

# MANHATTAN

Directed by Woody Allen  
Produced by Charles H. Joffe and Jack Rollins  
Distributed by United Artists  
Released in 1979

If Isaac, the protagonist of *Manhattan*, writes what we see, he'll have a remarkable story. This character, played by Woody Allen, opens the film in a monologue, dictating five different opening paragraphs for a book he is writing. His introduction illustrates the protagonist of his book (and Isaac [and Woody Allen, for that matter]) as the epitome of what makes the island great.

The movie *Manhattan* is about all the introductions Simon dictates for his book. The romanticization of the city, the beautiful women, the sad decline of morality are all present in the film. We see it all in black-and-white tones while listening to George Gershwin tunes. The character laments the negative influence of television, to which he has made a guilty contribution. Finally arriving at a suitable introduction, the city is connected directly to the protagonist—he loves Manhattan and Manhattan loves him right back.

Allen by no means surveys the city in the film. He deals with a few characters of the intellectual set, people like himself that he knows well. The movie, while paying homage to the grandeur and mystique of New York City, is really an entertaining indictment of artsy academics.

"Nothing worth knowing can be understood by the mind."

Isaac gets caught in a fix, dating a 17-year-old named Tracy while falling for Mary, an editor, who is having an adulterous affair with Isaac's best friend, Yale, a professor. The strains of the relationship drive Yale and Mary apart and, with Yale's encouragement, Isaac seeks out Mary.

Isaac had never taken Tracy seriously, ignoring her questions about the direction of their romance. He begins dating Mary before he splits with Tracy. Emily, Yale's wife, wants to meet Isaac's new girlfriend. Yale thinks it's a fine idea, dismissing Isaac's concerns of awkwardness. One scene here stands out. Arriving at a bookstore, the two couples find a copy of the new book written by Isaac's ex-wife, a lesbian. Mary, Emily, and Yale pour over the details of the failed marriage, written with embarrassing frankness. Even though he is visibly uncomfortable, they continue sharing anecdotes and laughing. Isaac realizes these are not his true friends.

In the two previous breakup scenes in the movie, the person instigating the split becomes indignant and assigns blame to the jilted party. The same thing happens here, as Mary splits from Isaac to return to Yale. Mary is always full of herself, saying she hates being beautiful, and then describing herself as such throughout the film. She delights in castigating the work of artists who don't meet her standards, and receives therapy from a psychiatrist who frequently calls *her* for help. She is incapable of making any plans for the future, just making up her life as she goes along. Most significantly, she gives lip service to a standard of morality suitable for the society crowd, a standard she violates at every turn. Isaac, initially repulsed,

slowly became attracted to her, and now realizes he was right the first time. Thus follows the most important scene in *Manhattan*.

Yale and Isaac have it out. Instead of saying "follow your heart," our protagonist Isaac is adamant that personal integrity is necessary to extend civilization. Standing next to a skeleton of pre-historic man, Isaac rejects the accusation that he is self-righteous, declaiming that standards are necessary, "personal integrity" is important and that when he is dead he hopes he'll be lamented, not forgotten because of a selfishness that never served anyone, himself included.

Soon he realizes his big mistake and seeks out Tracy, to reconcile. However, she insists on going ahead with plans to study drama in London. Though she may still love him, she is wiser, and knows that if their relationship will have any chance of success, it will survive her absence. Isaac doesn't want her to become like the other people he knows, full of themselves, and too smart for their own good.

But he is forced to wait, and as his expression changes, realizing she is right, the film ends with the hope of her return.

"Not everybody gets corrupted. You've got to have a little faith in people."