corruption who will appear in Dos Passos's later novels *U.S.A.*, (1930, 1932, 1936) and the District of Columbia trilogy (1939, 1943, 1949).





# Techniques

It has been inevitable throughout this discussion that the original, inventive techniques the young novelist created for this collage of narratives are suited ideally to his themes of alienation and the pressures of perverse value systems. These techniques form the foundation for Dos Passos's artistic signatures in the U.S.A. and District trilogies as well as his final major novel, *Midcentury* (1961). His creation was inspired by James Joyce's masterpiece *Ulysses* (1922), T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), and experiments with collage as a film technique by Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, whom Dos Passos met during a 1928 trip to the U.S.S.R.

Out of these diverse sources Dos Passos invented his own literary collage, a concept that involves the assimilation of diverse narrative and visual materials. The chapters are introduced by prose poems, hortatory evocations of history, snippets from the popular press, and sound bites from the propaganda that accompanied America's entry into World War I. These epigraphs, while in one way recalling the somewhat pretentious references to other literature by which some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novelists introduced chapters, have a more pluralistic base and do not allude to other literary figures. Moreover, these prose poems have subtle relationships to either the chapter they introduce, or to a contiguous one.

The chapter epigraphs, then, play off models suggested by traditional fiction but at the same time subvert these, which close the system by connecting the work with other literary materials.

Dos Passos intentionally opens his system by incorporating diverse types of material in his chapter epigraphs.

Many of these strategies would be refined as "Newsreels," biographical sketches, and "Camera Eye" episodes in U.S.A.

More spectacular than the epigraphs is Dos Passos's use of "montage" or "collage" techniques. Although he composed the story of each major character sequentially, as he later did in assembling U.S.A., he deliberately disassembled the sequential narrative to intersect it with others that may or may not be directly related to it. Beach considers this a "pioneering collectivistic novel" that represents a "crosssection of the social structure" rather than the experiences of individuals.

This technique is variously called "synoptic," an impressionist technique intended to suggest a whole through representing a "few evocative details" by Gelfant, or an experiment in "Spatiality," an adaptation of the cubist painter's "multiple angles of vision" by Pizer.

Moreover, Dos Passos adapts a cinematic technique that has its origins in the "Wandering Rocks" episodes of Joyce's *Ulysses* and the disassociative sequencing of Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

His vignettes are presented without introduction, practically in medias res.

Unlike a traditional novel in which a description establishes background, appearance, and character history, in *Manhattan Transfer* an original kind of mimesis operates. Much as in real life we cannot immediately assess the importance of a person or situation we encounter, the novelist does not provide us with an artificial, fictional dossier for the characters we meet or the situations we encounter. Moreover, Dos Passos leaves it entirely up to the reader to establish connections among his narratives. It requires a special alertness, for example, to recognize that the Mr. and Mrs. Densch departing by ship at the opening of Part III, Chapter V, includes the business partner of the ubiquitous P. T. Blackhead, or that the Anna Cohen injured in the final fire of the novel is a character we have encountered variously as a dancehall girl, a frustrated daughter, and as a buyer's mistress. Finally, the reader, not the writer, identifies the robber Dutch Robinson as the returning war veteran and the lover who has been out of work for six months and cannot bear his inability to progress in his relationship with his fiancée. Only upon our making the connection among all these apparently discrete representations of Dutch do we as readers experience the full impact of Dos Passos's theme, the degree to which poverty and false ideals can propel a frustrated person into crimes against property.

Collage and cinematic techniques were fairly new to fiction when Dos Passos wrote *Manhattan Transfer*, but his experiments paved the way for the work of postmodern novelists as diverse as Norman Mailer, E. L. Doctorow, Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, and Don DeLillo. Before *Manhattan Transfer* the technique had been deployed only on a small scale, as in Eliot's great poem of the age (*The Waste Land*), Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley: Life and Contacts* (1920), or specific sections of *Ulysses*, especially the "Wandering Rocks" and "Circe" episodes. One way to appreciate the originality of this fictional innovation is to realize how many future novelists would, deliberately or not, adapt the "new mimesis" of Dos Passos to their own fictional and thematic needs.



# Themes

## Themes

The narrative that frames the first section of *Manhattan Transfer* both concretizes and confuses the alienation theme, the motif central to the novel, and Dos Passos's indictment of industrial America. The reader first encounters the story of Bud Korpenning's entering the city with high expectations. So, expecting the organization of a traditional plot, the reader anticipates that Bud's story will be the center of narrative interest, but it actually constitutes only a small fraction of the first section. Quickly Dos Passos directs us to other sketches. In a larger sense, however, Bud's story provides a nucleus of meaning for the rest of the novel. It is simultaneously a frame device, a thematic microcosm, and a representative example of confusion between satiric and individual character development in the novel as whole.

Enacting what is nearly a cultural archetype, Bud wants to relocate from rural New York to the city, in his repeated phrase to "get to the center of things." Like the heroes of novels by writers as diverse as Theodore Dreiser, William Dean Howells, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Bud attempts a journey from innocence and rural America to experience and the metropolis. This quest, a prototype for Charley Anderson's story in *U.S.A.* as well, is figuratively a search for some sense of connection to a larger cultural enterprise.

While he makes his way toward the center of the city, but not its figurative centers of power and influence, Bud receives contradictory advice from citizens who profess knowledge of the city's ways, subtle variations by Dos Passos on the guide figures of traditional quest literature. One tells him to get a shave and haircut, because "it's looks that count in this city," whereas another tells him to join a union if he hopes to prosper. Yet another resident offers him a dollar and a meal for performing a menial service but pays him with stale leftovers and a quarter.

At one level, therefore, Bud's story enacts the initiation of a prototypical American innocent confronted and victimized by a corrupt, experienced, world. He wants to locate and share that culture's meaning, but is victimized by those who understand it. In turn, he is further alienated by this victimization. When he comes to understand the city's devious ways, Bud becomes a cunning cynic, yet he remains a victim as he enacts desperate fantasies of wealth and influence. Pretending to agree to a bum's scheme to get rich, Bud spends his last money on a good meal, then in a gesture of defiance resembling the melodramatic suicide of Wenny, a central character in *Streets of Night* (1923), leaps from a bridge (a symbolic connection of two land masses and an applied technology) to his death to escape the heartlessness of the modern metropolis — a theme Dos Passos skillfully reinforces when the tugboat captain who witnesses the plunge grouches about the inconvenience of recovering Bud's body.

Like the immigrant whose sketch Dos Passos juxtaposes with the first episode of Bud's story, and Jimmy Herf, the novel's hero who as a child arrives in the city in the opening



section, and whose departure brings the book to closure, Bud represents an innocent person seeking connection with the culture and being ground down by the figurative steamroller the metropolis has become. His progress through stages of entry, denial of meaningful friendship or useful work, conflicting advice from city veterans, and exploitation by the privileged class, constitutes in microcosm one large thematic design of this novel. As readers we sympathize with Bud — not as an individual — but as a representative victim of an unempathic society.

A related theme central to *Manhattan Transfer* is the waste of human talent and energy in an industrial and capitalistic culture. Although critics often argue that Dos Passos's characters are mere automatons, driven helplessly by forces they do not comprehend, this seems more true of the shadowy figures at the perimeter than of the several characters whom we see more comprehensively. Robert Rosen labels most of the characters in *Manhattan Transfer* "passive, uncomprehending victims" and associates Dos Passos at this stage of his development with reformist writers such as Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris in their hope that "an honest portrayal of intolerable social conditions would impel readers to work to change those conditions."

Ruthless financiers, such as Phineas T. Blackhead and helpless, passive victims, such as Anna Cohen, a seamstress severely burned while daydreaming about the power her labor-union boyfriend will someday wield, are indeed representatives and victims of an impersonal society, much in the determinist traditions out of which Dos Passos was writing.

Most, however, in the large cast of central characters are able and energetic rather than passive, but they have no vision except the false one imposed by the culture they inhabit. They thus expend their talent and energy in striving for illusory goals, often meeting frustration as they progress. Baldwin, an able opportunist, must have considerable talent and energy to rise as he does even in the most corrupt environment, and Thatcher succeeds in two highly competitive fields, show business and magazine editing. Herf has both intelligence and sensitivity, but he cannot, unlike Thatcher and Baldwin, persuade himself of the legitimacy of his enterprises.

The character whose story most clearly illustrates the theme of wasted talent and broken lives is Stan Emery, at various times Herf's friend and Thatcher's lover who, Wagner-Martin argues, brings temporary love and vitality to Ellen's life. Stan plans to study architecture and dreams of new materials and innovative designs to build a humane modern metropolis. An early chapter epigraph lists materials and designs architects might employ as expressions of the cultures for which they are created. Identifying cultures with their materials and methods of building creates a powerful commentary on the connection between art and utility, a theme very close to the heart of Dos Passos's entire artistic enterprise. Babylon and Nineveh, he says, were built of brick, whereas Athens was characterized by "gold marble columns." Rome's conquering ways are represented by "broad arches of rubble" and Constantinople's religious history by minarets. But an ominous feeling about the modern metropolis is suggested by its architecture: "Steel, glass, tile, concrete will be the materials of the skyscrapers. Crammed on the narrow island the millionwindowed buildings will jut, glittering, pyramid



upon pyramid like the white cloudhead above a thunderstorm." Like the city itself as portrayed in *Manhattan Transfer*, its buildings are both beautiful and intimidating, manifestations of engineering skill that produce cathedrals to capitalist opportunism and overcrowded tenements. Stan's life-giving love for Ellen and his hope to create a practical art are wasted in a character who lacks the commitment and purpose to discipline and master his art.

As the heir of a wealthy lawyer (at whose firm Baldwin briefly works), Stan has abundant material possessions and opportunities, so he never has to learn the discipline of a true artist. His drunkenness, which leads directly to a disastrous marriage, and his suicide, are symptoms of his desire for immediate gratification, in turn a manifestation of alienation and materialism. Stan is literally the victim of his uncritical acceptance of a culturally-imposed hedonism, a motif consistent with the drunkenness, ennui, and search for gratification among the characters in this and other novels of the era. The primary cause for Stan's individual failure — the central one in a novel filled with failures — is his inability to make a commitment to his art, to control his life and create meaning for himself.

Practically every critic who has written about this seminal American novel has agreed that its main theme is what Donald Pizer calls the "myth of success in American life" and the complex relations between American citizens' obsessions with success and America's nature as an industrialist society, themes Pizer sees expressed also in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, both published in the same year as *Manhattan Transfer*. Iain Colley also notes important similarities among these three books, but stresses that whereas cultural tragedies occur in Fitzgerald's and Dreiser's novels, Dos Passos emphasizes instead the "aimlessness of life" and "repeated encounters with misery that wear down hope and energy."

The characters generally enact variations on the Horatio Alger myth of success as the result of pluck, creativity, and a little luck, but for Dos Passos's characters failure brings misery and low self-worth, especially in the case of Joe Harland, once the "wizard of Wall Street" but now a boasting, self-pitying shell of his former self — reduced to mooching from affluent relatives and working as a night watchman — who finds his principal solace in bottled oblivion. In a slightly different way, the culture's obsession with material success is represented by two young robbers, Dutch Robinson and his girlfriend the "Flapper Bandit." They cannot achieve material success by legal means, so they take up robbery to achieve that end and are sentenced to twenty years for crimes against property.

A final key theme of *Manhattan Transfer* is the capricious nature of success. Central to the Alger myth is the notion that success comes from earnest diligence, but in this novel the vision of life is that many who try hardest fail consistently, from Korpenning to Harland to Herf, whereas success is either a matter of blind adherence to cultural stereotypes (in the case of James Merivale, Jimmy's cousin, who unquestioningly goes into the family business and accepts a commission in the Army) or pure luck. We never know just how P. T. Blackhead or his associate Densch acquired wealth and power, but it is clear that they maintain this situation by shady, questionably legal, means. Their



fiscal empire disintegrates mysteriously, with Densch absconding funds and fleeing for Madagascar and Blackhead fighting off debtors and demanding whiskey.

Dos Passos ironically develops this theme around two characters who make the transition from socialist and anarchist to wealth and power by different means. Emile and Congo Jake are introduced as outsiders, and at one point Jake expresses overtly anarchistic views. These theories, occasionally cited to show Dos Passos's own anarchistic tendencies in the 1920s, should be examined in context. They are spoken by a man whose experiences in the novel add up to a parody of the Alger myth. Although Jake is tending bar at a club in which the rich and famous congregate, rather than shipping as a merchant sailor, he identifies with the workingmen whose revolutionary fervor, according to anarchist theories, are being diverted by a war devised by "Rupp and Rothschild and Morgan."

By the end of the book, he has become a beneficiary of Prohibition. As a bootlegger, Congo, now calling himself "Armand," profits by others' weaknesses; he owns a limousine, a luxury apartment, and has a beautiful mistress.

Congo's friend Emile also represents the capricious nature of success. Like Congo Jake an itinerant seaman, Emile becomes intimate with Mme. Rigaud, who owns a restaurant. Although there is little indication of actual affection, Emile and Mme. Rigaud eventually marry and he takes over the business with the wealth and power such entrepreneurship implies.

## Survival in New York City

Most of the characters struggle to survive in a city that never sleeps and has little compassion. Where Ellen uses her beauty and charm to survive, Jimmy tries with his wits, and although successful enough, he ends up hating his job and the city. Congo goes into the business of bootlegging, which makes him rich. Emile marries into financial security. Ed takes no chances, while George gets his break with an ambulance-chaser's lawsuit, from which Gus collects significant money. Other characters follow their paths toward success, failure or a grinding daily routine. Three who fail are Bud, Stan and Joe. Joe becomes an alcoholic bum in his old age. Bud and Stan end their lives early by suicide. As a backdrop, the city continues to grow and modernize as if it has a life of its own, fed by its inhabitants' life forces and blood.

## Socialism

The working class does not have a very good standard of living at the turn of the 19th century to the 20th, but the young people who will become the Lost Generation fight to survive and later to prosper along with the capitalistic class. Socialism is popular in Europe and Russia as a means to raise the middle class, and part of this idea is to unite the working class in order to bring about revolution. The Bolshevik Revolution is successful in Russia due to the weakness of the provisional government, but the United States is not weak. The deportation of socialists is common in New York City, but this



does not stop the union movement or keep the citizens from talking among themselves about revolution. As history demonstrates, the union movement does become successful, and the middle class does rise in the United States, but not by violent overthrow of the government. The revolution is a relatively peaceful one involving political compromise and cooperation with systems that are corrupt, such as Tammany Hall.

George, Gus, O'Keefe and Elmer represent the union movement of this time. Of these characters, Elmer is the most radical and foresighted. He is radical in that he favors a Bolshevik-like revolution, and he is the most foresighted in that he realizes the gains the working class makes in his generation will not be fully realized until the following generations. George becomes a reformist willing to make compromises with the union power, which Gus represents. O'Keefe symbolizes the hard working men and women who simply want decency and fairness, caring little about power or corruption.

## Seeking Love

Ellen has a genuine problem. She does not love men except for Stan, and he dies in an alcoholic fit in which he starts his apartment on fire. Her childhood desire to be a boy and her involvement with John Oglethorpe, an ambiguously homosexual man, might point to an inner struggle with sexual orientation. Women irritate her, but men cause her to transform into a cold and hard porcelain doll. Jimmy has a mildly warm relationship with Ruth and a hopelessly unrequited love with Ellen. George is attracted to her in a similar way and cannot stand his wife, Cicely, whom he married to gain a higher social position. Emile claims that he loves Madame Rigaud, but she knows better. The love has more to do with her shop than her heart. The seeking of love is a primary motivator and becomes entangled with surviving New York City.

## Success and Failure in the Lost Generation

Jimmy is a strong symbol for the Lost Generation. He is born into wealth, and as a result he is not as highly motivated as other characters, Congo being the most striking of them, to become successful. He struggles with the city and career throughout the novel until the very end, when he decides to leave and become a writer. Ellen achieves outward success as an actor and editor, but she cannot escape her pattern of marriage and divorce. Inside she is a failure as a loving human being, having grown into a hardened heart. Her last mate is George, another outwardly successful character who cannot resist Ellen's charms and is bound for failure in the marriage. One of the more entertaining characters, John Oglethorpe, has achieved success in the theater and seems comfortable with who he is not. He and other actors become facades of actual people. They live within their theatrical masks to protect themselves from emotional harm.

The Lost Generation can also be considered those people who are not born into wealth but strive for a better life. They are lost because their efforts will not be realized for



generations to come. Paralleling this, the Great Depression brings on business failures that drive people such as Mr. Densch out of the capitalistic class. This generation of people matures before World War II brings the country out of the Great Depression and into a period of general prosperity following the war. World War I brings some prosperity to the United States, but the Roaring Twenties is the illusion of prosperity that precedes The Great Depression.



# Style

## Points of View

This story is written from the third-person omniscient point of view, where the author can look through any character's eyes and enter any character's mind. Each chapter section expounds on one or a few perceptions during a particular climactic point in a character's life. Some characters are highly symbolic, such as the drunken man shouting that he cannot do something directly after Ellen accepts George's marriage proposal. Ellen cannot stop her cycle of marriage and divorce. Other characters like Ellen and Jimmy are central to the novel's main themes. Point of view often shifts inward for Jimmy. He has a tremendous imagination, a place to which he escapes regularly while in crisis.

An especially satisfying point of view is when the author describes New York City, how it looks and smells in various weather situations and times of the day and night. Location is important for these descriptions, as Hell's Kitchen differs dramatically from other city locations.

## Setting

New York City is the primary and most powerful setting. The city has a life of its own, a space of its own, and it impacts all who experience it. Immigrants continually come to the city by way of Ellis Island or by jumping ship, and citizens come to the city from other parts of the country. The other settings in the book are all tissues and individual cells of the larger living metropolis. Some are diseased and ready to be replaced, while some are vibrant with life and growth, and others are staid like bone and sinew.

The neighborhoods and boroughs are the city's skeleton. The skyline is the city's beautiful skin, and the workers are the city's muscle. Wall Street flows with the city's blood, which is money, and the city has an abundance of its life fluid, except when the Great Depression hits. This living setting grows from a low skyline at the beginning of the book to a skyscraping cityscape at its end. The L trains are replaced by subways, and automobiles displace horses. There are places of disease and corruption in the city beautiful. Despair and death stalk the canyons, along with arsonists, anarchists, criminals and brutish detectives. Each section of the book establishes a particular setting, a slice of the whole, some ugly, some beautiful, some harsh and some soft. Few individual settings are returned to, and thereby only one central setting exists, which is New York City.

## Language and Meaning

The author uses several avant-garde techniques in his language. He attempts to reflect the various New York City accents through punctuation marks and rearranged spellings, sometimes dropping the apostrophe from a contraction, and sometimes leaving it in. He



combines words that are normally separate, such as *rainstriped*. This may not be formally correct English, but the practice works to build strong impressions without distractions. Unlike other writers of the period, he follows capitalization and quotation rules consistently, possibly to help the reader along in an otherwise challenging set of stories. Each chapter opens with a brief scene in italics that serves to identify a primary thought that resembles an overall chapter theme. Yet the reader is consistently left with questions as to what the author means and sometimes confusion about character interactions. Like a complex modern cinema work, the meanings have many possibilities that become more apparent upon subsequent readings. The language often leaves the meaning open-ended and thus invites the reader to speculate.

## Structure

This novel is written in a modernistic style that developed during the initial decades of the 20th century. The author applies his sharp poetic senses of sight, sound, smell, impression, emotion, inner voice, tempo and expression in his prose, resulting in a book that mimics a collection of related poems rather than a classic novel. Some characters follow through the loose plotlines, while others exist for the moment. Each chapter consists of shuffled scenes that sometimes connect in obvious ways, but occasionally the connections are not well-defined. The lack of familiar structure causes the book to be a difficult reading task for those accustomed to the classic novel structure. Nevertheless, the poetic nature of the prose gives unmistakable artistic impressions appropriate for the settings. The author paints impressionistic art with his words in a manner that overshadows plotlines, themes and character development. He emphasizes rather than explains and reveals rather than expounds. As with other writers of his period, his prose structure challenges the reader to ponder in ways that might be more comfortable if presented as poetic readings or cinematography. The structure of the novel nearly demands that each section be read aloud, almost as a piece of music. The book is an art gallery and symphonic performance, a form of literary multimedia.



## Quotes

"With a long slow stride, limping a little from his blistered feet, Bud walked down Broadway, past empty lots where tin cans glittered among grass and sumach bushes and ragweed, between ranks of billboards and Bull Durham signs, past shanties and abandoned squatters' shacks, past gulches heaped with wheelscarred rubbishpiles where dumpcarts were dumping ashes and clinkers, past knobs of gray outcrop where steamdrills continually tapped and nibbled, past excavations out of which wagons full of rock and clay toiled up plank roads to the street, until he was walking on new sidewalks along a row of yellow brick apartment houses, looking in the windows of grocery stores, Chinese laundries, lunchrooms, flower and vegetable shops, tailors', delicatessens." Chapter 2, p. 21

"The light of the sunset flamed in the windows of factories on the Long Island side, flashed in the portholes of tugs, lay in swaths of curling yellow and orange over the swift brown-green water, glowed on the curved sails of a schooner that was slowly bucking the tide up into Hell Gate." Chapter 3, p. 55

"Through the gloom Jimmy could make out the beveled smooth bulk of a big locomotive. The smoke rolled out of the stack in huge bronze and lilac coils. Down the track a red light snapped green. The bell started to ring slowly, lazily. Forced draft snorting loud the train clankingly moved, gathered speed, slid into dusk swinging a red taillight." Chapter 4, p. 84

"A smell of trampled sunsinged grass came from boys playing baseball. All the shady benches were full of people. When she crossed the curving automobile road her sharp French heels sank into the asphalt. Two sailors were sprawling on a bench in the sun; one of them popped his lips as she passed, she could feel their seagreedy eyes cling stickily to her neck, her thighs, her ankles." Chapter 6, p. 115

"Ellen sits in a gown of nilegreen silk in a springy armchair at the end of a long room jingling with talk and twinkle of chandeliers and jewelry, dotted with the bright moving black of evening clothes and silveredged colors of women's dresses. The curve of Harry Goldweiser's nose merges directly into the curve of his bald forehead, his big rump bulges over the edges of a triangular gilt stool, his small brown eyes measure her face like antennae as he talks to her. A woman nearby smells of sandalwood. A woman with orange lips and a chalk face under an orange turban passes talking to a man with a pointed beard. A hawkbeaked woman with crimson hair puts her hand on a man's shoulder from behind. 'Why how do you do, Miss Cruikshank; it's surprising isn't it how everybody in the world is always at the same place at the same time.' Ellen sits in the armchair drowsily listening, coolness of powder on her face and arms, fatness of rouge on her lips, her body just bathed fresh as a violet under the silk dress, under the silk underclothes; she sits dreamily, drowsily listening. A sudden twinge of men's voices knotting about her. She sits up cold white out of reach like a lighthouse. Men's hands crawl like bugs on the unbreakable glass. Men's looks blunder and flutter against it



helpless as moths. But in deep pitblackness inside something clangs like a fire engine."  
Chapter 8, p. 154

"Coming out of the building O'Keefe had to make his way through people crowding into the portal. A slate sky sagging between the tall buildings was spitting the pavements with fiftycent pieces. Men were running to cover with their straw hats under their coats. Two girls had made hoods of newspaper over their summer bonnets. He snatched blue of their eyes, a glint of lips and teeth as he passed. He walked fast to the corner and caught an uptown car on the run. The rain advanced down the street in a solid sheet glimmering, swishing, striping windows, putting shine on the paint of streetcars and taxicabs." Chapter 9, p. 175

"His arm was like plaster when he put it round her to dance with her. High ashy walls broke and crackled within him. He was soaring like a fireballoon on the smell of her hair." Chapter 10, p. 193

"They came out on deck into a dazzling September afternoon. The water was greenindigo [sic]. A steady wind kept sweeping coils of brown smoke and blobs of whitecotton steam off the high enormous blueindigo arch of sky. Against a sootsmudged horizon, tangled with barges, steamers, chimneys of powerplants, covered wharves, bridges, lower New York was a pink and white tapering pyramid cut slenderly out of cardboard." Chapter 14, p. 235

"The night was one great chunk of black grinding cold. The smell of the presses still in his nose, the chirrup of typewriters still in his ears, Jimmy Herf stood in City Hall Square with his hands in his pockets watching ragged men with caps and earsflaps pulled down over faces and necks the color of raw steak shovel snow. Old and young their faces were the same color, their clothes were the same color. A razor wind cut his ears and made his forehead ache between the eyes." Chapter 16, p. 292

"Before the ferry leaves a horse and wagon comes aboard, a brokendown springwagon loaded with flowers, driven by a little brown man with high cheekbones. Jimmy Herf walks round it; behind the drooping horse with haunches like a hatrack 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. The driver sits hunched with his hat over his eyes." Chapter 18, p. 342



## Topics for Discussion

Characterize Ellen's interactions with men. How does she react, and what does she actively do?

Why is Jimmy dissatisfied with his newspaper career?

Compare and contrast Congo's character with Emile's.

Why does Ellen call her husbands John "Jojo" and Jimmy "Jimps"?

Ellen's name changes from Ellie to Elaine. What do these name changes indicate about her or other characters' perceptions?

Stan is the only man whom Ellen loves. Why does she love him? Why does she abort his baby?

Describe the overall impression of New York City that the author conveys.

Select two descriptions that create distinctively different impressions. What poetic techniques, such as metaphor, simile, color, sound and feeling does the author use?

The stories and subplots in the novel are shuffled. How does this technique work or not work to move the stories ahead?

Identify more recent works in the cinema or in literature that use similar shuffled plot lines.



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