Abstract

Nathanael West (1903-1940), who was not fully "discovered" as an important writer until the 1950's, has presented a persistent and profound tragic vision in his four novels. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the special nature of his tragic vision and the special ways in which it has been manifested. Through this study, it is hoped, some light will be shed on the achievements of this leading American novelist of the 1930's.

The thesis consists of six chapters. The introductory chapter not only explains the theoretical framework of the present study but also examines the uniqueness of West by tracing the steady growth of his posthumous reputation and discussing the primary shaping forces of his profound sense of tragedy. Chapter II deals with The Dream Life of Balso Snell in which the protagonist's journey in the Trojan Horse through dreams-within-dreams embodies West's attempt at artistic nihilism. In the third chapter, the focus is on Miss Lonelyhearts' futile quest of the so-called "Christ dream" for the sake of suffering humanity. Then, Chapter IV concentrates on the factors of the failure of the so-called "American dream" as dramatized in A Cool Million. As to Chapter V, it is mainly concerned about the satire upon the "dream dump" of Hollywood as presented in The Day of the Locust. Finally, in the concluding chapter, an overall appraisal of West's artistic treatment of his tragic vision is made by way of discussing the position he has occupied in the tradition of American black humor.

West's work as a whole offers a penetrating critique of the cultural crisis facing modern people. His tragic vision has affected considerably the themes, techniques, and style of his works, and it is effectively presented through the use of his mode of black humor and some surrealist and symbolistic techniques. That vision has resulted in some special patterns of imagery and also in the special structure of his works generally based on the tension between dream and reality. Unable to withstand the absurd reality, many of his characters are often driven into nightmares by their dreams. This irony of dreams is well sustained by the imagery of the waste land. In view of the serious critical attention he has received and of the remarkable influences he has exerted on some prominent modern writers, there is no doubt that he deserves his ever growing reputation.
Acknowledgments

When I started working on the present project, very few materials related to it were available in Taiwan. Fortunately, I located a copy of *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* in the Library of the Institute of American Culture, Academia Sinica. I wish to express my profound gratitude for the abundant assistance received from this Institute. I am also indebted to Dr. & Mrs. Yao-fu Lin, Dr. & Mrs. Chen-ching Li, Mr. & Mrs. Tien-en Kao, and Dr. Wu-kwang Yeh, who have kindly sent or brought me from America many useful materials about West. I am also thankful for the efficient service rendered to me by Mrs. Alice Hsu, Mrs. Stella Hsueh, and Mrs. Amy Lai, Reference Librarians in the Cultural Center Library of American Institute in Taiwan.

My hearty thanks are due to Mrs. Carol Engstrom, Miss Pearl Fang, Miss Harriet Feng, and Mr. Han-ping Chiu for having kindly proofread the manuscript for me.

I wish to convey my sincere appreciation to all the authors and publishers of the works from which I have quoted in this thesis.

Finally, I should also like to record my special thanks to my wife, Sujen Jan, for typing the whole manuscript for me.
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**Chronology**

1903    Born Nathan Weinstein, 17 October, in New York City
1922    Entered and left Tufts University, enrolled at Brown University
1924    Graduated from Brown University
1924-1926  In Paris
1927    Working at Sutton and Kenmore Hotels, New York City. Met James T. Farrell, William Carlos Williams, and other literary figures,
1931    *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*
1932    Edited *Contact* with Williams; met Josephine Herbst
1933    Published *Miss Lonelyhearts*; living on a farm in Erwinna, Pennsylvania; serving as junior writer for Columbia Studios
1934    *A Cool Million*
1936    Script writer, Republic Studios, RKO, Universal, Columbia, until 1940
1938    Collaborated on two plays
1939    *The Day of the Locust*
1940    Married Eileen McKenney, 19 April; died with his wife in an auto accident, 22 December
1957    *The Complete Works*
Chapter I

Introduction

The horror of this age was in West's nerves, in his blood.

—Josephine Herbst

As a novelist, Nathanael West is unique in at least two respects. On the one hand, he was not fully "discovered" as an important writer until the 1950's. On the other, he presented, in a highly impressive manner, a persistent tragic vision of modern life in his four novels. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the special nature of his tragic vision and the special ways in which it has been manifested. Through this study, it is hoped, some light will be shown on the achievements of this leading American writer of the 1930's.

My interest in undertaking a study of Nathanael West's fiction was first aroused by the steady growth of his posthumous reputation. Before he met his tragic death in an automobile accident in 1940, his books had sold very poorly, and he had been virtually unrecognized as a writer. Not until about ten years after his death did his name begin to surface. As Richard B. Gehman wrote in 1950, "Today West is at last getting just recognition for his special, remarkable talent; more and more rooters, ten years after his death, are helping his reputation to come into its own. Ten years after his death: that is the final ironic, tragic, Westian joke." The same phenomenon has been noted by many other critics since 1950.

In an article, "How Forgotten Was Nathanael West?" William White gives an intriguing account of West's rising reputation by examining the viewpoints of some representative reviewers and literary historians. White observes that West was not mentioned at all in such books as "Alfred Kazin's On Native Grounds (New York, 1942); Fred B. Millett's Contemporary American Authors (New York, 1940), which treats 219 writers; Blanche Housman Gelfant's The American City Novel (Norman, Oklahoma, 1954); W. M. Frohock's The Novel of Violence,
1920-1950 (Dallas, Texas, 1950), where West should certainly have been considered." White further points out, "Finally, West's treatment in the *Oxford Companion to American Literature* may be cited both as being typical and denoting a trend: James D. Hart omitted him from the first edition (New York, 1941) and from the second edition (1948), but in the third edition (1956, p. 814) he is given a full 11-line paragraph that he deserves, and his birth year is correctly given as 1902." White gives many additional examples to show that since 1950 more and more serious critical attention has been directed to West's work. In 1975, White published *Nathanael West: A Comprehensive Bibliography*, which includes almost all the important information needed to trace the unusual progress of West's literary fame, particularly during the past three decades. In view of the large amount of materials about West, Helen Taylor does not exaggerate when she states, "The cult of Westiana has grown steadily since the late '50's to its present height, and, with the plethora of new material which is constantly appearing, has become a bibliographer's proverbial nightmare."

Just like White and many others, Daniel Aaron is very much concerned with West's growth in critical stature. Writing in 1947, he also noted that Alfred Kazin and Fred B. Millett had ignored West completely. He says, "In preparing this note I have found practically no critical treatment of West save for a handful of reviews, most of them hurried and inadequate. Only one critic, Edmund Wilson, has dealt with West at length (*The Boys in the Back Room*), recognizing his strange and remarkable talent." Then writing again in 1951, Aaron recognized "West's perverse genius" by saying, "Now that Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* has attained the status of a 'minor classic', he is not likely to be slighted by the literary historians and critics who until recently have pretty much ignored him." Aaron's interest in West's increasing attraction was heightened in another article which was published in 1965. He writes:

> The revival of interest in Nathanael West, now of some fifteen years' duration, continues to mount. In the reappraisal of the literary 'thirties, West has caught up with and overtaken most of the triple-decked Naturalists whose solemn and often infelicitous documentations no-longer are devoured with relish.

Another critic, Leslie A. Fiedler, has also said something about the rediscovery of West: "Nathanael West appears to us from our present vantage point the
chief neglected talent of the age.”10 In Gerald Locklin’s opinion, West is “surely the most underrated and unjustly neglected American writer since Herman Melville.”11 All these selected remarks about West’s posthumous fame and the publication of The Complete Works of Nathanael West in 1957 make clear West’s unique position in the history of modern American literature. While no attempt is intended here to offer an exhaustive account of his ever mounting reputation, I would like to conclude my discussion of this subject by quoting an illuminating passage from Jay Martin’s substantial book, Nathanael West: The Art of His Life:

Shortly after West’s death, Edmund Wilson wrote that West “left two books more finished and complete as works of art than almost anything else produced by his generation.” . . . Critics began to suggest that West had been the most talented American novelist of the thirties, and virtually the only one whose fiction had not been victimized or softened in that decade either by the dogmatism, the clichés, and the romanticism of radicalism, or by the hysteria and utopianism of conservatism. “Had he gone on,” William Carlos Williams declared, “there would have unfolded . . . the finest prose talent of our age.” That conviction now became general, as West’s work was praised by Malcolm Cowley, Daniel Aaron, Leslie Fiedler, the French surrealist Philippe Soupault, and W. H. Auden. Stanley Edgar Hyman declared Miss Lonelyhearts to be “one of the three finest novels of our century.” Soon after the publication of his Complete Works in 1957, it became apparent that West was not only attracting advance-degree candidates in literature and bibliographers but also influencing younger novelists like James Purdy, Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon, John Hawkes, and Flannery O’Connor. He was known not only to college students or what had once been called “a discriminating minority,” but to a wide public: his books have sold, in all editions, over a million copies, and have been translated into nearly a dozen languages.12

This well-grounded passage explains very clearly that West has been enjoying remarkable popularity for over twenty years. That he is worthy of the careful study he has attracted is, of course, beyond doubt.

Some people lamented the fact that West was ignored during his lifetime. For example, Fitzgerald once complained about the “cowardice” of reviewers by saying, “Underpaid and overworked, they seem not to care for books, and it has been saddening recently to see young talents in fiction expire from sheer lack of a stage to act on: West . . . and many others.”13 But why the long neglect of West,
after all? Many critics have attempted to answer this question. For example, Alan Ross writes in his introduction to West’s *Complete Works*:

West’s slightness of reputation is not easy to understand, for *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* rank almost with any novels that came out of America in the thirties—more condensed, penetrating and poetic than many, that with much larger scope and subsequent recognition, purported to give the lie to the American scene.

Perhaps the ruthlessness of West’s portrait, his making of the whole political and economic racket so undisguisedly repulsive and meaningless, was too near the bone for an American audience with a mass neurosis, and a guilty conscience. There were, of course, other factors: the fact that the publisher of *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* went bankrupt almost immediately after the book was issued, and the shadow of an imminent war that took American thought beyond its own frontiers. Perhaps it is only now, when West’s books are again being made available, that he will reach the wider audience, with a different view on both him and his times, of which he was originally deprived.  

This argument makes good sense. That a reading public with “a mass neurosis” and “a guilty conscience” would recoil from West’s ruthless treatment of American life gains force in the light of West’s statement to George Milburn in 1939:

> [A] 11. my books always fall between the different schools of writing. The radical press, although I consider myself on their side, doesn’t like *my particular kind of joking*, and think it even Fascist sometimes, and the literature boys, whom I detest, detest me in turn. The highbrow press finds that I avoid the big, significant things and the lending library touts in the daily press think me shocking and what, in the novels of Michael Arlen, is called “bad hat.” The proof of all this is that I’ve never had the same publisher twice—once bitten, etc.—because there is nothing to root for in my work and what is even worse, no rooter.  

As is shown in the above letter, both the “radical press” and the “highbrow press” misread West’s novels. West was actually a very serious writer despite his interest in a “particular kind of joking,” and his comic spirit led him to treat in a very special fashion “the big, significant things” which he never really avoided. In the words of Norman Podhoretz, “the big, significant things are precisely what West
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pursued.\textsuperscript{16}

Why did West like the so-called "particular kind of joking"? For what purposes did he pursue "the big, significant things"? Why did he treat his chosen subjects the way he did? All such questions are central to the present study, and to answer them, we must first of all try to understand the primary source of his creative power—his tragic vision of modern life. It is essentially prompted by the tragic vision that he used his "strange and remarkable talent" to portray and criticize many negative aspects of modern life.

In the present study, the term "tragic vision" is used in the same sense as defined by Richard B. Sewall in \textit{The Vision of Tragedy}. Sewall writes:

In general, the tragic vision is not a systematic view of life. It admits wide variations and degree. It is a sum of insights, intuitions, feelings, to which the words "vision" or "view" or "sense of life," however inadequate, are most readily applicable. The tragic sense of life, as Unamuno describes it, is a subphilosophy, or a prephilosophy, "more or less formulated, more or less conscious." It reaches deep down into the temperament, "not so much flowing from ideas as determining them." It is an attitude toward life with which some individuals seem to be endowed to high degree, others less, but which is latent in every man and may be evoked by experience.\textsuperscript{17}

To further illustrate the essential meaning of the tragic sense of life, we may use Miguel de Unamuno's well-known anecdote about Solon. The skeptic asked Solon, "Why do you weep for the death of your son when it avails nothing?" Solon replied, "I weep precisely because it avails nothing."\textsuperscript{18} Commenting on this anecdote, Sewall states:

It is this sense of ancient evil, of "the blight man was born for," of the permanence and the mystery of human suffering, that is basic to the tragic sense of life. It informs all literature of a somber cast—the dirge, the lament, the melancholy lyric or song, the folk ballad of betrayal and death. It colors many scenes in the great epics and hovers about the best comedy as an imminent possibility. The tragedies of the tradition, from Aeschylus to Dostoevski, say this about it: that by most men it must be learned—and learned through direct, immediate experience: that is, through suffering.\textsuperscript{19}
A perusal of West's works discloses him as a very serious writer with a profound sense of "the permanence and the mystery of human suffering." Moreover, the themes, techniques, and style of his works have been colored by that sense of life. Therefore, it is worthwhile to take a close look at his tragic vision so as to gain a better understanding of his literary achievement.

Talking about West's character in a letter to Cyril Schneider, Robert M. Coates asserted, "I think the key to his character was his immense, sorrowful, sympathetic but all pervasive pessimism. He was about the most thoroughly pessimistic person I have ever known." This statement affords an important insight into the most distinct quality of not only the character but the works of West. Pessimism, which is deep-rooted in his heart, has given form and significance to his works. Needless to say, pessimism is the essential element of his tragic vision. As Schneider points out:

The philosophic foundation of his novels, that life is essentially composed of bitterness and sorrow, was incompatible with the idealism of the protest novelists and it alienates him from them. West saw evil and stupidity everywhere triumphant and saw no hope of redemption or escape. . . . The triumph of idiocy and insensitivity is implicit in his four novels and it is this different but penetrating perspective that demands recognition.

The difference between him and the so-called "protest novelists" writing in the 1930's provides a useful clue to the uniqueness of his vision of America. In a comparison between him and Farrell, Caldwell, and Josephine Herbst, Richard Gehman has this to say:

He too deplored the emptiness of Twentieth Century life in the United States, but he chose to reflect that life in terms not of characters who were consciously involved in a struggle, but of those who were unconsciously trapped—characters who were, in the blindness of their lives, so tragic as to be true comic figures.

West's difference from the protest novelists is a main reason why he was slighted or unwelcomed in the 1930's. It also signifies his concern with human life or civilization as a whole. Alan Ross rightly observes, "Life is terrible, that was the despairing conclusion that led nowhere and which was the motive spring of his
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novels. For West there was no religious redemption to be found in human weakness, no transfiguring sense of good-and-evil, no compensation in the physical life. Seediness, apathy remained just seediness and apathy. The joke was on civilization. . . . 

It is exactly his pessimistic view of civilization that has led him to attack fiercely all the components of the nightmares of modern man, such as injustice, violence, boredom, falsity, grotesqueness, and all sorts of disasters. With such a dark vision of civilization, it is only natural for West to portray modern man as a miserable creature living in the waste land without any hope for salvation.

However, West’s pessimism can not be construed as a sign of misanthropy, since his tragic vision is morally based. His ruthless treatment of the waste land may be regarded as an embodiment of his moral sense. As Victor Comerchero argues convincingly:

For all his mocking laughter, West is seething with indignation, an indignation which, paradoxically, is grounded in compassion. The perplexing quality of West’s two masterpieces results from his attempt to disguise his moral earnestness and his anguish by a brilliant comic imagination. Simply and perhaps extremely stated, he was an embarrassed moralist. He was also a frustrated one, for his nature and his world view made it impossible for him to “show the way”; he could watch in fascinated horror at a wasteland before him that filled him with pity and rage.

Gerald Locklin agrees that West could not be taken as a misanthrope despite his extremely negative view of life. He maintains, “West’s criticism of life cannot be dismissed as the histrionics of a cantankerous misanthrope. West was by no means personally anti-social; his dark vision had its roots far beneath the surface aspects of personality.” On the basis of some interesting materials he has gathered, Locklin asserts that “[b]etween the poles of geniality and pessimism, West lived a life of paradoxes. . . .” As a result of the conflicting extremes in his personality, it is not surprising to find the curious mixture of stark pessimism and moral consciousness in West’s art.

West’s character was very complex, indeed. He seemed, as pointed out by Gehman, to be like Tod Hackett who, as described in The Day of the Locust, is “a very complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside the
other like a nest of Chinese boxes." Gehman cites many examples to show "the many clashing elements in his nature and interests," with special references to his attitudes toward military men, organized religion, business, and workaday occupations.

West's pessimism can also be attributed to causes other than the persistent conflict in his psyche. According to Locklin, the main causes of West's pessimistic vision include his rejection of his Jewishness resulting in a feeling of insecurity, the lack of favorable responses to his writings, his materialistic mother's disapproval of his literary career, his sexual frustrations, the influences of some writers on him, and above all, the generally unsatisfactory cultural climate of the twenties and the thirties in America. It is necessary for us to bear in mind all these facts if we wish to understand West's complicated character, but so far as the development of his pessimism and his special ways of literary expression are concerned, perhaps the last two causes weigh most heavily.

In his preteen years, West began reading literary works. The first major writer he was exposed to was Tolstoy, and he had read a great deal of Russian literature before he was thirteen years old. Among the Russian writers familiar to him, Dostoevsky turned out to be the one most influential. Many critics, such as Angel Flores and James F. Light, have discussed Dostoevsky's remarkable influence on West. However, the most thorough study of this influence so far has been undertaken by Randall Reid. By way of making a detailed comparison between Miss Lonelyhearts and Crime and Punishment, Reid found that West adopted certain techniques and ideas from Dostoevsky while creating something entirely of his own. Reid Remarks, "West was, like Dostoevski [sic], fond of treating guilt-ridden, dualistic characters who live and act in a strangely hallucinatory world." But the more significant resemblance lies in both writers' expressionistic treatment of evil through a skilful delineation of their characters' obsessions. Reid states:

The worlds in which Raskolnikov and Miss Lonelyhearts live relentlessly confirm their obsessions. Misery and grotesque deformation are everywhere—outside the self as well as within. This union of personal obsession and universal reality creates the peculiar stifling atmosphere of both Crime and Punishment and Miss Lonelyhearts. Life seems to be an airless room or an oppressive dream from which one
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cannot wake.33

Evidently West shared with Dostoevsky an obsession with the nightmarish side of reality. These obsessions are forcefully presented through the metaphors of deadness abounding in both novels.

A voracious reader, West studied many other writers seriously, such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, William Carlos Williams, Gustave Flaubert, Thomas Hardy, Henry James, H. L. Mencken, Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, and so forth. In one way or another, all these writers influenced West. For example, Eliot’s masterpiece “The Waste Land” must have inspired West to write Miss Lonelyhearts. As has been pointed out by Edmond L. Volpe in “The Waste Land of Nathanael West,” these two works resemble each other in several respects: “The similarities in theme and imagery seem too obvious to be accidental.”34 West’s book can be read as a reply to Eliot’s poem, since “Eliot’s optimism is particularly obvious when his vision is contrasted with West’s.”35 One more obvious example is found in West’s interest in the concept of grotesqueness as developed by such authors as Huysmans and Anderson. West’s treatment of Homer Simpson’s hands in The Day of the Locust bears an unveiled resemblance to that of Wing ‘Biddlebaum’s hands in Anderson’s “Hands.”

However, so long as the influences on West’s pessimism are concerned, more attention should be directed to Dadaism and surrealism, to which West exposed himself, particularly during his stay in Paris from 1924 to 1926. Light says correctly, “Dadaism and surrealism intrigued him most. . . . Four words define, as well as it can be defined, the underlying spirit of Dada. These words are disgust, revolt, destruction, and despair. The key word is despair.”36 As will be further demonstrated in the following chapters, West absorbed much of the “underlying spirit of Dada.” Destruction and despair are the key words to describe West’s vision of life. In consequence, he was a surrealist “in his violent rejection of the human condition.”37

In a review of The Day of the Locust, Clifton Fadiman writes that West “is about the ablest of our surrealist authors.”38 But West denied that he was a surrealist by saying of Fadiman, “He knows enough about Surrealism, I am sure, to know that I am not a Surrealist at all.”39 West’s refutation calls for discussion,
since some signs of the surrealistic tendency do manifest themselves in his works, including his interest in the unconscious, the mysterious, and the grotesque, and his preoccupation with "decay, degeneracy and disintegration." As Gehman contends, "Like the Surrealites, West often used enormous incongruities to make his points, but unlike them, he preferred to distill his perceptions into images and situations that were painfully barren of minutiae." Locklin is also quite sure about the influence of Dadaism and surrealism upon West. He writes:

West borrowed from Surrealism the dream structure and the idea of plumbing the unconscious in search of a reality beyond the facade of the commonplace. Fyodor Dostoevsky tutored West in man's struggle against himself. But Dostoevsky took his themes seriously, while West is ambiguous. Finally, the dadaistic disgust, anti-intellectualism, obscurantism, and glorification of the physical, which Dada purveyed, show up in West. These attitudes are allowed to serve West's nihilism, but are ultimately satirized as pretentious in their own right.

Judging from the reflection of these attributes of Dadaism and surrealism in West's fiction, it is hardly deniable that West was indebted to these movements. Nevertheless, West's complaint about being labeled a surrealist is rather understandable. "For," in the words of Cyril Schneider, "at the center of the surrealist movement, was a desire to release the poet from the bounds of nature, and create a new world of the imagination in which the poet could dispense with the necessity of reason and logic, thereby creating without any reference to life as it is usually conceived. In this sense, we cannot place West in the surrealist camp." The following chapters will show more clearly that West's fictitious world is not wholly like the one perceived by a genuine surrealist. It is full of despair and absurdities, but its attachment to the basic laws of reason and logic is still discernible. Besides, "West never adopted the social and political goals of the surrealists, and he could never accept their premise of art for art's sake." In other words, West should not be regarded as a pure surrealist, although he has, as will be best demonstrated in The Dream Life of Balso Snell, adopted certain surrealist concepts and techniques.

In addition to the writers and movements mentioned above, the socio-cultural milieu of the twenties and the thirties also constituted an important shaping force of West's tragic vision. Although he did not belong to the group of protest
novelists, he was still dissatisfied with many aspects of American life. His joining the sad young men who expatriated themselves in Europe might be taken as an expression of sympathy for their protest against American culture. In his eyes, America had many grave problems. In “Some Notes on Violence,” for example, he observes that in his country violence has become an “idiomatic” and “daily” problem. He explains how serious it is by comparing its literary treatment in Europe and America:

What is melodramatic in European writing is not necessarily so in American writing. For a European writer to make violence real, he has to do a great deal of careful psychology and sociology. He often needs three hundred pages to motivate one little murder. But not so the American writer. His audience has been prepared and is neither surprised nor shocked if he omits artistic excuses for familiar events. When he reads a little book with eight or ten murders in it, he does not necessarily condemn the book as melodramatic.45

The different attitudes toward violence on the part of Europeans and Americans are very remarkable indeed. Many people’s moral callousness to violence is well reflective of their spiritual paralysis or emotional impotence, which is a recurrent theme in West’s fiction. As will be made clearer later, the rampancy of violence in America has been persistently treated as a terrible malaise which should be held responsible for the miseries of many people.

Another personal experience of West might have also heightened his consciousness of the deteriorating socio-cultural climate of America—his serving as an associate editor of Americana in 1933. This magazine was noted for its highly iconoclastic or radical character, which was fully reflected in the editorial of the opening issue in November, 1932. In it the editors declared sonorously their dissociation from not only Republicans and Democrats but also Socialists and Communists. They further defined their position in the conclusion: “We are Americans who believe that our civilization exudes miasmic stench and that we had better prepare to give it a decent but rapid burial. We are the laughing morticians of the present.”46 This manifesto of Americana is very well suggestive of West’s own critical attitude toward America. As pointed out by Aaron, “Some of its raucous and Dadaist quality is caught in his subsequent novels, together with its bitterness and cynicism and rage born of breadlines and national skulldeg-
Light also comments on the significance of West’s association with this magazine:

The magazine obviously saw the tragedy of the times, but it offered no solutions, unless bitter laughter could be called one. West himself sympathized with the magazine’s position as spectator, impartially deriding Hoover and Hitler, Stalin and Roosevelt, and the dadaistic and surrealistic tendencies of *Americana* were close to his own art. Yet, as a human being with—whether he liked it or not—a sympathetic heart, West could hardly be content with mere laughter.48

Undoubtedly West’s dark vision of America was compatible with the extremely cynical tone of *Americana*.

The same vision might also have been nourished by West’s Hollywood experience, which began with Twentieth Century Fox’s turning *Miss Lonelyhearts* into a Lee Tracy thriller. During those years (from 1936 until the time of his death) working as a script writer for a number of companies including Republic Studios, RKO, and Universal, West had an excellent opportunity to investigate Hollywood, which, as depicted in *The Day of the Locust*, is replete with almost all the evils he had seen elsewhere.49 Without such a long and deep involvement in Hollywood, West might not have been able to present such a powerful expression of his tragic vision of America in this novel.

Incidentally, West was a very serious writer even though he brought himself to work for some movie studios in Hollywood. In a letter to Edmund Wilson he explained the main reason why he allowed himself to become a screen writer:

I once tried to work seriously at my craft but was absolutely unable to make even the beginning of a living. At the end of three years and two books I had made the total of $780 gross. So it wasn’t a matter of making a sacrifice, which I was willing enough to make and will still be willing, but just a clear cut impossibility. . . . I haven’t given up, however, by a long shot, and although it may sound strange, am not even discouraged. I have a new book blocked out and have managed to save a little money so that about Christmas time I think I may be able to knock off again and make another attempt. It is for this reason that I am grateful rather than angry at the nice deep mud-lined rut in which I find myself at the moment. The world outside doesn’t make it possible for me to even hope to earn a living writing, while here the pay is large (it isn’t as large as people think, however) enough for me to have three or four months off every year. . . .50
From this letter we also find that West was really devoted to his career as a novelist in spite of the great Depression.

Having discussed the principal shaping forces of West's vision of modern life, we may now proceed to further explain the impact of this vision on his works as a whole. As has been stated earlier, this vision nourished his creative and imaginative power. On the one hand, it determined his choice of subject matters for his novels. On the other, it has a great deal to do with his persistent interest in the special structural and metaphorical patterns found in his works.

It becomes quite clear that West's ultimate concern is with the people who, living in the waste land, have been victimized by forces beyond their control. To put it simply, the waste land is his most important subject. Writing in 1972, Raymond M. Olderman gave a very concise and pertinent description of the chief characteristics of the waste land; it is interesting to note that almost all the characteristics mentioned by him find their way into West's novels of the 1930's. Olderman writes:

In the waste land all energies are inverted and result in death and destruction instead of love, renewal, or fulfillment. Water, a symbol of fertility in a normal land, is feared, for it causes death by drowning instead of life and growth. Wastelanders are characterized by enervating and neurotic pettiness, physical and spiritual sterility and debilitation, an inability to love, yearning and fear-ridden desires. They are sexually inadequate, divided by guilts, alienated, aimless, bored, and rootless; they long for escape and death. They are immersed in mercantilism and materialism; their lives are vain, artificial, and pointless. Close to being inert, they are helpless in the face of a total disintegration of values. Life constantly leads to a reduction of all human dignity; the wastelander becomes idealless and hopeless as he falls prey to false prophets.51

To say that the waste land in West's fictional world is like the one depicted above does not mean that there is nothing special about his treatment of the same subject. On the contrary, his profound sense of tragedy has prompted him to deal with the waste land in a highly individualistic manner. At least three significant qualities are discernible in his handling of the subject—his liking for the form of the short novel, his heavy reliance on "violent imagery" for the sake of the economy of style, and above all, his emphasis on the grave discrepancy between
dreams and reality. All these qualities have been colored, in a peculiar way, by his tragic vision.

In "Some Notes on Miss L.," West furnishes some useful hints on how to read his books. Although he refers only to Miss Lonelyhearts in the article, certain points he has made here are also applicable to the reading of the other three novels. For example, he considers that the short novel is "a distinct form especially fitted" for Americans because they are "a hasty people." He elaborates on this point: "Forget the epic, the master work. In America fortunes do not accumulate, the soil does not grow, families have no history. Leave slow growth to the book reviewers, you only have time to explode." This explanation for his choosing to write short novels suggests his dissatisfaction with the shallowness and impatience of his fellow countrymen.

Also mentioned in the article is the function of imagery in his work. In explaining the subtitle of Miss Lonelyhearts—"A novel in the form of a comic strip"—he writes, "Each chapter instead of going forward in time, also goes backward, forward, up and down in space like a picture. Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events. Violent acts are left almost bald." It is seen here that he attached great importance to the use of "violent images" because of his abhorrence of violence. After admitting his indebtedness to James's Varieties of Religious Experience and Starbuck's Psychology of Religion, West states, "The psychology is theirs not mine. The imagery is mine. Chapt. I—maladjustment. Chapter III—the need for taking symbols literally is described through a dream in which a symbol is actually fleshed. Chapt. IV—deadness and disorder; see Lives of Bunyan and Tolstoy. Chapt. VI—self-torture by conscious sinning: see life of any saint. . . ." This passage not only asserts the originality of West's imagery but also illustrates how he has, in each chapter, yoked a major theme to a controlling image or symbol.

West's interest in the special functions of imagery results in a remarkable variety of subtle images in his works. All the images in his novels have combined to lay bare his dismal view of America. Since his fiction embodies his deep concern with modern wastelanders, the image of the waste land governs all the other images. For this reason, his four novels may be regarded as an organic whole, each one of which relates thematically to the others. The following chapters will further show West's skill in communicating his ideas and experiences
through various interrelated clusters of images and symbols.

As a result of his successful handling of many pertinent images and symbols, West’s style is distinguished by remarkable economy. Malcolm Cowley praises this distinct quality:

He had the gift of a grotesquely accurate imagination, so much admired in the Nineteen Twenties, but the chief reason why his work is remembered is simply that he could write. He wrote as carefully as if he were chiseling each word in stone, with space around it. He wrote as if he were composing cablegrams to a distant country, with the words so expensive that he couldn’t waste them, and yet with the need for making his message complete and clear.56

In discussing the influence West received from such French Symbolists as Baudelaire, Marc L. Ratner also praises this admirable feature of West’s style:

West’s style is a study in economy and directness, one which makes use of poetic imagery to attain the desired degree of concentration, and West’s thoughts are identical to those of the Symbolists on this subject. “Lyric novels,” he wrote, “can be written according to Poe’s definition of a lyric poem.” His fiction generally shows the influence of the Symbolists because of its terse epigrammatic style, poetic imagery, and satiric content.57

The references to the prose poems of the French Symbolists and to Poe’s definition of a lyric poem are very helpful in understanding the strong appeal of West’s style. In a sense, West’s novels can be considered as “lyric novels” because of his success in achieving the concentrated effect through the use of many meaningful images. In discussing the imagery of nightmare in Miss Lonelyhearts, Light remarks, “These images, these attempts to make concrete the abstract, to pictorialize the internal feelings, make for the peculiar power of West’s writing, make for the feeling of nightmarish involvement in a world of hallucinations and shadows. In this concept he owes a good deal to surrealism.”58 Light has illustrated clearly the vital role West’s imagery plays in his presentation of the tragic vision of the world. In order to gain a proper appreciation of West’s artistry, we have to pay special attention to West’s dexterity in pictorializing his vision through poetic imagery.
West's tragic vision has been implied not only in his creation of some special patterns of imagery but also in the tension between dream and reality. His acute sense of tragedy seems to have found a most logical expression in his constant use of dreams to move the main plot forward in each novel so as to unfold the recurrent theme of unfulfilment and betrayal. Dreams in West's novels turn out to be very useful in portraying the misery of modern man. Almost all of West's principal characters are eventually disillusioned through their dreams, and their stories dramatize the whole process of their bitter disillusionment in the face of a hostile and absurd reality. In “Nathanael West's ‘Desperate Detachment’,” Max F. Schulz writes about the significance of dreams in West's fiction:

Dreams figure in all the novels except A Cool Million—where the dream is conceived of as a nationwide and patriotic preoccupation with the getting and keeping of money. Critics have made much of the Freudian and Surrealistic impulse in West's frequent resort to dreams, and rightly so; but their significance for West is not restricted to the psychological and aesthetic. In their reflection of a volatile universe, they also have a strong metaphysical import.59

To a remarkable extent, the predicament of West's main characters resembles that of Sisyphus, the mythological figure whose futile repetition of the same task symbolizes the rift between man's "intention and reality." In his penetrating analysis of the absurd hero in American fiction, David D. Galloway observes, "Many American novelists are considering the same disquiet, the same anxieties, and the same apparent lack of meaning and hope which Camus analyzed in The Myth of Sisyphus, and they share with Camus a common concern for religious and moral themes, especially in terms of the struggle to find value and fulfillment in a world without God."60 Obviously, West is one of those American novelists deeply conscious of the absurdity of human existence as is shown in the gap between dreams and reality. However, he did not share the optimistic attitude toward the absurd universe as assumed by such authors as Updike, William Styron, Saul Bellow, and J. D. Salinger. Galloway adds:

Like Camus, these authors reject nihilism and orthodoxy, and like Camus too, they end by affirming the humanity of man. The absurd hero is by definition a rebel because he refuses to avoid either of the two components on which absurdity
The Tragic Vision of Nathanael West

depends: intention, which is his desire for unity; and reality, which is constituted by the meaninglessness of life. . . . Like Camus, the absurd novelist does not attempt to establish a specific ethical system, but he does point toward a homo-centric humanism which may well serve the function of prolegomena to a future ethic.61

Unlike such authors mentioned above, West was so deeply immersed in his pessimism that he often succumbed to nihilism by negating or satirizing the dreams of his characters. Unable to withstand absurdity, many of his characters are more often than not driven into nightmares by their dreams.

To further explicate this terrible irony of dreams sustained by the tightly structured imagery of the waste land, I will devote each of the next four chapters to the examination of one novel. Chapter II will deal with The Dream Life of Balso Snell, in which the protagonist’s journey in the Trojan Horse through a series of dreams embodies West’s attempt at artistic nihilism. In the third chapter, the focus will be on Miss Lonelyhearts’ futile quest of the so-called “Christ dream” for the sake of suffering humanity. Then, Chapter IV will concentrate on the failure of the so-called “American Dream” as dramatized in A Cool Million. As to Chapter V, it will be chiefly concerned about the satire upon the “dream dump” of Hollywood as shown in The Day of the Locust. Finally, in the concluding chapter, an overall appraisal of West’s artistic treatment of his tragic vision will be made by way of discussing the position he has occupied in the tradition of American black humor.

Notes


2 On December 22, 1940, West and his wife Eileen McKenney, the heroine of My Sister Eileen by Ruth McKenney, were both killed in an accident, on their
way home from a hunting trip to Mexico. The accident took place at a crossroads near El Centro, California.


4 William White, "How Forgotten Was Nathanael West?" American Book Collector, 8 (Dec. 1957), 16.

5 Ibid. Concerning West's birth year, there have been various different opinions. It has now been generally agreed that it should be 1903.


7 Daniel Aaron, "'The Truly Monstrous': A Note on Nathanael West," Partisan Review, XIV, No. 1 (1947), 98.

8  "Waiting for the Apocalypse," Hudson Review, 3 (Winter 1951), 634.

9  "Late Thoughts on Nathanael West," Massachusetts Review, 6 (Winter-Spring 1965), 307.

10 Quoted in Nathanael West: The Cheaters and the Cheated, p. xv.


15 Quoted by Richard B. Gehman, pp. xxii-xxiii.


17 Richard B. Sewall, The Vision of Tragedy (New York: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), p. 4. Sewall refers to Miguel de Unamuno's The Tragic Sense of Life as "a landmark in the discussion of tragedy comparable to Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy (1970-71)." He adds, "It directed attention not so much to the literary form of tragedy ... as to the complex of attitudes, ideas, feelings we call tragic.
...” See Sewall, p. 150.
18 Quoted by Sewall, p. 6.
19 Ibid.
22 Gehman, p. ix.
23 Ross, p. xi.
25 Locklin, p. 5.
26 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Locklin, pp. 7-14.
33 Ibid., pp. 56-57.
35 Ibid.
38 Clifton Fadiman, rev. of *The Day of the Locust, New Yorker*, 20 May 1939, pp. 79-80.

40 Comerchero, p. 35.

41 Gehman, p. x.

42 Gerald Locklin, "*The Dream Life of Balso Snell*: Journey into the Microcosm,” in *Nathanael West: The Cheaters and the Cheated*, pp. 51-52.

43 Schneider, “The Individuality of Nathanael West,” p. 27.


46 Quoted in Daniel Aaron’s “‘The Truly Monstrous’: A Note on Nathanael West,” p. 99.

47 Ibid.


49 For more information about West’s script writing in Hollywood, see Jay Martin’s fine essay entitled “Nathanael West’s Film Writing,” in *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life*, pp. 401-06.


53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid., p. 166


Chapter II

The Dream Life of Balso Snell: Nihilism

Through Dreams-within-Dreams

The wooden horse, Balso realized as he walked on, was inhabited solely by writers in search of an audience, and he was determined not to be tricked into listening to another story. If one had to be told, he would tell it.

—Nathanael West

Nathanael West is said to have told A. J. Liebling "that he had written Balso as a protest against writing books." As is clearly demonstrated in the novel, he did direct a relentless protest against writing books. But this novel does more than that. Through the essentially Dadaistic and surrealist treatment of Balso's dream fantasy in the Trojan Horse, West laid bare his nihilistic attitude toward such other things as art, love, tradition, religion, and even life itself. The absurd journey undertaken by the young poet may therefore be read as a dramatization of the process of his coming to reject those things which are traditionally held as meaningful or valuable. The presentation of the nihilistic philosophy has derived much force from the presence of some striking images which are closely related to one another. Among them, the scatological imagery is evidently the dominant one. The other clusters of images, such as those centering around the wooden
horse, diseases, and the dream life itself, are all suggestive of West's nihilistic vision of the world.

Both thematically and structurally, dreams play a very unusual role in this novel. That the whole journey of Balso takes place in his dreams not only contributes to the unity of the work but also suggests the author's abhorrence of whatever is elusive, delusory, or illusory. Dreams symbolize falsity, emptiness, betrayal, and disillusionment; therefore, they are a suitable tool for expressing the author's nihilism. In this absurd dreamed world of the Trojan Horse, many grotesque figures and absurd incidents are presented to strengthen the author's criticism of the absurdities in the modern world.

The quest motive which is present throughout the book is first revealed in the epigraph—"After all, my dear fellow, life, Anaxagoras has said, is a journey." Balso embarks on the journey in quest of artistic fulfilment. He enters the wooden horse through its anus, and wondering around in its innards he comes across such grotesque persons as a Jewish guide, a Catholic mystic called Maloney the Areopagite, a precocious middle school student called John Gilson, a school teacher called Miss Mary McGeeney, and many writers who badly need to be recognized. By means of the seemingly formless structure founded on some dreams within dreams and stories within stories, West pictorializes his view of reality in a very satirical manner.

West's intention to protest against writing books has led him to treat books as an embodiment of falsity, delusoriness, and pretentiousness. The following passage from the "Crime Journal" of the twelve-year-old John Gilson may be taken as a good clue to the author's attitude toward books:

I am an honest man and feel badly about masks, cardboard noses, diaries, memoirs, letters from a Sabine farm, the theatre . . . I feel badly, yet I can do nothing. 'Sir!' I say to myself, 'your name is not Iago, but simply John. It is monstrous to write lies in a diary.'

However, I insist that I am an honest man. Reality troubles me as it must all honest men.

Reality! Reality! If I could only discover the Real. A Real that I could know with my senses. A Real that would wait for me to inspect it as a dog inspects a dead rabbit. But, alas! when searching for the Real I throw a stone into a pool whose ripples becomes of advancing less importance until they are too large for
A deep abhorrence of such deceptive things as masks, cardboard noses, and advancing ripples underlies West's view of "Reality." Perhaps the essential reason why he chose to build the complicated dream structure in this novel lies in his strong aspiration for the "Real." This motive to attack books as an embodiment of unreality is made clearer in the description of John Gilson's impressions of books:

Two years ago I sorted books for eight hours a day in the public library. Can you imagine how it feels to be surrounded for eight long hours by books—a hundred billion words one after another according to ten thousand mad schemes. What patience, what labor are those crazy sequences the result of! What starving! What sacrifice! And the fervors, deliriums, ambitions, dreams, that dictated them!

The books smelt like the breaths of their authors; the books smelt like a closet full of old shoes through which a steam pipe passes. As I handled them they seemed to turn into flesh, or at lest [sic] some substance that could be eaten. (p. 17) (emphasis added)

If the books have grown out of their authors' deliriums and dreams, then they must be the most deceptive stuff. This is why Locklin comments, "The books were never more than excretions of their authors and they are as dead as their authors are or soon will be. The people who consult them are cannibals, trying to feed their own illusions on dead illusions." Since they are but the products of mad schemes and illusions, they become as disgusting as the smell of "a closet full of old shoes" warmed by a steam pipe. This olfactory image implies not only the books' unpleasant smell but also their ugliness and uselessness.

Because of their quality of unreality, the pursuit of the "Real" in the books is doomed to be a failure. People will definitely be led farther and farther away from the real if they allow themselves to become book-eaters. This point is further suggested when Gilson describes his sense of futility in pursuing "a shadow":

I can know nothing; I can have nothing; I must devote my whole life to the pursuit of a shadow. It is as if I were attempting to trace with the point of a pencil the shadow of the tracing pencil. I am enchanted with the shadow's shape and want very much to outline it; but the shadow is attached to the pencil and moves with it, never allowing me to trace its tempting form. Because of some great need, I am
continually forced to make the attempt. (p. 16)

This image of endless shadow-pursuing reminds us of the futile efforts of Sisyphus. It is very well expressive of West's pessimistic view of life. It is simply impossible for anyone to outline the shape of a pencil's shadow with the point of the same pencil. The effort to pursue the shadow thus leads to nothing but failure and frustration, and so does the quest for the "Real" in books.

With such a scornful attitude toward books, it is not surprising at all that the author has employed many scatological images to satirize them. For example, the work of diary-writers is presented as worthless stuff:

Inexperienced diary-writers make their first entry the largest. They come to the paper with a constipation of ideas—eager, impatient. The white paper acts as a laxative. A diarrhoea of words is the result. The richness of the flow is unnatural; it cannot be sustained. (p. 14)

The "constipation of ideas," with the help of a laxative, results in "a diarrhoea of words"! Extreme disgust and contempt are implied here in the image. No wonder the writers living in the wooden horse are all repulsive to Balso Snell.

West's fierce attack on books in general has naturally led him to denounce literature and art. Commenting on Balso's encounter with Janey Davenport, a girl-cripple, Locklin says:

Balso is dreaming a dream within a dream. He is given the letters by Janey Davenport, a character from the second level-dream, one of the many faces of his own personality. The letters are written by Beagle Darwin, and they contain fictional narrations. In the first he assumes Janey's personality; in the second he views himself under a microscope. By removing the reader so many steps from reality, West reduces to absurdity fiction itself. It becomes a shadow of a shadow of a shadow of a shadow, so remote that it is only a stylized image of reality.

One more level is added when, with the opening of the last chapter, Janey Davenport is changed to Miss McGeeney, who admits that the letters are part of an epistolary novel which she is writing in the manner of Richardson.

This comment carries much weight as it explains West's denunciation of fiction in terms of the complicated dream structure, which is extremely remote from
reality. When he wakes up from his dream, Balso finds that Miss McGeeney is in fact Mary McGeeney, his old sweetheart. The dream and the reality, which is actually a dream too, overlap each other, and this sort of metamorphosis seems to have further reduced fiction to absurdity.

West does not merely negate the meaning of fiction. He also attacks the poetry which is degraded by materialism. After showing Balso the poem with which Gilson has won a fat girl’s body, Gilson says:

Not bad, eh? But I’m fed up with poetry and art. Yet what can I do. I need women and because I can’t buy or force them, I have to make poems for them. God knows how tired I am of using the insanity of Van Gogh and the adventures of Gauguin as can-openers for the ambitious Count Six-Times. And how sick I am of literary bitches. But they’re the only kind that’ll have me. . . . Listen, Balso, for a dollar I’ll sell you a brief outline of my position. (pp. 23-24)

Poetry and art have thus been utilized in a most ignominious way. They have become a mere tool for sensual and material gratification. Therefore, through the mouth of the Jewish guide, West negates the value of art: “After all, what is art? I agree with George Moore. Art is not nature, but rather nature digested. Art is a sublime excrement” (p. 8).

The same contemptuous attitude toward the theatre is also revealed. The narrator in Gilson’s pamphlet, “a tragic clown,” confesses: “All my acting has but one purpose, the attraction of the female” (p. 26): He says he wishes to write a play to revenge himself on the patrons of one art theatre. He would have the entire cast in the play shout Chekov’s advice: “It would be more profitable for the farmer to raise rats for the granary than for the bourgeois to nourish the artist, who must always be occupied with undermining institutions” (p. 30). He adds, “In case the audience should misunderstand and align itself on the side of the artist, the ceiling of the theatre will be made to open and cover the occupants with tons of loose excrement” (pp. 30-31). The scatological image is used again to express a thorough artistic nihilism. Warwick Wadlington explains the meaning of this image in terms of the mutually harmful relationship between artist and audience:

Art is an excrement in that it seems to be a waste, a by-product, of the funda-
mentally selfish, yet symbiotic, relationship of artist and audience: the audience needing the stimulating illusions of the artist in order to feel that it exists and the artist needing someone to see his illusions for the same reason. More specifically, as the anecdote about dumping excrement suggests, art is a sadomasochistic shell game in which the artist's covert desires to demean are released to the delight of the victims, who have in effect "asked for it" by stimulating his desires.\(^5\)

Another important cause of West's satirical view of literature is seen in its negative influences on the reader's mind and heart. Gilson admits in his pamphlet that he can not feel sorrow for the death of Saniette, his girl friend with whom he lived for two years:

Death is a very difficult thing for me to consider sincerely because I find certain precomposed judgments awaiting my method of consideration to render it absurd. No matter how I form my comment I attach to it the criticisms sentimental, satirical, formal. With these judgments there goes a series of literary associations which remove me still further from genuine feeling. The very act of recognizing Death, Love, Beauty—all the major subjects—has become, from literature and exercise, impossible. (pp. 24-25)

Literature is thus held responsible for the reader's total inability to have sincere and spontaneous emotional responses to such vital subjects as death, love, and beauty. He has been deprived of the capacity for genuine feeling by an excessive exposure to all sorts of ready-made criticisms accompanied with literary associations. In other words, the gap between the mind and the heart has been widened by literature. Hence, the narrator in the "pamphlet" confesses, "I am... on the side of the brain against the heart... I marshalled all my reasons for grief..." (p. 24). Unfortunately, the harder he marshalls his reasons for grief, it is suggested, the lesser possibility for him to find grief.

West's attitude toward the same intellectual coldness as nourished by literature is made clearer in the treatment of Beagle's responses to the imagined suicide of his jilted girl friend Janey Davenport. In his second letter to her, Beagle writes:

You once said to me that I talk like a man in a book. I not only talk, but think and feel like one. I have spent my life in books; literature has deeply dyed my brain its
own color. This literary coloring is a protective one—like the brown of the rabbit or the checks of the quail—making it impossible for me to tell where literature ends and I begin. (p. 47)

It is this sort of "literary coloring" that has brought about Beagle's emotional impotence. Beagle describes his cold rejection of his "pregnant and unmarried" girl friend in the most pretentious, impersonal manner. The constant shifting of the points of view in his two letters to her is an unmistakable sign of his cold intellectual detachment, a product of his schizophrenia caused primarily by the "literary coloring."

What is more, West projects his sense of black humor in the description of Beagle's response to Davenport's contemplated suicide. Using her point of view, for example, Beagle writes in the first letter about his own possible reaction to her miserable situation:

What love and a child by the man I loved once meant to me—and to live in Paris. If he should come back suddenly and catch me like this, brooding at the window, he'd say: "A good chance for you to kill two birds with one stone, my dear; but remember, an egg in the belly is worth more than a bird in the bush." What a pig he is! He thinks I haven't the nerve to kill myself. He patronizes me as though I were a child. "Suicide," he says, "is a charming affectation on the part of a young Russian, but in you, dear Janey, it is absurd." (p. 46)

Beagle's brain has been so deeply dyed by literature that he can not only imagine what his reaction to his girl friend's suicide would be but is hard-hearted enough to laugh at her attempt to kill herself by parodying the common proverb—"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." In his second letter to her, Beagle is, out of his emotional impotence again, even led to analyze with great intellectual calmness how Janey would philosophize about her planned suicide. He writes:

She probably decided that Love, Life, Death, all could be contained in an epigram: "The things which are of value in Life are empty and rotten and trifling; Love is but a fleeting shadow, a lure, a gimcrack, a kickshaw. And Death?—bah! What, then, is there still detaining you in this vale of tears?"... Life is too crude; and Janey Davenport, pregnant, unmarried, jumps from a studio window in Paris—Life is too difficult. O. Greenbaum, H. Knapé, T. Kornflower, J. Davenport, all would agree
In the above passage, we see that Beagle, deeply absorbed in his thoughts about the advisability of suicide, has totally neglected Janey’s real emotional and spiritual need for his love and understanding. Furthermore, Beagle has reinforced his intellectual capability by resorting to many literary allusions. The thoughts about love, life, and death, with the support of those allusions, are well expressive of West’s own tragic vision of life. The concept about the tragic role of clowns will be echoed in other works, particularly *A Cool Million* and *The Day of the Locust*. It is very clear, then, that, under the influences of literature, Beagle Darwin and the unnamed narrator in the “Pamphlet” are entirely incapable of genuine feeling. John Gilson is also caught in the same situation. He murders the idiot dishwasher who lives on the top of his house. Since the idiot represents man’s animality, as James Light has explained, the murder reveals a crisis in the struggle between Gilson’s mind and body.6

Richard B. Gehman seems to have slighted the significance of *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* when he says, “Balso was an inverted book, a young man’s intellectual parlor trick performed chiefly for his own amusement and that of those inner-circle friends he permitted to watch.”7 The novel can not be properly understood unless the “young man’s intellectual parlor trick” is watched from the right perspective. V. L. Lokke offers us the needed perspective in “A Side Glance at Medusa: Hollywood, the Literature Boys, and Nathanael West.” He observes, “What is characteristic of West’s literary intellectuals is the abuse of the functions of intellect; the compulsion to strain the imagination for the spectacular, the odd, the perverse, the diseased and deformed.”8 *Balso* is then “through and through, an extravagant assault upon the ‘literature boys’ whom he detested.”9 Lokke elaborates on West’s attack on the literary intellectuals’ abuse of the functions of intellect:
In the novel numerous strategies of literary production are catalogued including the cultivation of "a 'rotten, ripe maturity'"; the search through "old issues of medical journals for pornography and facts about strange diseases"; the infinite regress of literary criticism, and the parallel resources in biography of the biography of biographers of authors of biographies of Boswell, all "rattling down the halls of time, each one in his or her turn a tin can on the tail of Dr. Johnson"; the sneaky efforts of Dada to catch the subconscious unawares through automatic writing; and finally, the obsessive probing of the stream of consciousness, the crawling inside oneself like a bear in a hollow tree the better to smell and record the interesting "nastiness of I."10

As a result of the intellectual abuse, West's intellectuals are emotionally and spiritually impotent and uncommitted. Their familiar strategies are "irony, blasphemy, caricature, and ridicule—and the eventual reduction of all gestures of faith to black jokes and frenzied laughter."11

Thus, the protest against writing books culminates in the accusation that books, particularly literary ones, have contributed to the grave crisis of spirituality. Just like books, religion is not treated as a solution to this problem. West's treatment of Balso's encounter with Maloney the Areopagite betrays his lack of respect for religion in general and for Christ in particular. Maloney the Areopagite says to Balso:

I spend the rest of my time marveling at the love shown by all the great saints for even the lowliest of God's creatures. Have you ever heard of Benedict Labre? It was he who picked up the vermin that fell out of his hat and placed him piously back into his sleeve. Before calling in a laundress, another very holy man removed the vermin from his clothes in order not to drown the jewels of sanctity infesting them.

Inspired by these thoughts I have decided to write the biography of Saint Puce, a great martyred member of the vermin family. (p. 10)

The Catholic mystic goes on narrating the life story of Saint Puce, a flea "who was born, lived, and died, beneath the arm of our Lord" (p. 11). During his childhood, Saint Puce enjoyed "[e]ating the sweet flesh of our Saviour; drinking His blood; bathing in His sweat; partaking, oh how fully!, of His Godhead" (p. 11). Then in his manhood, he experienced "one continuous, never-culminating ecstasy" (p. 12), exploring and charting "every crevasse, ridge, and cavern of
Christ’s body” (p. 12). He later recorded his ecstatic travels in a “great work, A Geography of Our Lord” (p. 12). Maloney sobs very sadly when he finishes the story of Christ’s crucifixion and Saint Puce’s martyrdom. But Balso does not show any sympathy with Maloney’s pious tears. He says, “I think you’re morbid. Don’t be morbid. Take your eyes off your navel. Take your head from under your armpit. Stop sniffing mortality. Play games. Don’t read so many books. Take cold showers. Eat more meat” (p. 13).

The whole episode of Maloney is presented in an extremely mocking tone. Obviously, Catholic mysticism is the main object of West’s satire here. West is so skilful in using the “trick of associating pious idea with physical images evoking disgust”12 that religious devotion is shown as something utterly laughable or despisable. The unsympathetic depiction of Maloney’s and Saint Puce’s morbidity is evidently meant to reduce “Christ to absurdity” and to suggest that religion is not “the way to spirituality.”13 Lokke’s comment on West’s intellectuals sheds much light on the grotesque story of Saint Puce:

All of West’s intellectuals exhibit a compelling urge to blaspheme, to attack religious themes and symbols through caricature and parody. The most flattering explanation of this compulsive need to burlesque the “mystery” and “ritual” of feeling is that it reflects the pain, outrage, and deep sense of loss of the possibility of any faith which can sustain life.14

West’s attack on the intellectuals was prompted by the fact that their abuse of the functions of the intellect has brought about not only their inability to recognize love, death, and beauty, but also their loss of religious faith.

The harm the intellect has done to the heart draws much of West’s attention. As a result of excessive reliance on the intellect, love has been perverted or debased. As a matter of fact, no genuine love exists in West’s fictional world. Lust always triumphs over love. As has been mentioned earlier, John Gilson is motivated to write poems by his sexual preoccupation. The narrator in the “Pamphlet” confesses that all his theatrical acting is done for the purpose of attracting the female. Once he beats his girl friend Saniette while shouting, “O constipation of desire! O diarrhoea of love! O life within life! O mystery of being! O Young Women’s Christian Association! Oh! Oh!” (p. 27). His contempt of love is thus fully betrayed in this scatological image, in which desire is mistaken
for love.

In fending off Balso’s sexual onslaught, Janey Davenport says, “Love, love with me, Mr. Snell, is sacred. I shall never debase love, or myself, or the memory of my mother, in a hallway. Act your education, Mr. Snell. Tumbling in hallways at my age! How can you? After all, there are the eternal verities, not to speak of the janitor. And besides, we were never properly introduced” (p. 39). But her view of love is not shared by Balso and Beagle Darwin. She thinks, “If he were a true poet he would love me for my body’s beauty; but he is like all men; he wants only one thing” (p. 44). Finally, in his passionate seduction speech, Balso elaborates on the theme of hedonism, “Sex, not marriage, is a sacrament” (p. 58). He succeeds in winning the body of Mary McGeeney, and he forgets “Home and Duty; Love and Art” while “an eager army of hurrying sensations” is moving in his body (p. 61). The novel ends with his orgasm, which confirms the ultimate victory of sex over love.

Love is thus reduced to something vulgar and ridiculous. Janey’s aspiration for “beautiful and sacred” love turns out to be a joke; it can never be fulfilled. The vulgarization of love is partially attributed to people’s grotesque view of the body, for their obsession with sensual pleasure stems from their morbid concern with the flesh. Perhaps this is why West satirizes the dirt or corruption of the body. For example, the narrator in the “Pamphlet” offers an explanation for his beating his mistress:

This evening I am very nervous. I have a sty on my eye, a cold sore on my lip, a pimple where the edge of my collar touches my neck, another pimple in the corner of my mouth, and a drop of salt snot on the end of my nose. Because I rub them continually my nostrils are inflamed, sore and angry. (p. 28).

Another example of West’s contempt for the degraded body is found in Balso’s passion for a “beautiful hunchback” (p. 37). Balso holds her arm and says:

O arabesque, I, Balso Snell, shall replace music in your affections! Your pleasures shall no longer be vicarious. No longer shall you mentally pollute yourself. For me, your sores are like flowers: the new, pink, budlike sores, the full, rose-ripe sores, the sweet, seed-bearing sores. I shall cherish them all. O deviation from the Golden Mean! O out of alignment! (P. 38)
Balso's passion for the hunchback's "sores" betrays his grotesque attitude toward the body. To him the sores are as lovely as flowers, and this reminds the reader of an old girl friend of his. "All day she did nothing but place bits of meat on the petals of flowers. She chocked the rose with butter and cake crumbs, soiling the crispness of its dainty petals with gravy and cheese. She wanted the rose to attract flies, not butterflies or bees. . ." (p. 57). In the world of the grotesques, beauty or loveliness is soiled and despised, whereas dirtiness and ugliness are cherished. Love has been degraded, just as the rose has been soiled enough to attract flies.

Balso's journey in the wooden horse is thus seen as the record of a young poet's nay-saying experiences. What the writer of "Crime Journal" says clearly reflects West's nihilistic philosophy:

I "laughed the icy laughter of the soul," I uttered "universal sighs"; I sang in "silverfire verse"; I smiled the 'enigmatic smile'; I sought "azure and elliptical routes." In everything I was completely the mad poet. I was one of those 'great despisers,' whom Nietzsche loved because "they are the great adorers; they are arrows of longing for the other shore." Along with "mon hysteria" I cultivated a "rotten, ripe maturity." You understand what I mean: like Rimbaud, I practiced having hallucinations. (p. 16) (emphasis added)

The reference to Nietzsche and Rimbaud are a clue to the thematic and stylistic preferences of West. As a "great despiser," he also sought great freedom in literary creation, the freedom as one can experience in hallucinations. This is why he let the writer of "Crime Journal" go on saying:

Now, my imagination is a wild beast that cries always for freedom. I am continually tormented by the desire to indulge some strange thing, perceptible but indistinct, hidden in the swamps of my mind. . . (p. 16)

Interestingly enough, Jerémiah Mahoney's image of West is also characterized by having a powerful desire for freedom. Mahoney describes West as an "extremely curious and disinterested" man with the "world of ideas" as his "toy shop." "He liked being an animal; he liked feeling like superman; he didn’t really know, then, perhaps, what it was to be human."15 That West liked being an animal or superman may partially explain his frequent use of animal imagery in his novels.
In the context of this novel, the Trojan Horse appears as a fitting symbol of falsity and illusoriness. In Podhoretz’s opinion, the horse is a symbol of Western culture which the novel tries to mock. Galloway opines, “The Trojan Horse is Balso’s world, and like its Homeric predecessor it represents evasion and deceit. For West the modern world is no more honest in the dreams it offers man than the Trojan Horse had been in the dreams of peace with which it tempted the besieged citizens of Troy. The horse as a symbol of sham reappears in A Cool Million in Sylvanus Snodgrasse’s fatuous panegyrics and in the grotesque rubber figure at the bottom of Claude Estee’s swimming pool in The Day of the Locust. . . .” The reappearance of this animal image is a sign of West’s persistent concern with man’s suffering from delusions.

As has been mentioned in the preceding chapter, West received influences from a number of sources, including Dadaism, surrealism, Joyce, and Dostoevsky. All these influences are present in this novel. As pointed out by James Light, such major aspects of Dada as “disgust, anti-intellectualism, and the glorification of the physical” are dealt with in Balso Snell. But West only accepted partly the spirit of Dada. Locklin has very well analyzed the unique elements of West’s vision:

Dada was destruction, but it was destruction with a better future in mind. “It is aimed,” says George Ribemont-Dessaignes, “at the liberation of the individual from dogmas, formulas and laws, to the affirmation of the individual on the place of the spiritual.” West’s nihilism encompassed not merely 3000 years of history, but all the possibilities of life itself. For West, the future offered no hope, because neither the body nor the spirit offered meaning or value. West’s nihilism was, therefore, absolute, whereas that of the Dadaists, as vigorous as it was, was relative.

This comparison shows an important insight into the depth of West’s tragic vision. The glorification of the body is accompanied by the condemnation of the spirit. The liberation of the individual is at the service of thorough negation. The influence of surrealism is manifested in the dream structure of the novel, “for surrealism wished to capture man’s disconnected dream life and preserve that mysterious world in art.” But West did not accept surrealism completely. He satirized “the surrealist’s contention that the dream life may reveal an inner man who is higher than the purely animal creature.” As to the
influence of Joyce, it is seen in both the theme and form of the novel. As Light observes, "The form of Ulysses, a journey through chaos, makes the form of Balso what it is. Even more, the dominant ideas of Ulysses, the quest for truth (or the father) and the rejection of false gods, are the central concepts of Balso; and West accepts the idea, if not the prose, of Joyce's 'yes' to the body." West's acceptance of Joyce's influence in these respects is an expression of his pessimism since Balso's quest for truth in the surrealist journey through chaos is doomed to failure.

As West's first book, Balso Snell has received much unfavorable criticism. Stanley Edgar Hyman opines that the novel's weaknesses include its "obsessive scatology" and its having no form. Actually, the scatology serves the author's nihilistic scheme quite well. Locklin argues convincingly that the novel does "constitute an original form embodying a nihilism which is, in its extremity, original in American literature." In view of the author's nihilistic intention, it is certainly justifiable to adopt the form of "a journey through chaos." After all, as Charles Olson's verse reads, "Form is never more than an extension of content."

Locklin is right in saying, "The novel does not deserve either neglect or disparagement. It is one of the most complex books this side of James Joyce, and its complexity is coherent, not chaotic." This book deserves more critical attention not only because of its own merits but also because of its close relevance to West's later works. Galloway analyzes the relationships of Balso Snell to the other three novels by West in terms of thematic presentation and characterization. He writes:

In Balso Snell, West introduced his readers to the eccentric, the mystic, the pervert, the crippled, and the disillusioned who were to be credibly presented as major players in his later novels. The themes of cheating, distorted reality, and the 'Dostoevskian paradox of good and evil occur throughout the book, although they emerge in self-conscious references and images. In the absurdly tweedy figure of Miss McGeeney West first suggests the sterility of modern woman and the failure of sexual gratification.

Galloway cites more examples to show that Balso Snell is related to West's later works. Balso's bitter cynicism is to be further developed in Shrike. Balso
"approaches religious mysticism, sexual expression, and literary detachment in a manner that foreshadows the agonized gropings of Miss Lonelyhearts." But the most striking example is West's skilful use of dreams and poetic imagery which will be seen over and over again in the later works. In addition to the points raised by Galloway, I would like to add that West's use of the quest motif and black humor is also to be repeated later.

According to Light, West started working on *Balso Snell* while studying at Brown University. An interesting account of the genesis of this novel is given by Light:

> The surname of a Brown professor, Snell, had hugely amused him because of its closeness to "smell"; and at spasmodic intervals during his last two years of college, West invented various adventures of a hero by that name. John Sanford, who was not at Brown but remained a close friend, recalls that by 1924 West had told him virtually everything that was to be found in *Balso Snell*. An early use of the *Balso* materials was made by Quentin Reynolds in a speech on Spring Day. Reynolds had been elected Speaker for the occasion and appealed to West for help. Eventually West gave him a manuscript which proved to be a narrative of Balso Snell's pilgrimage into the bowels of the legendary Trojan horse. . . .

Although the novel took its final form during West's stay in Paris, the fact that he began writing it at Brown is significant in that he had developed the kind of nihilistic outlook and an interest in the "particular kind of joking" before he was twenty years old. English professors at Brown, as Reynolds noted, had been unaware of having harbored "a genius in their midst." A reviewer of *Balso Snell* was perceptive enough to take notice of something unusual about this "genius" when he wrote:

This is a first novel. And, considering the usual unevenness of first novels, Mr. West has effected a splendid and craftsmanlike book. Perhaps it would be rather impertinent to call this facile, buoyant book a novel, but whatever the author ordains to baptize his work it is, not too superlatively, a distinguished performance in sophisticated writing. True, there is nothing tremendously significant in it either of style or technique. Yet there is a suavity of phrase and execution in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* that makes for excellent reading.

The budding talent which made possible the creation of this "splendid and
craftsmanlike book" would eventually put forth its exuberant blossoms in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*.

Notes

1. *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, in The Complete Works of Nathanael West, p. 37. All further references to this novel appear in the text.
4. Ibid., p. 46.
9. Ibid., pp. 36-37.
10. Ibid.
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16 Podhoretz, p. 156.


19 Locklin, pp. 53-54.

20 Light, p. 55.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., p. 56.


24 Locklin, p. 50.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., p. 24.

27 Galloway, p. 33.

28 Ibid.


30 Ibid., p. 111.

Chapter III

Miss Lonelyhearts: Failure of the "Christ Dream"

Man has a tropism for order. Keys in one pocket, change in another. Mandolins are tuned G D A E. The physical world has a tropism for disorder, entropy. Man against nature... the battle of the centuries. Keys yearn to mix with change. Mandolins strive to get out of tune. Every order has within it the germ of destruction. All order is doomed, yet the battle is worth while.

—Nathanael West

In "Some Notes on Miss L.," West says that this novel is intended to give "the portrait of a priest of our time who has a religious experience." This "priest," who is not formally associated with any religious institution, is not given any formal name in the novel. He is just called "Miss Lonelyhearts," which is the name of the agony column in The New York Post-Dispatch, a column for which he has been employed to write in answer to many pleas for help from the readers. The column plays a very important role in the novel. It does not merely serve as a mirror of the waste land in which Miss Lonelyhearts is brought to see very clearly the terrible sufferings of many people. It also serves as a scourge which keeps flogging him in his search for solutions to the problems of his suffering readers. It becomes West's convenient tool for expressing his dark vision of the world by portraying the protagonist's bitter reactions to it. As a primary cause of the remarkable changes in his character, the column becomes very closely related to his religious experience.

His fiancée Betty says to him that he has made a fool of himself by doing the "Miss Lonelyhearts" job. Speaking in defense of his job, he reveals his full con-
sciousness of the tremendous impact of the column upon him:

Perhaps I can make you understand. Let's start from the beginning. A man is hired to give advice to the readers of a newspaper. The job is a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke. He welcomes the job, for it might lead to a gossip column, and anyway he's tired of being a leg man. He too considers the job a joke, but after several months at it, the joke begins to escape him. He sees that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. He also discovers that his correspondents take him seriously. For the first time in his life, he is forced to examine the values by which he lives. This examination shows him that he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator. (p. 106)

From this passage we learn that the letters from his readers have not only aroused his genuine compassion for their miserable situations but has also urged him to seek the meaning of his own life. The job as the columnist has thus turned out to be a crucial turning point in his life.

After he has, out of his growing sympathy with the suffering correspondents, decided to be engaged in the so-called "Christ business," he is continually frustrated by the cynicism of Shrike, the feature editor of the column, by Betty's lack of sympathy for his job, by his own doubts about the "Christ dream," and by his constant falling into the trap of lust. This novel is a very forceful dramatization of his persistent struggle for the sake of the "Christ dream." His pursuit of the Christian faith is complicated by his unwise involvement in the unhappy marriage life of Peter Doyle, a poor cripple. The novel ends when he is accidentally shot to death by the cripple. The love he has learned through hard effort is destroyed by the hatred of the cripple, which has resulted from a sheer misunderstanding. Obviously, this most ironical ending of the story further betrays West's pessimism about the whole "Christ business." It is clear then that the ultimate purpose of West is to depict the modern waste land by way of describing Miss Lonelyhearts' increasing involvement in the sufferings of the wastelanders.

The world in which the suffering people live is indeed a waste land both physically and spiritually. The physical characteristics of this waste land are observed by Miss Lonelyhearts when he walks through a park in New York on a spring day:
As far as he could discover, there were no signs of spring. The decay that covered the surface of the mottled ground was not the kind in which life generates. Last year, he remembered, May had failed to quicken these soiled fields. It had taken all the brutality of July to torture a few green spikes through the exhausted dirt. (p. 70)

The image of decay and death as shown in the above passage naturally reminds the reader of the first few lines of T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land.” The meaning of this image is made clearer by what follows immediately:

What the little park needed, even more than he did, was a drink. Neither alcohol nor rain would do. To-morrow, in his column, he would ask Broken-hearted, Sick-of-it-all, Desperate, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband and the rest of his correspondents to come here and water the soil with their tears. Flowers would then spring up, flowers that smelled of feet. (p. 70)

Through the delineation of Miss Lonelyhearts’ inner feelings, West has demonstrated how the geographical waste land is related to the spiritual one. The sterility and dryness of the land has deepened its inhabitants’ despair. Miss Lonelyhearts’ invitation to his poor correspondents to water the land with their tears signifies that these two waste lands are inseparable from each other. Haunted thus by the numerous sufferers on the waste land, he becomes anxious to find ways to help them.

Miss Lonelyhearts’ increasing anxiety about those poor people is seen as a result of the influence he has received from his father, a Baptist minister. This influence declares itself in his outer appearance:

A beard would become him, would accent his Old-Testament look. But even without a beard no one could fail to recognize the New England puritan. His forehead was high and narrow. His nose was long and fleshless. His bony chin was shaped and cleft like a hoof. (p. 69)

This description seems to suggest that the gradual intensification of his desire to play the role of a modern Christ follows smoothly because of his religious background. The sharp features of his “Old-Testament look” are well associated with his strong sense of mission. However, it proves to be very difficult for him to ex-
experience the spirit of Christ. In the poorly furnished room where he lives alone, he hangs an ivory Christ on the wall, but he feels depressed because the ivory figure remains static. "He had removed the figure from the cross to which it had been fastened and had nailed it to the wall with large spikes. But the desired effect had not been obtained. Instead of writhing, the Christ remained calmly decorative" (p. 75). Now that nothing has been aroused in his heart by the figure, it is only natural that he cannot accept the advice of love in the chapter about Father Zossima in *Brothers Karamazov*. Nevertheless, his determination to seek Christ’s love is sustained by his own religious background as shown in the following passage:

As a boy in his father’s church, he had discovered that something stirred in him when he shouted the name of Christ, something secret and enormously powerful. He had played with this thing, but had never allowed it to come alive.

He knew now what this thing was—hysteria, a snake whose scales are tiny mirrors in which the dead world takes on a semblance of life. And how dead the world is... a world of doorknobs. (p. 75)

His past experience with Christ explains his responsiveness to the call of Christ now. It is his painful observation of the dead “world of doorknobs” that has finally led him to set free the “something” which his shouting Christ’s name ever stirred in him during his childhood. His motivation to serve the cause of Christ now is fittingly suggested by the image of the snake because as a symbol of the “something” in him, its small scales mirror the seemingly alive world. In other words, his past reluctance to accept Christ is wavering now because of his full consciousness of the deadness of the waste land. In dramatizing Miss Lonelyhearts’ long struggle to realize the “Christ dream,” West sheds much light on the principal causes of the miseries of modern wastelanders, such as violence, apathy, sex without love, and the loss of pastoralism.

In the face of the sufferings of his correspondents, Miss Lonelyhearts feels at once helpless and angry because he does not know how to answer their pleas for help. His predicament is vividly described:

Suddenly tired, he sat down on a bench. If he could only throw the stone. He searched the sky for a target. But the gray sky looked as if it had been rubbed with...
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a soiled eraser. It held no angels, flaming crosses, olive-bearing doves, wheels within wheels. Only a newspaper struggled in the air like a kite with a broken spine. (p. 71)

Miss Lonelyhearts' situation is, as the above passage suggests, very much similar to that of a newspaper which is struggling in the "gray sky" "like a kite with a broken spine." The objects he is searching for in the sky are exactly those the waste land needs badly: love, grace, hope, purity, peace, and salvation. His deep sense of insecurity and frustration is well suggested by this image of the broken struggling kite. Because of its broken spine, it can not expect to get anywhere. In fact, it may fall down to the ground at any moment. Therefore, it may foreshadow Miss Lonelyhearts' eventual downfall. West's tragic vision is thus pathetically revealed through the symbol suggesting that Miss Lonelyhearts' desperate struggle is also doomed.

Miss Lonelyhearts' efforts to help his correspondents stem from his acute obsession with order. He is abhorrent of chaos. As shown in the following paragraph, he is very much conscious of the need to restore order for the world. He found himself developing an almost insane sensitiveness to order. Everything had to form a pattern: the shoes under the bed, the ties in the holder, the pencils on the table. When he looked out of a window, he composed the skyline by balancing one building against another. If a bird flew across this arrangement, he closed his eyes angrily until it was gone. (p. 78)

As his frustrations and anguish keep mounting, he becomes increasingly sensitive to order. And yet, as the epigraph to this chapter indicates, his preoccupation with the need for order will deepen his anguish because of the drift toward disorder in the physical world. The assertion that every order is destined to be destroyed is of course a sign of West's pessimism. It expresses a naturalistic view about the possibility of human amelioration. A profound sense of tragedy is thus reflected in the belief that the battle against disorder is worth while, although the battle is destined to be a failure.

The apathy and cynicism of Shrike make Miss Lonelyhearts doubt about the whole "Christ business." Portrayed as a symbol of faithlessness and hopelessness prevailing in the world, the hard-hearted intellectual ridicules Miss Lonelyhearts' every effort to help the suffering people. He has printed a highly sarcastic prayer
This funny "prayer" is full of religious implications. Thus Shrike indulges himself in making fun of Miss Lonelyhearts' serious quest. In his opinion, there is absolutely no way out of this chaotic world. He says to Miss Lonelyhearts, "You're morbid, my friend, morbid. Forget the crucifixion, remember the renaissance. There were no brooders then. I give you the renaissance..." (p. 71). He adds, "Oh, so you don't care for women, eh? J. C. is your only sweetheart, eh? Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, the Miss Lonelyhearts of Miss Lonelyhearts..." (p. 72). He even denies the value and possibility of almost every conceivable solution by saying:

My friend, I know of course that neither the soil, nor the South Seas, nor Hedonism, nor art, nor suicide, nor drugs, can mean anything to us. We are not men who swallow camels only to strain at stools. God alone is our escape. The church is our only hope, the First Church of Christ Dentist, where He is worshiped as Preventer of Decay. The church whose symbol is the trinity new-style: Father, Son and Wirehaired Fox Terrier... (p. 110)

Shrike's intellectual coldness goes to the extreme when he dictates a letter to Christ for Miss Lonelyhearts. The letter may be said to be a most powerful expression of Shrike's cynicism. His disbelief in God is summed up in these lines: "The Leopard of Discontent walks the streets of my city; the Lion of Discouragement crouches outside the walls of my citadel. All is desolation and a vexation of the spirit. I feel like hell. How can I believe, how can I have faith in this day and age? Is it true that the greatest scientists believe again in you?" (p. 110). As a
matter of fact, Shrike gives a penetrating analysis of the causes of Miss Lonelyhearts’ doubt about not only himself but also about Christ. All these expressions betray Shrike’s mocking, blasphemous attitude, which has grown out of his total apathy toward the sufferings of other people. Indeed, “Christ was Shrike’s particular joke” (p. 68). As has been mentioned, he and almost all the other intellectuals created by West share the same attitude. “Like the butcherbird whose name he bears,” comments Lokke, “Shrike is a destroyer whose role is to crush hope, to debunk dreams, and to destroy innocence.”

Shrike’s apathy is very dramatically manifested through the way in which he plays the game of “Everyman his own Miss Lonelyhearts,” a game invented by himself. He distributes a number of letters written by Miss Lonelyhearts’ miserable correspondents, and then asks each participant to try to answer the letter just for fun. He reads a part of each letter in an utterly detached manner. For example, after reading the letter from an old poverty-stricken sick woman, he asks the guests, “Have you room in your heart for her?” (p. 134). Miss Lonelyhearts refuses to play the game with them, and he drops the letter distributed by Shrike to the floor. Shrike says to him calmly:

You are plunging into a world of misery and suffering, peopled by creatures who are strangers to everything but disease and policemen. Harried by one, they are hurried by the other.

Pain, pain, pain, the dull, sordid, gnawing, chronic pain of heart and brain.
The pain that only a great spiritual liniment can relieve. . . . (p. 134)

Evidently, Shrike is fully aware of the fact that the world is full of “misery and suffering,” but his intellectual detachment has led him to treat it in such a cynical manner as if it had nothing to do with him. His cynicism means a thorough denial of hope for the world. Hence, West’s creation of this master cynic can also be regarded as an expression of stark pessimism.

In fact, apathy is a universal disease in the waste land. Many people are victims of it. An example is found in the letter written by a woman who calls herself “Sick-of-it-all.” She says she has had seven children in 12 years. She has been terribly sick for two years, but her husband is utterly apathetic toward her suffering. In his dedication to the Catholic faith, he has, against his promise,
impregnated the sick wife again. The poor wife’s despair is rather impressively shown in the last two sentences of the letter: “I am so sick and scared because I can’t have an abortion on account of being a catholic and my husband so religious. I cry all the time it hurts so much and I don’t know what to do” (p. 67). Apparently, a bitter irony is suggested by the fact that the husband is unforgivably unsympathetic with his wife despite his being “so religious.”

The next major feature of the life on the waste land lies in the prevalence of violence. Harold S., a 15-year-old girl, reveals her great worry in a letter to Miss Lonelyhearts as her 13-year-old deaf and dumb sister Gracie has been raped while playing alone on the roof. She says she is the only one who loves Gracie, and she does not dare to tell her mother what has happened to her poor sister because the mother is “liable to beat Gracie up” (p. 68). Gracie was once locked up for two days simply for tearing her mother’s dress.

Another act of violence is committed by Miss Lonelyhearts and his companion Gates to an old stranger. They force the old man to go with them to an Italian cellar, thinking that he has homosexualistic tendencies. Miss Lonelyhearts ends up twisting the old man’s arm until the latter screams. His cruelty betrays his sensual confusion under the pressure of his increasing anxiety about the poor correspondents. “He was twisting the arm of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent. He was twisting the arm of Desperate, Broken-hearted, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband” (p. 88). Actually, he did a similar thing before to a small frog he had stepped on. “Its spilled guts had filled him with pity, but when its suffering had become real to his senses, his pity had turned to rage and he had beaten it frantically until it was dead” (p. 87). The fact that his pity-induced anger has led him to commit violent acts shows clearly that he is tortured by a sense of impotence to do anything for suffering creatures.

The most striking example of violence comes in a horrible dream of Miss Lonelyhearts in which he and two college friends, Steve Garvey and Jud Hume, killed a lamb in order to offer it as a sacrifice to Jesus Christ. The powerful descriptions of this act of violence exposes ironically their lack of devotion to their Christian faith. Their resort to violence in an attempt to show their respect to Christ is at least an indication of their incapacity to serve Him in a proper way. In the dream, he repeated the same prayer as taught by Shrike: “Oh, Lord, we are
not of those who wash in wine, water, urine, vinegar, fire, oil, bay rum, milk, brandy, or boric acid. Oh, Lord, we are of those who wash solely in the Blood of the Lamb” (p. 76). This prayer is an unmistakable expression of Miss Lonelyhearts’ being torn between his aspiration for the love of Christ and his doubt about its value, a doubt as has been voiced by Shrike. Because of this doubt, Miss Lonelyhearts and his companions argued “the existence of God from midnight until dawn” (p. 76). They turned a rock into an altar, covering it with daisies and buttercups. Ironically, Miss Lonelyhearts, who was to perform the violent act of butchering the little lamb they bought from the market, was elected priest, while Steve and Jud served as his attendants. The blasphemous absurdity of the whole game of sacrificing the lamb to God before barbecuing it can be sensed easily in a passage like this:

“Christ, Christ, Jesus Christ. Christ, Christ, Jesus Christ.”

When they had worked themselves into a frenzy, he brought the knife down hard. The blow was inaccurate and made a flesh wound. He raised the knife again and this time the lamb’s violent struggles made him miss altogether. The knife broke on the altar. Steve and Jud pulled the animal’s head back for him to saw at its throat, but only a small piece of blade remained in the handle and he was unable to cut through the matted wool.

Their hands were covered with slimy blood and the lamb slipped free. It crawled off into the underbrush.

After some time had passed, Miss Lonelyhearts begged them to go back and put the lamb out of its misery. They refused to go. He went back alone and found it under a bush. He crushed its head with a stone and left the carcass to the flies that swarmed the bloody altar flowers. (pp. 77-78)

That Miss Lonelyhearts ended the lamb’s life in a most violent way for the purpose of putting it “out of its misery” reminds the reader of his ending a frog’s life after stepping on it. Both episodes exemplify his strong inclination to violence. His crushing the lamb’s head with a stone has a much richer symbolic meaning, as it suggests subtly that his “Christ business” is doomed because he has made his altar bloody. Robert J. Andreach offers a convincing comment on Miss Lonelyhearts’ predicament in terms of the Christ-Pan antagonism. According to Andreach, Shrike represents Pan, a symbol of nature and paganism, whereas
Miss Lonelyhearts represents the Christian idealism although he finds it hard to resist the temptation of Pan. I think West's sense of tragedy is here manifested through the cognizance of the fact that it is extremely hard, if not impossible, to solve the conflict between natural desire and Christian idealism. Andreach maintains, "What makes his predicament hopeless is that belief in Christ is no solution since for West Christ was never born, and whenever Miss Lonelyhearts tries to make him a reality, he invariably brings back to life the dead Pan, the world of primitive sexuality." Andreach further analyzes the relationship between Miss Lonelyhearts and the waste land:

The truth most noticeably lacking in West's world is God's grace, which operates toward transforming nature and assisting man in his spiritual growth. Miss Lonelyhearts is in despair because he cannot find Him. He is a dream, not a reality, and if one persists in the Christ dream to its conclusion, he perverts it by reawakening his animal nature. For West all that Christianity does for man is give him a consciousness of a higher reality, which prevents him from remaining unconscious, and a conscience, which prevents him from enjoying his sexual nature without feeling guilty. **The paradox which destroys Miss Lonelyhearts is that it takes violence for him to bring Christ to life but violence is just what Christianity banished, and when he allows himself to become violent, he becomes the priest and the victim of an ancient and bloody ritual.**

Because Pan can be resurrected only through the violation of one's conscience and Christ can be born only through the violation of one's nature, modern man lives in a wasteland... Andreach is right in stressing the negative effect of violence on modern world in general and on Miss Lonelyhearts in particular. The dreamed lamb episode is therefore symbolic of Miss Lonelyhearts' dilemma brought about by the conflict between the Christian idealism and paganism in him.

In her illuminating book, *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction*, Louise Y. Gossett points out that there are two kinds of violence:

Violence may be either the inner drive toward the use of force or the external action of this force. Vehemence, passion, excitability turned inward may immobilize the normal capacities of the person in confusion and tension; turned against another these powers may violate and destroy both the aggressor and the victim. Psychological violence is relayed in states of mind and feelings. Physical
violence is the consequence of force exerted by a character against himself or against others, resulting in extreme acts like arson, rape, mutilation, suicide, and murder. At times in current Southern fiction the violent force is the power of nature threatening man in storms, floods, and droughts, or in hostile land. So interrelated are psychological and physical violence, of course, that one is generally the concomitant of the other. It is seen clearly that both physical and psychological violence abounds in West's waste land. Miss Lonelyhearts' slaughter of the lamb is an extreme type of physical violence he is capable of. As a further demonstration of his propensity for violence, he has violent sex with some women. His relationship with Betty is troubled because he finds her outlook on the world rather limited. He thinks, "Her world was not the world and could never include the readers of his column. Her sureness was based on the power to limit experience arbitrarily" (p. 79). Besides, Betty insists on guarding her virginity, and so he allows himself in time to turn first, to Mary, Shrike's wife, and next, to Fay Doyle, the cripple's wife. No love exists between Mary and Shrike, nor between Fay and Peter. Shrike calls Mary "a damned selfish bitch" (p. 92). Shrike tells Miss Lonelyhearts, "Sleeping with her is like sleeping with a knife in one's groin" (p. 92). Mary, who calls her husband a "pig" (p. 92), says of him, "Do you know why he lets me go out with other men? To save money. He knows that I let them neck me and when I get home all hot and bothered, why he climbs into my bed and begs for it. The cheap bastard!" (p. 93). It is with such an abnormal husband-wife relationship that Miss Lonelyhearts gets himself involved. He asks Mary to have sex with him, but she never consents. One night, in response to her refusal, "He kneaded her body like a sculptor grown angry with his clay, but there was too much method in his caresses and they both remained cold" (p. 95). Finally he even "tore at her clothes," and "tried to drag her to the floor" (p. 96). From this episode, we see that Miss Lonelyhearts has no scruples yet about adultery.

The most horrible illustrations of sexual violence occur in the two stories concerning the mistreatment of woman writers. One of them is about how a group of men gangraped a female writer; the other describes an even more dehumanizing act of violence being done to a woman novelist. The story is told in the speakeasy:
She got to hanging around with a lot of mugs in a speak, gathering material for a novel. Well, the mugs didn’t know they were picturesque and thought she was regular until the barkeep put them wise. They got her into the back room to teach her a new word and put the boots to her. They didn’t let her out for three days. On the last day they sold tickets to niggers. . . . (pp. 82-83)

Such dirty stories fully reflect the extent to which modern life has been degraded by sexual violence. As has been seen in Balso Snell, love, corroded by violent sexuality, in West’s fictional world has long been degraded, dehumanized, and deprived of life and meaning.

Miss Lonelyhearts is one of the numerous victims. He decides to have a date with Fay Doyle after reading her letter, in which she complained about being unhappily married to a cripple. He is defeated by his lust. He cannot yet “discover a moral reason for not calling Mrs. Doyle. If he could only believe in Christ, then adultery would be a sin, then everything would be simple and the letters extremely easy to answer” (p. 99). Here lies the essential cause of his inability to suppress his drive toward violence. His sexual relation with Fay is also characterized by violence, which is very vividly manifested through the use of sea imagery:

She made sea sounds; something flapped like a sail; there was the creak of ropes; then he heard the wave-against-a-wharf smack of rubber on flesh. Her call for him to hurry was a sea-moan, and when he lay beside her, she heaved, tidal, moon-driven.

Some fifteen minutes later, he crawled out of bed like an exhausted swimmer leaving the surf, and dropped down into a large armchair near the window. (p. 101)

The sea imagery suits Fay Doyle perfectly well because she is a big woman with “legs like Indian clubs, breasts like balloons and a brow like a pigeon” (p. 100). She tells Miss Lonelyhearts that she married the cripple because the man who had impregnated her had refused to give her money for an abortion. There is no love at all in her relationships with these men. Hers proves to be the most destructive kind of sexuality, which makes Miss Lonelyhearts so sick that he has to stay in bed for over a week. “For Miss Lonelyhearts, sex may be a compulsion, but it is no kind of cure,” Reid rightly comments. “Both his own sexual adventures and those of other characters are peculiarly joyless and repellent.” After he has
recovered from his sickness, he decides not to succumb to Fay’s further temptation any more. Instead, as he gets more and more deeply involved in his quest for Christ’s grace, he chooses to instill love in Fay’s mind for the poor cripple’s sake. But unfortunately, the cripple’s respect for him is finally turned into hatred by Fay’s venomous false charges against him. As a result, the destructiveness of Fay’s sexual violence is also responsible for Miss Lonelyhearts’ being shot to death by the cripple.

Another explanation for modern man’s misery lies in the fact that the traditional pastoral ideal as cherished by Betty has lost attraction to most people. Betty spent her childhood on a farm and she still loves animals, country sounds and smells. To her everything in the country is “fresh and clean” and all the troubles of Miss Lonelyhearts are simply “city troubles” (p. 106). Therefore, she highly recommends the soil as a cure for him. But Shrike rejects the prescription. He asserts that the life on the soil is “too dull and laborious” (p. 107). A typical wastelander, he is utterly against the soil.

Miss Lonelyhearts is finally persuaded to spend some time with Betty on her aunt’s farm in Connecticut. But his brief sojourn on the farm fails to cure him. His reactions to the farm are quite different from those of Betty. An innocent beautiful virgin, Betty acts “like an excited child, greeting the trees and grass with delight” (p. 112). There is an impressive description of how she and the hero look at the pond on the farm:

They sat close together with their backs against a big oak and watched a heron hunt frogs. Just as they were about to start back, two deer and a fawn came down to the water on the opposite side of the pond. The flies were bothering them and they went into the water and began to feed on the lily pads. Betty accidentally made a noise and the deer floundered back into the woods. (p. 113)

That is a sight of tranquility and simplicity. The next day they swim in the cold water naked. Afterwards, Betty washes the underwear and then puts it on a line rigged between two trees, while Miss Lonelyhearts sits on the porch leisurely, watching her in complete nakedness. In spite of these lovely scenes, the farm is not a perfect place to stay. When they walk in the woods, they see unpleasant things: “Although spring was well advanced, in the deep shade there was nothing but death-rotten leaves, gray and white fungi, and over everything
a funereal hush” (p. 114). Even in spring, the country exudes death and decay and sadness. This observation reminds the reader of what Miss Lonelyhearts has seen in the park of the city, as has been mentioned earlier.

The pastoral atmosphere in the country is thus spoiled by the sights of death and decay. Besides, the “idyll” can hardly stand the onslaught of poverty and violence and disease in the city. Miss Lonelyhearts comes to know, as soon as he reaches the Bronx slums on his way back to the city, that Betty has failed to cure him. Unlike Betty, who can ignore the sufferings of others and remain content with her own simple life, he can never forget the letters because of what he has seen in the slums. The following passages explain why Betty’s pastoral approach has no effect on him:

Crowds of people moved through the street with a dream-like violence. As he looked at their broken hands and torn mouths he was overwhelmed by the desire to help them, and because this desire was sincere, he was happy despite the feeling of guilt which accompanied it.

He saw a man who appeared to be on the verge of death stagger into a movie theater that was showing a picture called Blonde Beauty. He saw a ragged woman with an enormous goiter pick a love story magazine out of a garbage can and seem very excited by her find.

Prodded by his conscience, he began to generalize. Men have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio and newspapers. Among many betrayals, this one is the worst. (p. 115) (emphasis added)

The sight of so many inhabitants of the city in utter destitution and poor health has thus filled Miss Lonelyhearts' heart with sincere compassion. Consequently, he can not but renounce the soil as recommended by Betty.

However, because the misery of the people is enormous, he feels he has failed at his Christ dream and places the real cause of the failure in his lack of humility. Therefore, soon after his return from the farm, he asks Betty to marry him. He is even willing now to take her advice to quit the “Miss Lonelyhearts” job and find a new job in an advertising agency. This act represents a big change in his attitude. Marc L. Ratner observes, “In the next to last chapter, after he has persuaded Betty to have their child, his one truly creative act, Miss Lonelyhearts is prepared for the final stage of his climb out of the pit of
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night — communion with Christ.” This change is skilfully presented through the use of rock imagery. He has become as “calm and solid” as a rock, able to withstand Shrike’s jokes, the sexual temptation of Mary and Fay, and even the stirrings of his own emotions. “Shrike dashed against him, but fell back, as a wave that dashes against an ancient rock, smooth with experience, falls back” (p. 133). When Shrike reads a letter about the pathetic story of a paralyzed boy, Miss Lonelyhearts remains untouched and uninterested. “What goes on in the sea is of no interest to the rock” (p. 134). After he has reached an agreement with Betty about many details of their future marriage life, the rock in him seems to have become even more hard and solid than ever.

The rock is meant to symbolize the negative effect of the futile efforts of Miss Lonelyhearts in struggling against the dehumanizing forces of the wasteland. In an article, “Aggression in Miss Lonelyhearts: Nowhere to Throw the Stone,” Lawrence W. DiStasi gives a good analysis of the rock imagery in terms of its emotional, religious, and sexual implications. He writes:

The final concept of Miss Lonelyhearts as a rock beautifully sums up the thematic and structural unity revealed by tracing the rock imagery in the novel. The cluster of values which reverberate around this image are negative ones, invariably implying violence and rigidity. The first mention of the stone image states the problem of loss of targets for aggression and leads inexorably to the final solution of turning the aggression inward to the self, the self as the rock. In between are a series of processes expressed through rock imagery which outline variations and attempts at solutions to this problem. The religious values which are evoked through stones tend to imply rigidity moving toward death as opposed to flexibility and life. The stone with which Miss Lonelyhearts crushes the lamb’s head in botched sacrifice is a good example of the violence and rigidity which religious ritual has become for the modern priest-Lonelyhearts.

It is true that the rock imagery is highly suggestive of the fact that Miss Lonelyhearts has become more and more rigid and violent emotionally and religiously. This change in him has been brought about primarily by his deep obsession with his self-imposed mission to find ways of solving the problems of his correspondents. But his sense of impotence in the face of their predicament fills him with so much despair that he cannot but feel like a rock at last. “He did not feel guilty. He did not feel. The rock was a solidification of his feeling, his con-
science, his sense of reality, his self-knowledge” (p. 138). In other words, after finding that all the possible approaches to his “Christ business” have been denied one by one, he can only protect himself by hardening himself.

This is why he, as we can see in the final chapter, welcomes fever which promises “heat and mentally unmotivated violence” (p. 138). Ironically, it is when he has, under the great pressure of the impossible reality, resolutely resigned himself to the burning of the rock-turned furnace that he has a religious experience at last. The violent fever drives him virtually into insanity, in which he finds that, to his ecstasy, the ivory Christ on the wall has been transformed into “life and light” (p. 139). But even more ironically, as soon as he is, having his own spiritual crippliness been thus burnt away, determined to make Doyle the cripple become whole again with his God-inspired love, he meets his tragic death by Doyle’s gunshot. As Marcus Smith states, “The reader knows what Miss Lonelyhearts does not know, that Peter Doyle is out to kill him. . . . The reader . . . knows that Miss Lonelyhearts will get his ‘brains blown out.’ ”10 In his great enthusiasm to perform a “miracle,” he has mistaken Doyle’s shout to be “a cry for help from Desperate, Harold S., Catholic-mother, Broken-hearted, Broad-shoulders, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband” (p. 140). Doyle has appeared, in the feverish dream of Miss Lonelyhearts, as an embodiment of suffering humanity. Thus, his hatred crushes the love of Miss Lonelyhearts, whose dream of a miracle remains a dream forever. It is through this striking irony that West’s tragic vision is most poignantly manifested.

The ending of his novel is indeed very significant in terms of its relevance to Miss Lonelyhearts’ obsession with the “Christ dream.” His rushing down the stairs to embrace the crippled visitor is evidently prompted by his powerful intention to succor him and other sufferers with love—to perform a miracle. The fact that he, after the gun has accidentally exploded, drags Doyle with him and then they roll down the stairs together sheds light on the meaning of the novel. It is the downfall of not only Miss Lonelyhearts but also the cripple. The former’s death has deprived the latter of any further hope for salvation. In fact, it has also deprived all the other suffering correspondents of any further hope for salvation.

Therefore, the tragic ending can be interpreted as a very effective expression of West’s pessimism. It cannot be cogently interpreted in terms of Freudianism,
as has been attempted by such critics as Stanley Edgar Hyman and Victor Comerchero. Hyman writes, "It is of course a homosexual tableau — the men locked in embrace while the woman stands helplessly by — and behind his other miseries Miss Lonelyhearts has a powerful latent homosexuality."11 Comerchero is also mistaken in explaining the ending in homosexual terms.12 I fully agree with Randall Reid that the ending "is hardly suggestive of homosexuality."13 His argument against the Hyman-Comerchero reading is well-grounded: "Miss Lonelyhearts has clearly lost all sense of particular identity. The object of his embrace has neither sex nor substance. It is an abstraction, a compound illusion projected upon a real person whom Miss Lonelyhearts barely recognizes."14 He comes to the conclusion:

The homosexual interpretation is, then, so weak that it requires us to ignore many of the novel's details and invent others. It is also quite irrelevant to the novel's issues. Nothing in the diagnosis explains the fact of mass suffering or the reasons for Miss Lonelyhearts' response to that suffering or the ultimate failure of his mission.15

The world Miss Lonelyhearts has left behind is extremely bleak. His vision of the world is presented in the following description of his sudden communion with God:

Everything else in the room was dead — chairs, table, pencils, clothes, books. He thought of this black world of things as a fish. And he was right, for it suddenly rose to the bright bait on the wall. It rose with a splash of music and he saw its shining silver belly. (p. 139)

The fish image helps stress the point that the black world desperately needs God's grace. When the world's blackness and deadness are driven away by Christ's life and light, Miss Lonelyhearts is finally able to answer the letters from his readers. In his mind he has now a new identity. With his complete identification with God, he has virtually become a representative of God. Therefore, his death implies that the world returns to its former state of blackness and deadness and that nothing more can and will be done about the dark reality.

Commenting on the meaning of this novel, Norman Podhoretz remarks, "What we learn is that Miss Lonelyhearts' sentimental spiritualism is no more
adequate than Shrike's intellectual cynicism or Betty's naive unconcern; all three attitudes are equally valid and equally futile, and they constitute, for West, the three possibilities of life in a world whose one ineluctable reality is the letters.16 As is demonstrated in the novel, these three different attitudes are indeed "equally futile," but they are not "equally valid." It is primarily because of apathy that Shrike assumes an extremely cynical attitude toward the miseries of many people, toward the agony column itself, and toward Miss Lonelyhearts' "Christ dream." He takes it for granted that the world is full of pain, and he laughs at Miss Lonelyhearts' determination to do something for it. He has negated the value of all the possible cures for the world, and he indulges himself in his sensual and material pleasures. Therefore, his cynicism is a clear expression of utter selfishness and pessimism.

As to Betty's "naive unconcern," it is not as pessimistic and destructive as Shrike's cynicism. With her abhorrence of what she calls "city troubles," she naturally favors the pastoral approach. She tries to persuade Miss Lonelyhearts to quit his job as a columnist, not so much because she is unconcerned about the sufferings of his correspondents as because she is more concerned about his physical and mental health. Her outlook on the world is not as broad as Shrike's, but she at least perceives the negative influence of the "city troubles" on modern life. In a comparison of Betty and Miss Lonelyhearts, Reid makes some relevant references to the theories concerning morbid-mindedness versus healthy-mindedness as expounded in William James' The Varieties of Religious Experiences. Reid states:

"Morbid-mindedness" and "healthy-mindedness," as James describes them, are obviously not just temperamental peculiarities to be classified by the clinical psychologist. They are instead conflicting religious and philosophical attitudes toward the nature of life. They divided sharply on the problem of evil. To the morbid-minded, evil is fundamental and ineradicable. To the healthy-minded, evil is either illusory or minor and transient. Miss Lonelyhearts and Betty exhibit this polarity of attitudes in all its forms. James identified love of nature as one characteristic of the religion of healthy-mindedness (he mentions Whitman as an example), and of course Betty asserts that all Miss Lonelyhearts' troubles are "city troubles." To cure him, she takes him first to the zoo and then to the country. The concept of cure is itself fundamental to healthy-mindedness. Because nature
is good and life is happy, evil and misery must be "unnatural."

... To Miss Lonelyhearts, however, nature is inherently evil. Its "tropism for disorder, entropy" is eloquently confirmed by the letters. Though morbid-mindedness may be pathological, it is also virtually irrefutable.\(^17\)

This penetrating analysis of the essential differences in mental health between Miss Lonelyhearts and Betty is very helpful in further understanding West's tragic vision. If Betty's healthy-mindedness has given her an optimistic attitude toward the future of the world, her optimism can hardly help Miss Lonelyhearts accept the reality of the Bronx slums and the letters of his correspondents. In other words, hers is a rather pollyanaish attitude toward the world, whereas Miss Lonelyhearts' pessimism, as nourished by his morbid-mindedness, has after all grown out of his realistic and pathetic examination of the dark reality. Besides, his puritan background may also be regarded as one of the shaping forces of pessimistic spiritualism.

C. C. Hollis wrote in 1957, "Miss Lonelyhearts was what West dared not be; Shrike was what he dreaded to become."\(^18\) This statement shows an insight into the meaning of West's way of treating Miss Lonelyhearts' "Christ dream." Just like Shrike and Betty, West did not believe in this dream, and that is why West would choose to have Miss Lonelyhearts' God-inspired love nipped in the bud. As Marc L. Ratner puts it, "In Baudelaire's poem all dreams are false, meaningless. One must leave the world because no dream can sustain the soul for any length of time. ... For Miss Lonelyhearts the one dream which has any meaning is the way of Christ. That West's view is closer to Baudelaire's can be seen in the senseless, pathetic death of Miss Lonelyhearts."\(^19\) To Miss Lonelyhearts the "Christ dream" is the only possible way out, but it fails eventually. The falseness of this dream would not have been so coldly exposed without West's tragic vision of the world. Undoubtedly, Miss Lonelyhearts bears a powerful testimony to West's outlook on the world. It is, in the words of Thomas H. Jackson, "about despair, alienation, violence, fragmentation, dehumanization, victimization, and sterility — about all of these things as definitive qualities of modern life."\(^20\)

West's tragic vision has not merely determined his choice of these particular themes and subjects. It has also had some influence on his techniques. As Comer-
chero observes, "Enough has been suggested to point out the influence of West's world view on his artistic method; in a sense, it resulted in his savagely defensive comic attitude. To a large extent, it is this characteristic of anguished humor, of blended pathos and comedy, that seems to be his trademark." He adds, "The problem is real, and yet it is put rather humorously; the detached self-mockery gives the comic quality. It is in this delicate balance between intense feeling and humorous expression that West achieves some of his greatest effects." The distinct quality of "anguished humor" is discernible in Miss Lonelyhearts too, and, as will be further discussed in the concluding chapter, this quality is akin to "black humor."

The same vision of tragedy has also led West to create what he called "violent images." As has been shown earlier, this novel abounds in such "violent images," which are highly suggestive of the destructiveness of almost every event or action. As to the "comic strip" technique, Reid has this to say:

A novel in the form of a comic strip was not as strange a notion as it may seem. West was always fascinated by painting and caricature, and of course popular art was, in intellectual circles of the twenties, as fashionable as the fox-trot. . . . The distinctive forms which emerged — movies and comic strips — were both picture narratives. And the union of word and picture was not limited to popular art. The surrealists often used pictorial representations of literary ideas, and even Rimbaud, according to Verlaine, had formed and titled his Illuminations after the cheap colored prints which delighted him.

This is a good account of the reasons why West took an interest in the comic strip technique. In "History and Case History in Red Cavalry and The Day of the Locust," Max Apple makes a perceptive analysis of this technique in both metaphysical and stylistic terms. According to Apple, no character in Isaac Babel's Red Cavalry and West's Locust has "a 'usable past': each is 'boxed in' by the random violence of a particular moment." After quoting West's own words about the comic strip technique, Apple says, "This comic strip notion of independent experiences, pictures with a few words, depends upon easily recognizable figures who are not men." He elaborates on the symbolic meanings of the technique: "The boxed comic strip technique denies all but spatial and chronological relationships. But most significantly, it denies the past. What happened to
Dagwood Bumstead yesterday has no necessary relationship with what happens today. Comic strips have no past, only the raw materials of character and situation." What Apple has said here about *Locust* also applies to *Miss Lonelyhearts*. The many violent images symbolizing the pervasiveness of violence in Miss Lonelyhearts' world assume additional meaning as the "boxed in" characters, having been symbolically denied the past, seem to be utterly hopeless and helpless in coping with each moment of naked violence. Besides, the technique seems to have also added something to the "anguished humor" of West.

In addition to the many violent images discussed so far, I would like to single out one more image which can further describe West's practice of conveying his profound sense of tragedy imagistically. I refer to the image of the Mexican War obelisk which Miss Lonelyhearts comes across in a little park. This image, as perceived through his point of view, is full of symbolic meanings:

> The stone shaft cast a long, rigid shadow on the walk in front of him. He sat staring at it without knowing why until he noticed that it was lengthening in rapid jerks, not as shadows usually lengthen. He grew frightened and looked up quickly at the monument. It seemed red and swollen in the dying sun, as though it were about to spout a load of granite seed. (p. 89)

When he is staring at the war monument, he is full of sadness, as his heart "remained a congealed lump of icy fat" (p. 88). His inability to find any practicable solutions to his correspondents' predicament makes him so sad and angry that he seems to have identified himself with the phallus-like monument which appears to be spouting "a load of granite seed." This phallic image suggests that, in the words of Lawrence W. DiStasi, "Eros is devoid of any life-giving quality and has become a monument to war" and "the life-giving seed is rigidified into bullets or instruments of death." In other words, the image is quite logically suggestive of not only Miss Lonelyhearts' suppressed anger but also the dehumanization and mechanization of love, which is an unmistakable sign of the spiritual paralysis prevailing in the waste land. Therefore, the violent image of the war monument contributes subtly to both the thematic and the stylistic unity of the novel.

The dominant image is of course that of the waste land. In a fine comparison between West and Eliot, Edmond L. Volpe observes that *Miss Lonelyhearts* is a literary answer of the 1930's to Eliot's *The Waste Land* of the 1920's. After
comparing a number of similarities and differences in these two works, Volpe finds out that Eliot’s vision of man and society is essentially optimistic since regeneration is possible in his waste land, whereas West’s vision puts forth nothing but despair, denying any hope for salvation to the world. “The Christ dream, Nathanael West is saying, can perhaps provide personal escape, but it is not the salvation of the waste land; it is not, as in Eliot’s poetry, the means of personal and thereby universal salvation.” Furthermore, as Volpe points out, Eliot and West view the world as a valueless place from different angles:

There is one major difference: Miss Lonelyhearts’ world has no values, not because man has thrown them over, substituting superficial values for good ones, but because the human being has reached a time in his history when he can no longer delude himself. . . . In the three letters that open the novel, the writers are victims, completely innocent victims, of forces beyond their control. . . . Their protective illusions have burned away. But reality cannot be endured without dreams, and in desperation the anguished victims write to Miss Lonelyhearts.

The fact that the victims can do nothing but seek help and comfort from Miss Lonelyhearts, who can not fulfil his “Christ dream,” is the most agonizing reflection of West’s sense of tragedy.

Undoubtedly, Miss Lonelyhearts is a very successful dramatization of a modern “priest’s” futile quest for the Christ dream in an attempt to do something for the many victims of dehumanizing forces on the waste land. The protagonist, who “must pretend in his column to be a woman, for only women presumably suffer and sympathize,” is a pathetic victim too, just like his poor correspondents. There is no doubt that this novel deserves praises from many critics. Aaron asserts that it “will possibly remain a ‘minor classic.’” Hyman even says that it seems to him “one of the three finest American novels of our century,” the other two being The Great Gatsby and The Sun Also Rises. Whether these three novels are really the finest ones of the twentieth-century America is certainly debatable, but Hyman is at least right in saying, “It shares with them a lost and victimized hero, a bitter sense of our civilization’s falsity, a pervasive melancholy atmosphere of failure and defeat.” In short, the failure of the “Christ dream” means the loss of the values by which man can expect to live meaningfully in the modern world. It is likely that the “Christ complex” as has been poignantly
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experienced by Miss Lonelyhearts will become a widely used term in the future.

Notes

1 Miss Lonelyhearts, in The Complete Works of Nathanael West, p. 104. All further references to this novel appear in the text.


5 Ibid., p. 259.


8 Marc L. Ratner, “‘Anywhere Out of This World’: Baudelaire and Nathanael West,” American Literature, XXXI (Jan. 1960), 462.


13 Reid, p. 76.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., p. 77.
17 Reid, pp. 47-48.
19 Ibid.
21 Comerchero, p. 24.
22 Ibid., pp. 24-25.
23 Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Miss L., "in Nathanael West: A Comprehensive Bibliography, p. 165,
24 Reid, p. 85.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., p. 243.
28 DiStasi, p. 91.
30 Ibid., p. 93.
33 Hyman, p. 28.
34 Ibid.
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Chapter IV

A Cool Million: Rejection of the American Dream

America is the land of opportunity. She takes care of the honest and industrious and never fails them as long as they are both. This is not a matter of opinion, it is one of faith. On the day that Americans stop believing it, on that day will America be lost.

— Nathanael West

The epigraph can be read as a definition of the so-called American dream, which propels Lemuel Pitkin, the young protagonist of this novel, to leave his hometown in Ottsville, Vermont, in an attempt to make "a cool million." The big dream is instilled into him by Nathan "Shagpoke" Whipple, who, a former President of the United States of America, is now running the Rat River National Bank. But this dream is never fulfilled. It turns out to be an utterly false dream, because it has brought him and such other believers as Betty Prail a long series of nightmares, and this novel may simply be viewed as a satirical analysis of how the American dream has been irrevocably corroded. The main causes of the failure of the American dream lie in the pervasiveness of violence, injustice, inequality, and racism. In this parody of the Horatio Alger success story, West expresses his tragic vision of America through a subtle use of black humor. Under his relentless attack, the American dream has become nothing but an absurd joke.

In a letter of May 31, 1932, to Josephine Herbst, West explained that his purpose in writing this novel was to deal with "the breakdown of the American dream." He added, "I'm doing it satirically, of course. I'm rewriting the Horatio Alger myth — from barge boy to president or from shirt-sleeves to shirt-sleeves in one generation." This intention determines the picaresque
structure of this novel. In dramatizing how the American dream has been, step by step, rejected, West focuses on the serious conflict between the bright dream and the dark reality. Since the publication of this book coincided with the great Depression in America, it is natural that West directed much attention to the many social, political, economic, and ethical problems in the 1930's. Unlike his other three novels, this book is quite rich in economic and political implications. However, this is not a "protest novel" in the normal sense of the term. The way in which the Horatio Alger myth is burlesqued distinguishes this work from other "protest novels."

The story begins with a description of the difficult situation in which Mrs. Sarah Pitkin, an old widow, finds herself. She is deeply worried because a Mr. Joshua Bird has decided to foreclose the mortgage on her house if she cannot raise the necessary monies within three months. Her only child, Lemuel Pitkin, a 17-year-old high school boy, goes to ask the banker Mr. Whipple for help. Mr. Whipple is kind enough to lend him 30 dollars and to urge him to embark on the pursuit of the American dream. After defining the dream for Pitkin, Whipple goes on saying:

Let me warn you that you will find in the world a certain few scoffers who will laugh at you and attempt to do you injury. They will tell you that John D. Rockefeller was a thief and that Henry Ford and other great men are also thieves. Do not believe them. The story of Rockefeller and of Ford is the story of every great American, and you should strive to make it your story. Like them, you were born poor and on a farm. Like them, by honesty and industry, you cannot fail to succeed. (p.150)

An innocent, intelligent, and promising young man, Pitkin accepts this sound piece of advice without any hesitation. But on the very first day of his grand journey, he is brought to undergo a number of unexpected experiences, which are totally against the principles of justice and fairness as implied in the American dream. On the New York-bound train, he makes acquaintance with a stranger who claims that his uncle is the mayor of New York and that he has inherited a cool million from his father. Pitkin's love of money is revealed in the ejaculation: "A cool million! Why, that's ten times a hundred thousand dollars" (p. 159). The basic meaning of the novel's title is suggested here in this dialogue.
The Tragic Vision of Nathanael West

But the stranger is actually a pickpocket, and he gets off as soon as he has stolen all the borrowed money of Pitkin. The pickpocket accidentally drops a diamond ring in Pitkin's pocket while stealing the money. Pitkin is persuaded to pawn it for thirty dollars by a second stranger, a self-styled pawnbroker who actually is a notorious rascal. Soon after this fraud has gotten off the train, a squad of policemen rush to arrest Pitkin, on the ground of the fraud's false charge against him. Pitkin tries to defend his innocence, but in vain. Since "neither judge nor jury would believe his story" (p. 165), he is, after being beaten up violently, put into the state prison. This is a typical case of the injustice and violence Pitkin has experienced.

What is equally horrible is the mistreatment imposed upon him in the prison. The warden says to him:

The first thing to do is to draw all your teeth. Teeth are often a source of infection and it pays to be on the safe side. At the same time we will begin a series of cold showers. Cold water is an excellent cure for morbidity. (p. 166)

Pitkin cries out his strong protest, "But I am innocent. I am not morbid and I never had a toothache in my life" (p. 166). But the warden ignores his protest by arguing that "an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure" (p. 166). This novel abounds in such expressions of unreason. Pitkin is thus forced to accept the "hydrotherapy" and to have all of his healthy teeth extracted.

Throughout his journey, Pitkin suffers from many more hardships and misfortunes, such as having one eye plucked out, one leg amputated, and his head scalped, being thrown into jail two times, and finally, being shot to death while speaking for the cause of the National Revolutionary Party under Whipple's leadership. In presenting all these sufferings, West is consistent in using a highly satirical tone, which proves to be very helpful in expressing his sense of black humor. This can be well illustrated with what the warden says to Pitkin when the latter is allowed to leave the prison:

Suppose you had obtained a job in New York City that paid fifteen dollars a week. You were here with us in all twenty weeks, so you lost the use of three hundred dollars. However, you paid no board while you were here, which was a saving for you of about seven dollars a week or one hundred and forty dollars.
This leaves you the loser by one hundred and sixty dollars. But it would have cost you at least two hundred dollars to have all your teeth extracted, so you're really ahead of the game forty dollars. Also, the set of false teeth I gave you cost twenty dollars new and is worth at least fifteen dollars in its present condition. This makes your profit about fifty-five dollars. Not at all a bad sum for a lad of your age to save in twenty weeks. (p. 175)

The warden's detailed account of Pitkin's gains from being imprisoned is absurd. To assert that the poor lad has "profited" from "injustice and torture" is a most grotesque expression of absurd unreason. This comic way of depicting a very grotesque or absurd situation is often used by West in attacking grotesqueness or absurdity itself.

In writing this parody of the Horatio Alger myth, West did not merely concern himself with the forces which have combined to make it impossible for Pitkin and his fellow believers to carry out the dream of "a cool million." He also paid some attention to the question as to how those threatening forces could possibly be checked or eliminated for the sake of the American dream. One of the answers to this question was presented by way of delineating the revolutionary career undertaken by Whipple, whereas some other answers, such as those concerning the issues of violence and racism, were not given so directly.

As has been mentioned already, Whipple is an enthusiastic advocate of the American dream. After being sent to the same prison where Pitkin is staying, he is not discouraged at all. He explains to Pitkin that he has been put to prison because of the failure of the Rat River National Bank. He voices his political views in the following passages:

Such is the gratitude of the mob, but in a way I can't blame them. Rather do I blame Wall Street and the Jewish international bankers. They loaded me up with a lot of European and South American bonds, then they forced me to the wall. It was Wall Street working hand in hand with the Communists that caused my downfall. The bankers broke me, and the Communists circulated lying rumors about my bank in Doc Slack's barber shop. I was the victim of an un-American conspiracy.

My boy, when we get out of here, there are two evils undermining this country which we must fight with tooth and nail. These two archenemies of the American Spirit, the spirit of fair play and open competition, are Wall Street and the Communists. (p. 172) (emphasis added)
Whipple reiterates his faith in America by saying:

America is still a young country, and like all young countries, it is rough and unsettled. . . . Don't believe the fools who tell you that the poor man hasn't got a chance to get rich any more because the country is full of chain stores. Office boys still marry their employers' daughters. Shipping clerks are still becoming presidents of railroads. . . . Despite the Communists and their vile propaganda against individualism, this is still the golden land of opportunity. Oil wells are still found in people's back yards. There are still gold mines hidden away in our mountain fastnesses. . . . (p. 174)

All these statements bear witness to Whipple's great optimism about America. In order to fight against the two enemies of the "American Spirit," he organizes the National Revolutionary Party, popularly known as the "Leather Shirts" because the uniform of his "Storm Troops" is "a coonskin cap," "a deerskin shirt and a pair of moccasins," and their weapon is the "squirrel rifle" (p. 186). In an effort to recruit new members for his party, he addresses the unemployed crowd before the Salvation Army canteen: "Citizens, Americans, we of the middle class are being crushed between two gigantic millstones. Capital is the upper stone and Labor the lower, and between them we suffer and die, ground out of existence. Capital is international; its home is in London and in Amsterdam. Labor is international; its home is in Moscow" (p. 188). He comes to the conclusion:

We must drive the Jewish international bankers out of Wall Street! We must destroy the Bolshevik labor unions! We must purge our country of all the alien elements and ideas that now infest her!

America for Americans! Back to the Principles of Andy Jackson and Abe Lincoln! (p. 188)

From this speech we learn that Whipple and his followers are fighting against capitalism and Communism for the sake of chauvinism and the Horatio Alger tradition. However, Whipple is not against all capitalists. He further defines his position later, "The distinction must be made between bad capitalists and good capitalists, between the parasites and the creators. I am against the parasitical international bankers, but not the creative American capitalists, like Henry Ford"
for example” (p. 242). He opines that “Capital and Labor must be taught to work together for the general good of the country” (p. 242).

Although Whipple does not advocate any particular “ism,” his harangues show us that the essence of his ideology lies in the “spirit of fair play and open competition,” and his ultimate goal is to make “Capital” and “Labor” work together for the sake of common welfare. However, his is a rather superficial analysis of the weaknesses of both Capitalism and Socialism, and he does not show us any specific methods by which he can carry out his reform plan.

After the first meeting of the members of his party is dispersed by the forces of the international Jewish bankers and the Communists, he faces a very tough situation for some time. Later, accompanied by Pitkin and Jake Raven, an Indian friend, he digs gold from a mine in California, owned by Raven. But the project fails because of the interference of a savage man from Pike County, Missouri. Finally, he goes to the South to urge the people to lynch Sylvanus Snodgrasse, his opponent. A bloody riot follows the lynching incident, which is described in a detached tone, “The heads of Negroes were paraded on poles. A Jewish drummer was nailed to the door of his hotel room. The housekeeper of the local Catholic priest was raped” (p. 246). Soon Whipple’s revolutionary party overpowers the South and the West, and at the end of the novel, we see him gaining control of the North through violent means. After Pitkin’s death, Whipple makes Pitkin’s birthday a national holiday. He addresses the youths who take part in the big parade in Pitkin’s honor. He reiterates his faith in “the right of every American boy to go into the world and there receive fair play and a chance to make his fortune by industry and probity without being laughed at or conspired against by sophisticated aliens” (p. 255). His belief in nationalism finds a powerful expression in the conclusion of his harangue:

Through his martyrdom the National Revolutionary Party triumphed, and by that triumph this country was delivered from sophistication, Marxism and International Capitalism. Through the National Revolution its people were purged of alien diseases and America became again American. (p. 255)

The audience responds to this speech by roaring excitedly, “Hail, Lemuel Pitkin!” “All hail, the American Boy!” (p. 255). Thus ends this parody of the Horatio
Alger success story. Since the triumph of the National Revolutionary Party has been brought about by means of violence, this ending sounds rather ironical. If the revolution has delivered the nation from "alien diseases" as Whipple declares, it has not yet eliminated the most serious "native disease" -- violence and racism.

Closely related to the central theme of this novel is the miserable fate of Betty Prail, with whom Pitkin is in love "in a boyish way" (p. 151). Her parents were killed and her house destroyed in a fire when she was twelve years old. The corruption of the Ottsville Fire Company is fully satirized by the author: "After many delays, the fire company finally arrived at the Prail farm, but instead of trying to quench the flames they immediately set to work and looted the place" (p. 155). The chief of the company even raped the young Betty. After staying in the county orphan asylum until her fourteenth year, she began to work as a maid for the family of Lawyer Slemp, a deacon in the church. Unable to endure the tortures of the family, she finally found a chance to escape. But as the story opens, she is chased by a wild dog and then raped by its owner, Tom Baxter, son of the fire company chief. Then, she is found and taken by white slaves to the brothel of Wu Fong in New York. Wu Fong is a very shrewd, sophisticated man. In his "House of All Nations," he has each room "furnished and decorated in the style of" the prostitute's native country (p. 169). He is pleased to have bought Betty because she, "a real American girl" (p. 168), completes his collection of girls from every country of the world. He is sure that he can soon obtain a big profit from her "for many of his clients were from non-Aryan countries and would appreciate the services of a genuine American" (p. 169). In this connection, West shows an insight into the problem of racism by writing:

Apropos of this, it is lamentable but a fact, nevertheless, that the inferior races greatly desire the women of their superiors. This is why the Negroes rape so many white women in our southern states. (p. 169)

A stronger expression of racism is found in the long speech given by Israel Satinpenny, a Harvard-educated Indian chief "who hated the white man with undying venom" (p. 231). In this speech, he reveals his attitude toward the white man by criticizing what the white man has done to the Indians in the
name of progress. He expresses a profound nostalgia for the peaceful, pastoral life his ancestors used to enjoy on this "fair, sweet land" (p.232). He says:

In return for the loss of these things, we accepted the white man's civilization, syphilis and the radio, tuberculosis and the cinema. We accepted his civilization because he himself believed in it. But now that he has begun to doubt, why should we continue to accept? His final gift to us is doubt, a soul-corroding doubt. He rotted this land in the name of progress, and it is he himself who is rotting. The stench of his fear stinks in the nostrils of the great god Manitou.

In what way is the white man wiser than the red? We lived here from time immemorial and everything was sweet and fresh. The paleface came and in his wisdom filled the sky with smoke and the rivers with refuse. What, in his wisdom, was he doing? I'll tell you. He was making clever cigarette lighters. He was making superb fountain pens. He was making paper bags, doorknobs, leatherette satchels. All the powers of water, air and earth he made to turn his wheels within wheels within wheels within wheels.... (p. 232)

These two passages make clear why Chief Satinpenny hates the white man so deeply. At the same time, they also contain a striking contrast between the white man's culture based on science and technology and the Indian culture based on the pastoral ideal. This contrast reminds us of the idyllic farm visited by the protagonist and his fiancée in Miss Lonelyhearts. But it is in this novel that we come across a most eloquent, explicit denunciation of the negative impact of materialism upon human life. His hatred of the white man springs from his hostility toward materialism. He says:

Don't mistake me, Indians. I'm no Rousseauistic philosopher. I know that you can't put the clock back. But there is one thing you can do. You can stop that clock. You can smash that clock.

The time is ripe. Riot and profaneness, poverty and violence are everywhere. The gates of pandemonium are open and through the land stalk the gods Mapeeo and Suraniou.

The day of vengeance is here. The star of the paleface is sinking as he knows it. Spengler has said so; Valéry has said so; thousands of his wise men proclaim it.

O, brothers, this is the time to run upon his neck and the bosses of his armor. While he is sick and fainting, while he is dying of a surfeit of shoddy. (p. 233) (emphasis added)
Through the mouth of this Harvard man, West reveals a dire vision of the future of America. It is by means of violence that the Indian is going to seek vengeance upon the white man. But can the Indian restore the former pastoral way of life if the clock is smashed? Can he cure the waste land by resorting to violence? Needless to say, the answer to these questions is definitely negative.

The Indian warriors respond to the call for vengeance as enthusiastically as the southerners respond to Whipple's call to lynch Sylvanus Snodgrasse. This is an unmistakable sign of the pervasiveness of violence in American society. The common people's blind acceptance of violence is a grave threat to democracy. T. R. Steiner offers a comment on the meaning of this kind of threat:

I do not deny that the book has "serious" social and political content, and clearly shows West's anxiety that a Hitlerian dictatorship may come to Depression-fragmented America. But this content is trite: demogoguery and the blind force of mass-man had been staples of cultural and political analysis since de Tocqueville, Burckhardt and Nietzsche had outlined them as particular dangers of democracy. West seems not so much interested in the fact of these monstrosities as in the popular imagination which makes it easier for them to thrive. That, rather than Nathan "Shagpoke" Whipple, is the arch-villain of his book. . . . Here, the novel insinuates, is the landscape of the American psyche, which needs and creates Horatio Alger, racial stereotypes, pulp pornography.³

As a matter of fact, the popular thirst for violence is the "arch-villain" of not only this book but also Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust. It should be held responsible for many nightmarish experiences of the people. West's determination to condemn this "arch-villain" is most clearly shown in his description of the southern mob's crazy response to Whipple's call to lynch his opponent:

Before Mr. Whipple had quite finished his little talk, the crowd ran off in all directions, shouting "Lynch him! Lynch him!" although a good three-quarters of its members did not know whom it was they were supposed to lynch. This fact did not bother them, however. They considered their lack of knowledge an advantage rather than a hindrance, for it gave them a great deal of leeway in their choice of a victim. (p. 245)

It is seen in this passage that these people's impulse to commit the most bloody
act of violence is not prompted by any justifiable cause. In fact, the only cause of their action is their senselessness. They resort to violence for violence's sake. This is why the lynching scene thus coldly described leaves one cold and worried about the future of democracy.

The most horrible part about the whole pestilence of violence is the concept that one can make money by exhibiting the victims of violence to gratify the audience's morbid curiosity. It occurs to Whipple that it should be profitable to "get a tent and exhibit his young friend as the last man to have been scalped by the Indians and the sole survivor of the Yuba River massacre" (p. 235). Pitkin is persuaded to let Whipple put up the tent show. The show continues for many months. Many people's sensibility has been dulled by violence to such an extent that they can readily accept the victimization of violence as a commodity or an amusement.

The same sensual callousness is further demonstrated by the popularity of Pitkin's clownish show in the Bijou Theater. For the very meager weekly salary of twelve dollars, Pitkin agrees to act the role as the object of two comics' sadism to amuse the audience. Standing in between Riley and Robbins, he is ordered to receive many blows from their rolled-up newspapers, while they are making jokes. "Their object was to knock off his toupee or to knock out his teeth and eye" (p. 249). West's sense of black humor can be easily sensed in the following description of the most cruel clownish show:

The turn lasted about fifteen minutes and during this time Riley and Robbins told some twenty jokes, beating Lem ruthlessly at the end of each one. For a final curtain, they brought out an enormous wooden mallet labeled "The Works" and with it completely demolished our hero. His toupee flew off, his eye and teeth popped out, and his wooden leg was knocked into the audience.

At sight of the wooden leg, the presence of which they had not even suspected, the spectators were convulsed with joy. They laughed heartily until the curtain came down, and for some time afterwards.

Our hero's employers congratulated him on his success, and although he had a headache from their blows he was made quite happy by this. After all, he reasoned, with millions out of work he had no cause to complain. (p. 250) (emphasis added)

The cruel mistreatment of Pitkin turns out to be a source of immense amusement
for the spectators. The fact that the two comics, the employers, and the audience all take Pitkin's sufferings for granted is itself a most disgusting expression of violence. His being clubbed violently is even considered as a "success" by the employers.

Pitkin's innocence is thus exploited to the full. After escaping from Wu Fong's brothel, he lodges a complaint to the police, but unfortunately, the police is on the side of Wu Fong. Instead of getting any compensation for the physical violence done to him by Wu Fong's men, Pitkin is put into jail again. His dialogue with Elisha Barnes, the persecuting attorney, exposes the conflict between his innocence and the corruption of the lawmen:

"But I'm innocent," protested Lem. "Wu Fong..."
"Stop," interrupted Mr. Barnes, hurriedly. He had turned pale on hearing the Chinaman's name. "Take my advice and don't mention him around here."
"I'm innocent!" repeated Lem, a little desperately.
"So was Christ," said Mr. Barnes with a sigh, "and they nailed him..."
You've been indicted on three counts; suppose you plead guilty to one of the three and we forget the other two."

"But I'm innocent," repeated Lem again.
"Maybe, but you haven't got enough money to prove it, and besides you've got some very powerful enemies. Be sensible, plead guilty to the charge of disorderly conduct and take thirty days in the workhouse. I'll see that you don't get more.
Well, what do you say?" (pp. 211-12) (emphasis added)

When the wicked people obtain full support of those who are supposed to enforce the law, the innocent are doomed to be losers or victims. It is absurd that the persecuting attorney is afraid of the rascal Wu Fong, who is "running a disorderly house under the guise of a laundry" (p. 208). It is equally absurd that the same attorney should urge Pitkin to accept the false charge against him.

Pitkin's insistence on his innocence and Mr. Barnes' reference to Christ's innocence and crucifixion are very significant in terms of the theme of this novel. T. R. Steiner contends that Pitkin is treated as a mock-Christ. He says:

Strangely, those critics who see West as a symbolist — his central fictions as quest and sacrifice, and Lonelyhearts as a modern Christ — have not recognized the underlying fable of Cool Million. Like Christ but without His consciousness, Pitkin
bears a Revealed New Life, suffers and dies for his Dream, leaving his "message" to American youth. Lemuel (the name means literally, "belonging to God") has no earthly father; we are asked to see him (through the name of his widowed mother Sarah) as Isaac, Christ's type as sacrificial victim in the Old Testament. Whipple is his spiritual father, sending him into the world with a blessing (and ironically, like Judas "selling" him to that world with the loan of thirty dollars).4

Steiner's interpretation of Pitkin's role as a mock-Christ sheds some light on the significance of Pitkin's quest and sacrifice. The analogy even leads Steiner to say, "And they nail Pitkin, in the mock-crucifixion of the music-hall scene."5 However, this analogy does not seem to reveal the whole truth. For one thing, Pitkin is not conscious of the religious implications of his quest. Mr. Barnes' concept of "Christ's type as sacrificial victim" is not consciously shared by Pitkin. Basically, Pitkin's quest is, in fact, financially and politically motivated.

Therefore, it would be better to interpret Pitkin's role in terms of the myth of the Holy Fool. According to Arthur Cohen, West's preoccupation with the character of the holy fool has resulted in the creation of Miss Lonelyhearts, Lemuel Pitkin, and Homer Simpson. After pointing out that A Cool Million was modeled after the Horatio Alger stories, Cohen writes: "Such a model gives the clue to West's satire, for Lemuel Pitkin is all fool, all externality. He is the perfect fool, for he is nothing that the world does not make him. As a result, all his suffering is physical. The spirit, empty as it is, naive as it is, wholly American as it is, is untouched."6 As "an idealistic simpleton," T. S. Matthews says, Pitkin "continues to believe in rugged individualism, homespun American virtues and home-made American fortunes in spite of a succession of misadventures that twice land him in jail, lose him his teeth, an eye, a leg, his scalp and finally his life."7 West's creation of such a "ludicrous hero"8 poses an impressive satire on all these beliefs he has doggedly cherished. Pitkin's downfall is brought about by his "unquestioning faith" in the Horatio Alger myth, as pointed out by Galloway.9 His "frustration and betrayed confidence," just as those of Miss Lonelyhearts, "reflect a cultural naiveté which seemed to West to involve potential danger of almost unparalleled dimensions."10

West's vision of the dangerous naiveté of America seems to have found a symbolic expression in the itinerant exhibition of the "Chamer of American Horrors, Animate and Inanimate Hideosities" under the management of
Snodgrasse. A failure as a poet, Snodgrasse seeks to, out of a desire for revenge, "undermine the nation's faith in itself" (p. 238). The show is divided into two parts. The "inanimate" part consists of many "manufactured articles of the kind detested so heartily by Chief Satinpenny" (p. 238):

"... Along the walls were tables on which were displayed collections of objects whose distinction lay in the great skill with which their materials had been disguised. Paper had been made to look like wood, wood like rubber, rubber like steel, steel like cheese, cheese like glass, and, finally, glass like paper.

Other tables carried instruments whose purposes were dual and sometimes triple or even sextuple. Among the most ingenious were pencil sharpeners that could also be used as earpicks, can openers as hair brushes. Then, too, there was a large variety of objects whose real uses had been cleverly camouflaged. The visitor saw flower pots that were really victrolas, revolvers that held candy, candy that held collar buttons and so forth. (p. 239)

All these objects have one thing in common: their materials or uses have been camouflaged with great skill. What is "horrible" about them lies in their common quality of falseness. The same quality of things is also severely criticized by West in The Day of the Locust. All these falsities are associated with illusions or delusions. Therefore, they are linked to the theme of the discrepancy between dream and reality.

As to the "animate" part of the show, it is called "The Pageant of America or A Curse on Columbus," and it consists of "a series of short sketches in which Quakers were shown being branded, Indians brutalized and cheated, Negroes sold, children sweated to death" (p. 239). The central themes of these sketches are violence, social injustice, and racial discrimination, which are dealt with as the primary causes of the breakdown of the American dream in this novel. Viewed from this angle, "The Chamber of American Horrors" may be taken as an epitome of America as perceived by the author. It suggests that the existence of all such "horrors" makes impossible the fulfilment of the American dream.

In a review of this novel, Fred T. Marsh writes, "'A Cool Million' is not so brilliant and original a performance as Mr. West's extraordinary 'Miss Lonelyhearts.' Here he is inhibited by the style he has chosen ... . But as parody it is
almost perfect. And as satire it is a keen, lively and biting little volume, recommended to all and sundry. It is funny, but there's method in its absurdity."11 Galloway concludes his study of this novel by saying:

_A Cool Million_ lacks the poetic description, the feeling of economy, and the complexity of expression of _Miss Lonelyhearts_ and _The Day of the Locust_, but as an artist's opportunity to detour, practice, and sample, _A Cool Million_ bore fruit in _The Day of the Locust_ just as _Balso Snell_ did in _Miss Lonelyhearts_. Historically, _A Cool Million_ is important as the first complete disavowal of the American dream of success and one of the first suggestions of Fascism, but what he had to say about a Fascist America, West said with far greater power in his very unpolitical last novel.12

On the basis of the analyses given in this chapter, I think Marsh and Galloway have made fair appraisals of _A Cool Million_. As the first bitter satire against the American dream of success, this novel provides much food for thought about the American system of values. Despite such literary demerits as mentioned by Galloway, the story of the "dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin" clearly demonstrates West's tragic vision of America.

Notes

1 _A Cool Million_, in _The Complete Works of Nathanael West_, p. 150. All further references to this novel appear in the text.


4 _Ibid._, p. 160.
5 Ibid.
8 Cohen, p. 277.
9 Galloway, p. 121.
10 Ibid.
12 Galloway, p. 125.
Chapter V

The Day of the Locust: A Satire

on the “Dream Dump” of Hollywood

Hollywood, West’s fantastic “dream dump”, is conceived rather as a symbol of despair and unfulfilment. Hollywood, moreover, is not an isolated piece of dreamland or a national joke; it is America carried to its logical conclusion.

— Daniel Aaron

Hollywood, as presented in The Day of the Locust, is the most appropriate setting for expressing West’s vision of modern America full of illusion, artificiality, boredom, alienation, and violence. As a miniature of the waste land, it has much richer and deeper symbolic meanings than New York as is depicted in A Cool Million and Miss Lonelyhearts. Daniel Aaron rightly regards it as not only “a symbol of despair and unfulfilment” but also “America carried to its logical conclusion.” In the words of Cyril M. Schneider, it is used in the novel “as a focal point for a symbolic image of a tortured, demented, dislocated American society.” Louis B. Salomon calls it “an appalling spiritual waste land.” In “Hollywood Dance of Death,” Edmund Wilson writes, “Mr. West has caught the emptiness of Hollywood; and he is, as far as I know, the first writer to make this emptiness horrible.” As “the biggest illusion-factory in the world,” Hollywood is closely associated with all the essential factors contributing to the failures and miseries of modern wastelanders. West has found in Hollywood, in the words of David D. Galloway, “both an instant symbolism and a microcosm of his favorite subjects: the ignoble lie, the world of illusion, the surrealistic incongruities of the American experience.” According to Richard B. Gehman, Hollywood viewed by West as a microcosm “was peculiarly fitted to his needs because, as other writers since have discovered, everything that is wrong with life in the United States is to be found there in rare purity, and because the
unreality of the business of making pictures seemed a more proper setting for his 'half-world.' "7 For all the reasons cited here, Hollywood may certainly be regarded as a perfect symbol of West's tragic vision.

The title of this novel gives a striking hint at its central theme. The "locusts" refer to the big crowds of people, mostly middle westerners, who are aimless and mindless and hopeless under the pressure of some dehumanizing forces beyond their understanding. They become very bitter and violent when they realize they have been cheated by their "dreams." Their bitter disillusionment results in a horrible mob riot near the end of the novel, and in a couple of paragraphs West has given some penetrating insights into the epidemic of violence these destructive, ravaging "locusts" have brought to California:

New groups, whole families, kept arriving. . . . Until they reached the line, they looked difficult, almost furtive, but the moment they had become part of it, they turned arrogant and pugnacious. It was a mistake to think them harmless curiosity seekers. They were savage and bitter, especially the middle-aged and the old, and had been made so by boredom and disappointment.

All their lives they had slaved at some kind of dull, heavy labor, behind desks and counters, in the fields and at tedious machines of all sorts, saving their pennies and dreaming of the leisure that would be theirs when they had enough. Finally that day came. . . . Where else should they go but California, the land of sunshine and oranges?

Once there, they discover that sunshine isn't enough. They get tired of oranges, even of avocado pears and passion fruit. Nothing happens. They don't know what to do with their time. They haven't the mental equipment for leisure, the money nor the physical equipment for pleasure. . . .

Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize that they've been tricked and burn with resentment. Every day of their lives they read the newspapers and went to the movies. Both fed them on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, war. This daily diet made sophisticates of them. The sun is a joke. Oranges can't titillate their jaded palates. Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing.8 (emphasis added)

This is a very powerful and poignant description of the colorless, tasteless, and meaningless existence of those middle westerners. "They are the locusts, mindless
and numberless, who, like their Biblical namesakes, have turned a once beautiful country into a desert; they are impelled by forces they can neither understand nor control. They may even be the instruments of God’s wrath.”9 They are analogous to the locusts primarily because of their destructive violence springing from their deep resentment against being cheated. This is why the original title of this novel was “The Cheated.” It is very clear then that the new title is meant to suggest that the spiritual and cultural aridity of the waste land as epitomized by Hollywood has nurtured the kind of violence and nihilism as experienced by its visitors and inhabitants.

In presenting the theme of betrayal, West has created some highly pertinent and impressive clusters of images. When Tod Hackett, the principal narrator in the novel, is searching for Fay Greener on the lot of the movie studio, the following thoughts about Hollywood come to his mind:

In the center of the field was a gigantic pile of sets, flats and props. While he watched, a ten-ton truck added another load to it. This was the final dumping ground. He thought of Janvier’s “Sargasso Sea.” Just as that imaginary body of water was a history of civilization in the form of a marine junkyard, the studio lot was one in the form of a dream dump. A Sargasso of the imagination! And the dump grew continually, for there wasn’t a dream afloat somewhere which wouldn’t sooner or later turn up on it, having first been made photographic by plaster, canvas, lath and paint. Many boats sink and never reach the Sargasso, but no dream ever entirely disappears. Somewhere it troubles some unfortunate person and some day, when that person has been sufficiently troubled, it will be reproduced on the lot. (p. 353) (emphasis added)

The image of the dream dump and the Sargasso Sea is very useful in reflecting West’s sharp consciousness of the negative effect of dreams on man’s life. The ugliness and disorder of the junkyard seem to foreshadow the dire consequences of the betrayal of dreams. As Robert I. Edenbaum states in an article entitled “From American Dream to Pavlovian Nightmare”:

The dream dump is the central image of The Day of the Locust; it represents the ultimate disorder behind a world of shoddy in which everything and everybody is really something else. Still on the studio lot, Tod watches a nightmare version of Waterloo, one in which the Prince of Orange opposes an assistant director in a
battle which is lost because Mont St. Jean is still under construction by property men and carpenters. The scene ends with the collapse of the mountain in a comic chaos of plaster, canvas, lath and paint. But the studio catastrophe and chaos is merely analogous to the catastrophe and chaos incipient in the plaster and lath dream-world-turned-nightmare of Hollywood itself.\textsuperscript{10}

The studio catastrophe becomes then a symbol of the chaotic and unhappy situation in which many people cheated by their dreams have found themselves. For most of the characters in this novel, the primary cause of unhappiness lies in unfulfilled dreams. Structurally, this novel is essentially a dramatization of their futile struggle to reach their dreamed goals. Therefore, such motifs as escape, illusion, falsity, and artificiality are closely related to their desperate state. As to the other major factors contributing to the sufferings of the wastelanders, they include the pervasiveness of violence, apathy, and grotesqueness. Tod Hackett, a Yale-educated artist, has come to Hollywood to work on a great lithograph called “The Burning of Los Angeles,” which symbolizes all the destructive and dehumanizing forces associated with Hollywood.

The cheated midwesterners are represented to some extent by Homer Simpson. After working for twenty years as a book keeper in a hotel in Wayneville, Iowa, he is advised by his doctor to take a sound rest in California. A typical grotesque, he has been living a mechanical, uncreative, and monotonous life. His grotesqueness is shown in his appearance, mentality, and behavior. “For all his size and shape, he looked neither strong nor fertile. He was like one of Picasso’s great sterile athletes, who brood hopelessly on pink sand, staring at veined marble waves” (p. 290). The reference to Picasso’s painting underscores Homer’s sterility and hopelessness. Besides, he is also like a Sherwood Anderson character, for he has great difficulty in calming his “enormous hands” (p. 289). His clumsy and nervous hands are the most striking index to his grotesque mentality. Among the several passages describing them, the following serves as a good example:

His big hands left his lap, where they had been playing “here’s the church and here the steeple,” and hid in his armpits. They remained there for a moment, then slid under his thighs. A moment later they were back in his lap. The right hand cracked the joints of the left, one by one, then the left did the same service for the right. They seemed easier for a moment, but not for long. They started “here’s the
church” again, going through the entire performance and ending with the joint manipulation as before. He started a third time, but catching Tod’s eyes, he stopped and trapped his hands between his knees. (p. 389)

From this description we see that Homer handles his hands as if they were his enemies. They seem to suggest that he is lack of self-confidence in handling his own business or in tackling the forces which are threatening his sense of security.

Once Homer escaped from a Romola Martin’s seduction, and now he is one of Faye’s suitors. He showers upon Faye with “servility and generosity” and his “servility was like that of a crying, clumsy dog . . .” (p. 367). When he cries, his sound is like “that of a dog lapping gruel” (p. 290). Just like Prufrock created by T. S. Eliot, he is not a man of action, but of thought only. His life in Hollywood is exactly as monotonous and boring as his life in his hometown. “Except for the Romola Martin incident and perhaps one or two other widely spaced events, the forty years of his life had been entirely without variety or excitement” (p. 296). His barren life of course stems from his spiritual paralysis and emotional impotence, which is best shown in his habitual preference for the ugly, the mechanical, or the inactive. The following passage describing his inactiveness clarifies this point:

There was a much better view to be had in any direction other than the one he faced. By moving his chair in a quarter circle he could have seen a large part of the canyon twisting down to the city below. He never thought of making this shift. From where he sat, he saw the closed door of the garage and a patch of its shabby, tarpaper roof. In the foreground was a sooty, brick incinerator and a pile of rusty cans. A little to the right of them were the remains of a cactus garden in which a few ragged, tortured plants still survived. (p. 297)

This description shows that he would never try to improve his view of the world. He chooses to have the worst view available, and all such things as the garage, the roof, the incinerator, the rusty cans, and the cactus garden constitute an ugly, lifeless, and depressive view. By moving his chair slightly, he can enjoy a very beautiful view of the canyon. But he prefers not to make any change. His is a typical “wasteland mentality.” He finds a lizard living in a hole near the base of a plant. “It earned a hard living catching the flies that strayed over to the cactus
from the pile of cans” (p. 297). He often amuses himself by watching the lizard kill flies. “Homer was on the side of the flies. . . . But no matter how much he wanted the fly to escape, he never thought of interfering, and was careful not to budge or make the slightest noise. Occasionally the lizard would miscalculate. When that happened Homer would laugh happily” (p. 298). His identifying himself with the flies—the victims of the lizard—conveys his masochism and defeatism. That he would not make any efforts to help the flies escape the onslaught of the lizard also reflects his own inactive, paralyzed state of mind.

This kind of mentality can only result in stagnation and hopelessness. “He had been getting pamphlets in the mail from a travel bureau and he thought of the trips he would never take” (p. 315). He often expresses his sadness or anguish by crying. “Only those who still have hope can benefit from tears. When they finish, they feel better. But to those without hope, like Homer, whose anguish is basic and permanent, no good comes from crying. Nothing changes for them. They usually know this, but still can’t help crying” (p. 315). In other words, Homer is doomed to permanent anguish. His hopelessness is well symbolized by the utterly monotonous sounds he makes when he is crying. The symbolic meaning of his sounds is subtly suggested in this paragraph:

The sound was like an ax chopping pine, a heavy, hollow, chunking noise. It was repeated rhythmically but without accent. There was no progress in it. Each chunk was exactly like the one that preceded. It would never reach a climax. (p. 398)

The sound as described here becomes an appropriate footnote to Homer’s life “entirely without variety or excitement.” As a matter of fact, it is not life at all; it is death in life.

With such a passive, inactive mentality, Homer naturally does not have the courage to face the reality. There is no way for him to escape the hard reality. To enhance the presentation of his predicament, West utilized a very impressive image of “original coil” or “uterine flight.” After Faye Greener has gone away, Homer is so sad that he “curled his big body into a ball” (p. 402). “Some inner force of nerve and muscle was straining to make the ball tighter and still tighter” (p. 403). His posture reminds Tod of a picture of a woman he ever saw before in a book of abnormal psychology. The woman suffered from the so-called
“uterine flight” as she “had been sleeping in the hammock without changing her position, that of the foetus in the womb, for a great many years” (p. 403). Tod reflects on Homer’s case:

What a perfect escape the return to the womb was. Better by far than Religion or Art or the South Sea Islands. It was so snug and warm there, and the feeding was automatic. Everything perfect in that hotel. No wonder the memory of those accommodations lingered in the blood and nerves of everyone. It was dark, yes, but what a warm, rich darkness. The grave wasn’t in it. No wonder one fought so desperately against being evicted when the nine months’ lease was up. (pp. 403-04)

The analogy with Homer’s “uterine flight” suggests that the escape is only temporary—he cannot remain in “warm, rich darkness” for too long. In other words, he does not have any real escape—he is doomed. Thus he suffers a great deal from loneliness, boredom, and anguish. When his anguish finally coils into hatred, he gets involved in a most destructive mob riot.

Other grotesques include Abe Kusich, a violent and pugnacious dwarf; Earle Shoop, a cowboy suitor of Faye; Miguel, Earle’s Mexican friend deeply interested in cockfighting; Harry Greener, Faye’s comedian father who fails to “earn a living playing comedy bits in films” in Hollywood (p. 284); Mrs. Estee, who keeps a big rubber horse in her swimming pool; Mrs. Andrey Jenning, who runs a very famous brothel; Adore, a very queer would-be child star; and above all, Faye Greener, a voluptuous young daydreamer whose biggest ambition is to become a movie star. Apparently, this novel does not deal with the motion picture industry itself, but with the frustrations and failures of “a galaxy of spongers, misfits, and eccentrics.”

Although these characters are not grotesque in the same ways, they share some false values and harmful interests. For example, they tend to prize the mechanical or the artificial over the natural. Mrs. Estee’s love of the phony horse may serve as an illustration. Harry Greener’s clownish performances also possess a mechanical quality. The following passage offers an impressive description of his last performance:

Suddenly, like a mechanical toy that had been overwound, something snapped inside of him and he began to spin through his entire repertoire. The effort was
purely muscular, like the dance of a paralytic. He jigged, juggled his hat, made believe he had been kicked, tripped, and shook hands with himself. He went through it all in one dizzy spasm, then reeled to the couch and collapsed. (p. 301)

Homer can not stand such a painful clownish show, so he tries to stop Harry, but in vain.

One more example is found in mechanized "love." In the discussion between Claude Estee and Tod about Mrs. Jenning’s whorehouse, Claude observes, “She makes vice attractive by skilful packaging. Her dive’s a triumph of industrial design” (p. 276). Tod responds, “I don’t care how much cellophane she wraps it in . . . nautch joints are depressing, like all places for deposit, banks, mail boxes, tombs, vending machines.” In response to this, Claude states, “Love is like a vending machine, eh? Not bad. You insert a coin and press home the lever. There’s some mechanical activity inside the bowels of the device. You receive a small sweet, frown at yourself in the dirty mirror, adjust your hat, take a firm grip on your umbrella, and walk away, trying to look as though nothing had happened” (p. 276). Evidently, the image of the vending machine reveals West’s severe criticism of the absence of genuine love. As a result of man’s emotional degradation, “love” has become as cold, artificial as a vending machine.

Closely related to the mechanical mentality is many people’s fondness of falsity and artificiality. This is well illustrated with the many strange different styles in architecture, interior decoration, and furniture. For example, the cottage Homer has rented is described as a symbol of artificiality:

The house was queer. It had an enormous and very crooked stone chimney, little dormer windows with big hoods and a thatched roof that came down very low on both sides of the front door. This door was of gumwood painted like fumed oak and it hung on enormous hinges. Although made by machine, the hinges had been carefully stamped to appear hand-forged. The same kind of care and skill had been used to make the roof thatching, which was not really straw but heavy fireproof paper colored and ribbed to look like straw. (p. 287)

Besides, in the “Irish” cottage, there is a “Spanish” living room. “In the fireplace was a variety of cactus in gaily colored Mexican pots. Some of the plants were made of rubber and cork; others were real” (p. 287). “The table held a lamp with
a paper shade, oiled to lock like parchment. . .” (p. 287). Then in the bedrooms the so-called “New England” style of decoration is seen. “There was a spool bed made of iron grained like wood, a Windsor chair of the kind frequently seen in tea shops, and a Governor Winthrop dresser painted to look like unpainted pine. . .” (p. 288). The decor, thus disguised, contributes to the grotesque and deceitful atmosphere of Hollywood in general and of Homer’s cottage in particular.

Tod deplores the vulgarity of the people as shown in the strange variety of architectural styles. One day, after climbing from Vine Street to Pinyon Canyon, he thinks that “only dynamite would be of any use against the Mexican ranch house, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages and every possible combination of these styles that lined the slopes of the canyon” (p. 262). After viewing this architectural array, Tod feels very depressed, thinking: “It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous” (p. 262). This passage underscores Tod’s bitter disappointment at the vulgar and superficial “culture” of Hollywood. It lacks creativity and individuality. It is as unreal as Eliot’s London in *The Waste Land*.

The quality of falsity and artificiality is further reflected in the people’s dresses. As is shown in the following passage, what they are wearing is also suggestive of their embracing illusions:

A great many of the people wore sports clothes which were not really sports clothes. Their sweaters, knickers, slacks, blue flannel jackets with brass buttons were fancy dress. The fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office; and the girl in slacks and sneaks with a bandanna around her head had just left a switchboard, not a tennis court. (p. 261)

These dresses seem to function as masks for they conceal the wearers’ true looks. They symbolize the wearers’ inclination to indulge themselves in the pursuit of the unreal or the artificial.

Just like New York, Hollywood has long been infested with violence. In the previous novels, West never let the reader forget for a while this same problem which has been threatening and corrupting the lives of the wastelanders. Miss
Lonelyhearts and Lemuel Pitkin are typical victims of violence. However, it is in *The Day of the Locust* that West made the most thorough study of this rapidly spreading malaise of modern society. As has been hinted at in the title of the novel, it is one of man's gravest problems. In the previous novels, West directed more attention to how the problem has affected individuals rather than the masses, but in this novel, equal emphasis has been laid on the individuals and the masses. The problem is presented, as usual, through the use of some striking images, particularly those related to violent sexuality.

The problem of violent sexuality has much to do with mechanized "love" of course. By calling much attention to the thriving business of Mrs. Jenning's call house, West seems to suggest that the call house is the hotbed of sexual violence. Ironically, Mrs. Jenning is described as a very "refined" and "cultured" woman (p. 278). In a very elegant manner, she is, in a sense, priming her customers for sexual violence. For example, she has obscene films shown for the customers. One such film, entitled "Le Predicament de Marie, ou La Bonne Distraite," is about how the members of a family desire an extremely sexy prostitute Marie. In the midst of the show, the machine has some mechanical trouble which upsets the viewers, and there ensues a "mock riot" (p. 281). This incident seems to foreshadow the many sexual acts of violence which will follow. The brothel may therefore be seen as a symbol of the prevalent dehumanizing and destructive sexuality. Viewed from this perspective, West's spending so much space on Mrs. Jenning's call house is not unjustifiable. In fact, it is congruous with the structural and the thematic concerns of the author.

Faye Greener symbolizes violent sexuality. After her father's death, she decides to go with her best friend Mary Dove to Mrs. Jenning's call house, a suitable setting for her. Tod, who has been seeking her love, tries to dissuade her from taking this course, but in vain. "She wouldn't understand the aesthetic argument and with what values could he back up the moral one? The economic didn't make sense either. Whoring certainly paid. Half of the customer's thirty dollars. Say ten men a week" (p. 346). Finally, Tod finds an argument: "Disease would destroy her beauty. He shouted at her like a Y.M.C.A. lecturer on sex hygiene" (p. 346). This argument seems to have some effect on Faye. "She stopped struggling and held her head down, sobbing fitfully" (p. 346). But she chooses to persist in whoring anyway. In view of her character and her back-
ground, it seems only natural for her to plunge herself into the pit of lust.

Faye's physical appearance suggests her aggressive and violent character. "She was a tall girl with wide, straight shoulders and long, swordlike legs. Her neck was long, too, and columnar. Her face was much fuller than the rest of her body would lead you to expect and much larger. It was a moon face, wide at the cheek bones and narrow at chin and brow . . . " (p. 270). She has aspired strongly for movie stardom, and she tells Tod bluntly that he has "neither money nor looks" to offer her and that "she could only love a handsome man and would only let a wealthy man love her" (p. 270). Tod judges correctly when he sees her incapable of love or tenderness. He thinks:

Her invitation wasn't to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love. If you threw yourself on her, it would be like throwing yourself from the parapet of a skyscraper. You would do it with a scream. You couldn't expect to rise again. Your teeth would be driven into your skull like nails into a pine board and your back would be broken. You wouldn't even have time to sweat or close your eyes. (p. 271)

This passage reminds the reader of Fay Doyle, another memorable female character created by West. They are like each other so far as their violent sexuality is concerned. Donald T. Torchiana is therefore right in saying that "the impervious sexiness of at least two fays, Faye Greener and Faye [sic] Doyle, is clearly no solace for the torment they inflict: to sleep with either woman is to sleep 'with a knife in one's groin' or, given Faye's 'swordlike legs,' to accept an invitation to murder."12 Theirs is the most destructive kind of sexuality, and the imagery related to it is hard to forget.

With her youthful charm, it is not surprising that Faye has attracted many suitors; including Tod, Earle, Miguel, and Homer. Tod is fully aware of the destructiveness of her "love," and yet, strangely enough, he can not refrain from pursuing this venomous woman. "If she would only let him, he would be glad to throw himself, no matter what the cost" (p. 271). His infatuation with her keeps mounting until he contemplates raping her:

He expressed some of his desire by a grunt. If he only had the courage to throw himself on her. Nothing less violent than rape would do. The sensation he felt was
like that he got when holding an egg in his hand. Not that she was fragile or even seemed fragile. It wasn't that. It was her completeness, her egglike self-sufficiency, that made him want to crush her. (p. 320)

The image of crushing an egg expresses the violence of Tod's desire for Faye. His readiness to resort to violence is very clear: "If only he had the courage to wait for her some night and hit her with a bottle and rape her" (p. 407). His great passion for Faye has affected his life deeply. As Lavonne Mueller comments, "His lust for a tinseled Venus results in the loss of his ideals. Lonely, frustrated, and bitter, he plots revenge on Los Angeles by contemplating his canvas that will show the masses of 'cheated' ones setting fire to the city." 13

Faye is a breeder not only of violence but also of illusions. She cherishes many false dreams, including that of becoming a star some day. She tells Homer, "My father isn't really a peddler. He's an actor. I'm an actress. My mother was also an actress, a dancer. The theatre is in our blood." She adds, "It's my life. It's the only thing in the whole world that I want" (p. 309). As a matter of fact, she is simply daydreaming, as she is not equipped with any talent for her dreamed career. She once worked as an extra for a movie. She spoke only one line in it, and she did a very poor job. It is certainly fair to take her as "a symbol of the falsity of the screen." 14 She explains to Tod how she loves making up stories:

She had a large assortment of stories to choose from. After getting herself in the right mood, she would go over them in her mind, as though they were a pack of cards, discarding one after another until she found the one that suited. On some days, she would run through the whole pack without making a choice. When that happened, she would either go to Vine Street for an ice cream soda or, if she was broke, thumb over the pack again and force herself to choose. (pp. 316-17)

It is clear that Faye is addicted to dreams. And the image of playing with a pack of cards reveals the great pleasure she has continually derived from going over her dreams over and over again. As a symbol of falsity, she is logically associated with the dominant image of the dream dump.

In the big canvas entitled "The Burning of Los Angeles," "Faye is the naked girl in the left foreground being chased by the group of men and women who have separated from the main body of the mob" (p. 321). This painting is in-
tended to capture the predicament of all the wastelanders as dealt with in this novel. Therefore, it becomes highly symbolic of West’s tragic vision of the world. The group of people in the foreground with Faye as the central figure share all the false values with the mob shown in the background.

Commenting on the destructive power of Faye, Kingsley Widmer writes:

Tod, West’s artist-narrator, finds himself hopelessly loving the vacuous heroine, Faye, whom he must also despise. The degraded muse diabolically attracts, even with her narcissistic egotism, ruthlessness combined with stupidity, and bitch-goddess’ call to destruction . . . The fatuousness, even the very dehumanization, seem the essential appeal. In The Day of the Locust no man escapes the yearning—sophisticated writer, primitive Mexican, voracious dwarf, drugstore cowboy, middle-aged puritan, perceptive artist. For each, she is the masturbatory muse.\textsuperscript{15}

This comment explains well how a degenerate, despicable “bitch-goddess” like Faye can affect the lives of so many men. Since Faye’s invitation to destruction turns out to be so appealing to these people, this kind of appeal is an unmistakable sign of their senselessness and bestiality.

The use of the original and pertinent animal imagery contributes remarkably to the portrayal of some people’s grotesqueness and bestiality. Faye and her group of suitors go on a fowl-hunting excursion. Earle is proud of his plump game. The way he kills the birds reminds the reader of the horrible lamb-killing dream of Miss Lonelyhearts. “He gutted the birds, then began cutting them into quarters with a pair of heavy tin shears. Faye held her hands over her ears in order not to hear the soft click made by the blades as they cut through flesh and bone” (p. 331). After eating the chicken dinner heartily, Faye and Miguel dance together excitedly, which makes Earle so jealous that he finally clubs Miguel. This fight is followed by several scenes of violence including the fierce cock fight in the garage and the extremely wild party in Homer’s rented house.

The cock fight is presented as a very powerful image of violence and bestiality. The passages dealing with the fight between the savage cock Jujutala and the equally savage but less tactful Hermano constitute one of the most unforgettable parts in this novel. Since equal emphasis is placed on the descriptions of both the cock fight itself and the watchers’ wild responses, this fight
is indeed very meaningful as a convincing reflection of these people's obsession with violence. The power of the descriptions can be easily felt in a passage like this:

Before Juju could get into the air, the red managed to drive a hard blow with its beak to Juju's head. This slowed the smaller bird down and he fought on the ground. In the pecking match, the red's greater weight and strength evened up for his lack of a leg and a wing. He managed to give as good as he got. But suddenly his cracked beak broke off, leaving only the lower half. A large bubble of blood rose where the beak had been. The red didn't retreat an inch, but made a great effort to get into the air once more. Using its one leg skilfully, it managed to rise six or seven inches from the ground, not enough, however, to get its spurs into play. Juju went up with him and got well above, then drove both gaffs into the red's breast. Again one of the steel needles stuck. (p. 382)

The big red holds its ground bravely and violently, despite its having lost a leg and a wing, until it "fell over stone dead" (p. 383). "Juju pecked at the dead bird's remaining eye" (p. 383), and this made the dwarf scream, "Take off that stinking cannibal!" (p. 383). But Miguel and others do not say anything. Instead, he laughs. He enjoys the bloody fight. Homer is right in telling Tod on a different occasion: "He's almost as bad as his hen" (p. 371).

The symbolic significance of this cock fight is further revealed in the immediately following chapters. To some extent, the cock fight may be taken as a structural parallel to the fight among the male characters over Faye. It seems to herald the eruption of violence which eventually culminates in the première mob riot at the end of this novel. Faye's sexy dance with Miguel and Earle arouses the dwarf's jealousy, but Faye will not give him a chance to dance with her. So, "he charged between Earle's legs and dug upward with both hands. Earle screamed with pain, and tried to get at him. He screamed again, then groaned and started to sink to the floor, tearing Faye's silk pajamas on his way down" (p. 394). The violent fight that ensues is as bloody as the cock fight:

Miguel grabbed Abe by the throat. The dwarf let go his hold and Earle sank to the floor. Lifting the little man free, Miguel shifted his grip to his ankles and dashed him against the wall, like a man killing a rabbit against a tree. He swung the dwarf
back to slam him again, but Tod caught his arm. Then Claude grabbed the dwarf and together they pulled him away from the Mexican. (p. 394)

Faye’s voluptuousness has thus incited a fierce fight among her savage admirers. Earle is filled with fury when he finds Faye sleeping with Miguel late in the night, and as a result of the ensuing bloodshed, Faye leaves the place secretly, to the great sadness of Homer.

Homer’s long suppressed anguish is finally turned into uncontrollable violence, which leads him to stamp on the body of the sophisticated and malicious boy actor Adore Loomis. His crazy act of violence turns the big crowd expecting to see a film-premiere into a riotous mob. While being jostled around by the senseless crowd, Tod suddenly discovers that a young girl is sobbing desperately because she has been attacked by someone following her closely. “An old man, wearing a Panama hat and horn-rimmed glasses, was hugging her. He had one of his hands inside her dress and was biting her neck” (p. 417). Tod runs to the girl’s rescue immediately. Only after making much effort does he finally succeed in getting her free of the attacker. Equally appalling to Tod is the fact that “most of the people seemed to be enjoying themselves” (p. 418). Tod finds that a stout woman does not mind being hugged hard by a stranger. She even says to another woman close by, “Yeah, this is a regular free-for-all” (p. 418).

All these scenes show that many people are not only capable of violence but seem to be thirsty for it. In the case of Faye, her violent sexuality has victimized not only herself but many other people. The analogy between her and a cork, as perceived by Tod, suggests clearly the negative effect of her degeneracy on herself and others:

Nothing could hurt her. She was like a cork. No matter how rough the sea got, she would go dancing over the same waves that sank iron ships and tore away piers of reinforced concrete. He pictured her riding a tremendous sea. Wave after wave reared its ton on ton of solid water and crashed down only to have her spin gaily away. (p. 406)

This image of a cork suggests that Faye has been living in midst of violence just as the cork is surrounded by violent waves. Besides, the rootlessness, superficiality,
and insignificance of her life are also hinted at by the light, spinning cork. Then Tod goes on meditating on the meaning of this analogy:

It was a very pretty cork, gilt with a glittering fragment of mirror set in its top. The sea in which it danced was beautiful, green in the trough of the waves and silver at their tips. But for all their moondriven power, they could do no more than net the bright cork for a moment in a spume of intricate lace. Finally it was set down on a strange shore where a savage with pork-sausage fingers and a pimpled butt picked it up and hugged it to his sagging belly. Tod recognized the fortunate man: he was one of Mrs. Jenning's customers. (p. 406)

These associations of Tod's seem to imply that Faye, despite her prettiness and brightness, cannot avoid the fate of being ruined by herself simply because she has been leading a rootless and meaningless life.

It is significant that Tod is, while witnessing the horrible riot of the "demoniac" crowd, led to think about "The Burning of Los Angeles" (p. 409). Undoubtedly, the picture is meant to express his vision of the senseless, perverted, and violent crowd. He envisions the contents of the picture very clearly:

Across the top, parallel with the frame, he had drawn the burning city, a great bonfire of architectural styles, ranging from Egyptian to Cape Cod colonial. Through the center, winding from left to right, was a long hill street and down it, spilling into the middle foreground, came the mob carrying baseball bats and torches. For the faces of its members, he was using the innumerable sketches he had made of the people who come to California to die; the cultists of all sorts, economic as well as religious, the wave, airplane, funeral and preview watchers—*all those poor devils who can only be stirred by the promise of miracles and then only to violence.* A super "Dr. Know-All Pierce-All" had made the necessary promise and they were marching behind his banner in a great united front of screwballs and screwboxes to purify the land. No longer bored, *they sang and danced joyously in the red light of the flames.*

In the lower foreground, men and women fled wildly before the vanguard of the crusading mob. Among them were Faye, Harry, Homer, Claude and himself. . . . (p. 420) (emphasis added)

This lengthy description of the picture's subject matter fully reflects Tod's highly critical and pessimistic vision of the waste land. On the quail-hunting occasion,
Tod also meditates on the meanings of this painting. He will "show the city burning at high noon, so that the flames would have to compete with the desert sun and thereby appear less fearful, more like bright flags flying from roofs and windows than a terrible holocaust" (p. 334). He goes on thinking about his own special role in painting this picture. In foretelling a future event, he is conscious of his role as "Jeremiah" or a prophet of "doom and destruction" (p. 335). Although he intends to let the burning city have "quite a gala air" (p. 334) so as to make the whole scene appear less fearful, yet ironically, the sight of the holiday crowd who seems to be celebrating the big fire turns out to be the most fearful scene conceivable. Apparently, this irony has added much to the weight of this big canvas. It shows that the artist has been deeply disillusioned with all those appearing in the picture—those "poor devils" who choose to abandon themselves in the flames of violence.

The fact that Tod and many other people have actually lived through all the chaos and hopelessness and absurdity as presented in the canvas signifies that the "terrible holocaust" envisioned by Tod is not a product of pure imagination, but an objective reality. Hence, this apocalyptic painting not only reinforces the thematic and structural unity of this novel but renders the predicament of the wastelanders more depressing and consequently West's nightmarish vision of the world more striking. West's tragic vision has much to do with the apocalypse motif. As R. W. B. Lewis points out, "It was West, following hard on Melville and Mark Twain, who established for contemporary American writing the vision of the ludicrous catastrophe." Apocalyptic is indeed, in Leslie Fiedler's words, West's "special province."

Since this picture is full of religious implications, West's treatment of the religious faith of the people deserves a closer examination. Generally speaking, most of the wastelanders are not concerned about religion at all. Very few references to their religious faith have been made in this novel. None of the midwesterners ever mentions anything about religion. Even if some people would give some thought to this subject, it appears rather grotesque or even irrelevant to their lives. This is shown through Tod's observation of various churches in Los Angeles:
He visited the "Church of Christ, Physical" where holiness was attained through the constant use of chestweights and spring grips; the "Church Invisible" where fortunes were told and the dead made to find lost objects; the "Tabernacle of the Third Coming" where a woman in male clothing preached the "Crusade Against Salt"; and the "Temple Moderne" under whose glass and chromium roof "Brain-Breathing, the Secret of the Aztecs" was taught. (p. 365)

All these churches have one thing in common: they are grotesque as described through Tod's point of view:

As he watched these people writhe on the hard seats of their churches, he thought of how well Alessandro Magnasco would dramatize the contrast between their drained-out, feeble bodies and their wild, disordered minds. He would not satirize them as Hogarth or Daumier might, nor would he pity them. He would paint their fury with respect, appreciating its awful, anarchic power and aware that they had it in them to destroy civilization. (pp. 365-66) (emphasis added)

The worshipers's “wild, disordered minds” could not contribute anything to the elevation of mankind. Instead, their fury might even lead them to destroy civilization. Once Tod heard a furious man in the “Tabernacle of the Third Coming” denounce meat eating by claiming “to have seen the Tiger of Wrath stalking the walls of the citadel and the Jackal of Lust skulking in the shrubbery” (p. 366). His “messianic rage” made the hearers so excited that they all “sprang to their feet, shaking their fists and shouting,” and ended up singing “Onward Christian Soldiers” (p. 366). If their fury is an expression of their dissatisfaction with the world, they do not seem to have been inspired by their religion to work toward the amelioration of human conditions. With their “wild, disordered minds,” it is very difficult, if not impossible, for them to experience the peace and comfort of genuine belief in God. Perhaps this is why Arthur Cohen writes in “Nathanael West’s Holy Fool”:

It may be that West’s career is the triumph of unbelief. More likely it is the triumph of a realism which is aware that belief cannot survive unless man trusts its authenticity. Ours is surely an age that does not trust God and ours is a society, West makes clear, that does not permit such trust to re-emerge.18
Thus, almost all the people as dealt with in this novel are trapped in what Paul Tillich called a "human boundary-situation," which "is encountered when human possibility reaches its limit, when human existence is confronted by an ultimate threat." Many of them feel embittered because they are conscious of having been trapped. Joseph Conrad once wrote, "What makes mankind tragic is not that they are victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. . . . As soon as you know of your slavery, the pain, the anger, the strife—the tragedy begins. . . ." This can be read as a perfect description of the hopeless situation in which West's characters have found themselves.

When it comes to dramatizing the characters' responses to the forces which have combined to shatter their dreams, West was always careful in penetrating into the innermost of their souls. The depth of his tragic vision is often manifested through his depiction of their tragic sense aroused by the malicious forces. After describing the outer signs of the Karamazov world, Sewall has this to say, "But they are not in themselves tragic, as mere violence and perversion (more or less constant in any society) never are. They take on tragic meaning as we get close to their source in the deep spiritual confusion of which they are the symptoms." I think the same thing can be said of what West has done with "the deep spiritual confusion" of the "locusts." Homer Simpson's uncontrollable hands are the most striking signs of his anxiety and confusion. The same kind of spiritual confusion which is actually shared by many other midwesterners bursts into the murderous riot at last.

West's depiction of these characters' spiritual predicament is remarkably strengthened by his subtle use of black humor. He was not a surrealist in the full sense of the word, as has been mentioned in the introductory chapter, and yet he has employed some surrealist techniques rather effectively. I think his "particular kind of joking" has much to do with his surrealist sympathy. That kind of joking produces a kind of "surrealist jest" which is very useful in heightening "the incongruity between make-believe and reality" in the novel. The highly comic "Waterloo scene" is the most impressive illustration of West's "desperate humor" through the use of a surrealist jest. As Cyril M. Schneider has admirably pointed out, "World history is debased and rendered void of meaning in this jest that is typical of a surrealist burlesque that aims to ridicule."
California, ironically called "a paradise on earth" (p. 360), has thus been inhabited by many people who share a strong death wish. Having come to California to die, they appear to be a perfect embodiment of boredom and absurdity. Their spiritual paralysis is shown in their morbid behavior. At the Glendale airport people even expect to see some planes crash occasionally. The strangers who come to attend Harry Greener's funeral are utterly apathetic toward the dead. "They had come to see Harry buried, hoping for a dramatic incident of some sort, hoping at least for one of the mourners to be led weeping hysterically from the chapel. It seemed to Tod that they stared back at him with an expression of vicious, acrid boredom that trembled on the edge of violence" (p. 347).

Mrs. Johnson, an undertaker, is also an extremely grotesque woman with funerals as her "hobby" (p. 341). An "officious, bustling woman with a face like a baked apple, soft and blotched," she is "interested in the arrangement of the flowers, the order of the procession, the clothing and deportment of the mourners" (p. 341). All these people are presented as hopeless "living dead." In the big apocalyptic canvas Tod has been working on, their death wish is firmly captured as they seem to be enjoying the most destructive flames. The participants' reaction to the playing of "Come Redeemer, Our Saviour," one of Bach's chorales, is also highly reflective of their "wasteland mentality." No one listens to the music. "Bach politely serenading Christ was not for them" (p. 348). Tod thinks, "If there was a hint of a threat . . . just a hint, and a tiny bit of impatience, could Bach be blamed? After all, when he wrote this music, the world had already been waiting for its lover more than seventeen hundred years" (p. 349). The music seems to have no appeal at all to the people. "Perhaps Christ heard. If he did, He gave no sign" (p. 349). The music is thus associated with the deadness of the waste land inhabited by the big hordes of the unredeemable people.

When compared to Miss Lonelyhearts, The Day of the Locust has more room for improvement so far as artistry is concerned. Structurally, the former is much more tightly knit than the latter. However, the relatively loose structure might have been intended to produce the kind of atmosphere fitting the setting of Hollywood. As Gehman has commented:

It is episodic in structure but panoramic in form: appropriately enough, it in some ways resembles a motion picture—the early scenes are leisurely, fading in and out as
though the writer were turning his mind upon them like a camera, and then, as the characters come more and more into focus, becoming tighter, faster, and more merciless.24

As to West's handling of the point of view in this novel, it is not as successful as that in Miss Lonelyhearts either. The story is narrated mainly through Tod's point of view, and yet, as Gehman points out, the central theme of the novel is unfolded primarily through the character of Homer Simpson.25 According to Hyman, the novel "has no dramatic unity" because it shifts "from Tod to Homer and back to Tod."26 The use of these two principal points of view has somehow affected the structural unity. However, insofar as the thematic presentation is concerned, these two points of view may not be taken as a complete demerit. Galloway has a good comment to make on this:

West analyzes the Hollywood dream symposium through two contrasting points of view: the objectivity of Tod Hackett and the apathy of Homer Simpson. The polarity established between Homer and Tod illustrates the schizophrenic quality of West's own attitude: fascinated by stories of Hollywood vulgarism, he was at the same time repulsed by the Hollywood mind. Like Tod, he wanted to dissect that mind and to study it, but like Homer, he often felt that apathy was the best way to escape misery. . . . West's polarity is like Balso Snell's conflicting idealism and materialism or the opposition of idealistic Miss Lonelyhearts to Shrike, the arch materialist; and it is echoed in A Cool Million in the clash of the "real" America with Lemuel Pitkin's Alger-fed idealism.27

It is quite logical to interpret the two points of view in terms of the conflict between intellectualism and vulgarism, between idealism and materialism, and above all, between dreams and reality. Since this kind of conflict is actually central to all of West's four novels, Galloway's interpretation helps us understand not only Tod's and Homer's contrasting points of view but also West's main thematic concerns.

At the end of the novel, Tod, horrified by the rioting mob, is caught by a policeman and then lifted into a police car. While the car is taking him home, with the siren screaming loudly, he is virtually driven to insanity. The book ends with his laughing and imitating the siren as loudly as he can. Just like the death of Lemuel Pitkin which ends A Cool Million and that of Miss Lonelyhearts which
ends *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Tod's hysterical laughing and screaming bears testimony to West's tragic vision of life. The presentation of the unifying theme of destruction is greatly intensified with the downfall of the only sober "Jeremiah" on the waste land.

**Notes**

8. The *Day of the Locust*, in *The Complete Works of Nathanael West*, pp. 411-12. All further references to this work appear in the text.
9. Aaron, p. 635.
11. Salomon, p. 79.
12. Donald T. Torchiana, "The *Day of the Locust* and the Painter's Eye," in *Nathanael West: The Cheaters and the Cheated*, pp. 249-50. As a matter of fact, the statement that sleeping with the woman is like sleeping "with a knife in one's groin" is made by Shrike when he refers to his wife Mary.


21 Sewall, p. 108.

22 Cyril M. Schneider, “The Individuality of Nathanael West,” p. 23.

23 Ibid., p. 24.

24 Gehman, p. 72.

25 Ibid.

26 Stanley Edgar Hyman, Nathanael West, p. 45.

27 Galloway, p. 49.
Chapter VI

Conclusion

A true point of difference between West's style and the naturalists' is his use of comedy. He makes the reader writhe and smile, grimace and chuckle simultaneously. Strict naturalists are rarely amusing—intentionally. . . . It is part of the war within West that he sees his characters' plight as silly and ludicrous as well as heart-breaking, calling for laughter as well as tears. It is here that West's naturalism blends into existentialism's sense of absurdity and makes for his unique gifts as a novelist. It is impossible to have a stock response to his work. . . .

—Daniel R. Brown

In the foregoing chapters I have tried to describe Nathanael West's tragic vision by way of analyzing its manifold expressions as found in his four novels. Having thus defined that persistent vision which has strung all his novels together, I would like to further discuss his literary achievement by way of examining the relationship between his tragic vision and his contribution to the tradition of black humor. By so doing, perhaps, we can expect to better understand the position West has occupied in the history of twentieth-century American fiction.

It is true that, as Daniel Aaron points out, West is "not easy to place or categorize." Aaron explains this statement by calling special attention to some special qualities of West's work which somehow remind us of such other authors as Sherwood Anderson, Huysmans, and Chagall. He is certainly right in asserting the highly personal and original nature of West's "vision of a foul and arid world" which has led him to deal with both the "ludicrousness" and the "horror" of
life. In an interesting comparison of West and his contemporaries, Aaron makes some references to West's "highly idiosyncratic and undoctrinaire ways" of expressing his social commitment, his "unplayful irony," and his "nocturnal surrealist fancies associated with a certain school of expatriate writing in the 'twenties.' "4 Aaron's study of West's achievement leads to this conclusion:

At his most authentic, West is the "universal satirist." *His humor is savage and sad,* in contrast to Perelman's brash spoofing, and it springs, I think, from his tragic-comic view of the world, from his wry awareness of the disparity between secular facts and his suppressed religious ideals. His slapstick ends in a scream; the self-hatred of his characters, their efforts—sometimes grotesque and always painful—to find answers or relief, only curdles his pity.5

The above passage shows an important insight into the special effect of West's view of the world on his literary creation. West's is indeed a "tragic-comic view of the world," and it is indeed one of the essential springs of his "savage and sad" humor. I think that his is a special kind of humor and that an intimate relationship exists between his special humor and his tragic vision. Therefore, his humor deserves a closer examination.

Many other critics have been attracted by West's humor. For example, Leslie A. Fiedler once stated, "In West ... humor is expressed almost entirely in terms of the grotesque, which is to say, on the borderline between jest and horror; for violence is to him technique as well as subject matter, tone as well as theme."6 Grotesqueness and violence, as two of West's favorite subjects, have certainly much to do with his humor. As has been mentioned earlier, Victor Comerchero has also said something about West's humor. He rightly observes that West's "trademark" is the "anguished humor" which blends "pathos and comedy."7 Schneider points out that "although West considered himself to be a comic writer, he did not consider himself to be a humorous one."8 West is not a "humorous writer" in the common sense of the term. There is no doubt that West is a writer of "anguished humor," which grows out of his subtle treatment of comic situations. Schneider gives a penetrating analysis of the comic effects created by West:

A comic situation in West's fiction usually arises from one of several sources. The
most frequent are the following: 1) Extreme naiveté in the perception of the nature of reality; thus Pitkin's acceptance of Whipple's version of America is comic from beginning to end. 2) Incongruity; Israel Satinpeny, the Harvard-educated Indian in *A Cool Million*, invokes Spengler and Valery in denouncing the white men to his brethren. 3) Abnormality, or the exaggeration of normality into grotesqueness or monstrousness, which in essence combines the first two. Finally, 4) a kind of naked violence which, in its intensity and irrelevance, produces a situation that is at once comic and grim. In *A Cool Million* a Southern mob loots a village without any clear idea of what precipitated the riot; in *The Day of the Locust*, in the midst of a tumultuous mob at a movie premiere, some people feel a pathological satisfaction in being jammed together, feeling impulses otherwise controlled by convention. Both scenes are terrifying in their insight into mob behavior and the bitter clarity with which West exposes the possibilities of unrestricted human action. And yet, both scenes are ultimately comic. *The essential element of Westian comedy then, is irony, and usually of a very grim sort. The impulse is illusion, the outcome frustration, madness, or death.*

It is true that West has achieved a remarkable success in his ironical treatment of such subjects as extreme naiveté, incongruity, abnormality, grotesqueness, monstrousness, and violence. Undoubtedly, his obsession with these subjects as the essential elements of his type of comedy is rooted in his pessimism about the world.

In a study of *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, Locklin observes that West has "unusual gift for startling imagery and diction" and that "his humor seems purposely designed to offend the reader by its silliness or vulgarity or obscenity or blasphemy." This is a perceptive observation of the special effect of West's humor on the readers. Locklin goes on analyzing how the startling, offensive quality of West's humor has been brought about:

This is the humor which West learned from the dadaists, whose "saint," Jacques Vache, defined humor as "a sense of the theatrical and joyless futility of everything, when one knows." West's humor often provokes an initial grin or grimace, rather than a smile or belly laugh, and its cumulative effect is one of purgation or inoculation, rather than ephemeral amusement. Neither West nor the dadaists felt any obligation to offer an audience comic relief. They condemned the theory that art is to be enjoyed, and preferred to wreak their art upon their audiences.

This analysis of the special quality of West's humor in terms of Dadaism is
illuminating. It helps us understand not only West’s humor itself but also the Dadaistic element in West’s vision of the world. Again, this is also a clear expression of the tremendous effect of his tragic vision on his artistic creation. Although what Locklin has said here refers particularly to *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, the Dadaistic influence on his humor is also, to some extent, discernible in other three novels. The “sense of the theatrical and joyless futility of everything” which is often provoked by West’s humor is a natural expression of his pessimism too.

From these selected descriptions of West’s humor or comedy discussed above, it is seen that West’s humor, as an unmistakable expression of his world view, plays a very important role in his fictional creation. There seems to be something strange or elusive about his humor. Arthur Pollard tries to pinpoint the nature of West’s humor by saying:

> His jokey, febrile novels held their coterie reputation until the 1960s, when West’s intensely ironic view of American society and experience and his stylistic manner made him seem a precursor of the fashionable mode of black humor. He won high praise as a novelist in that line of bleak, ironic, detached fiction that runs from Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* and Twain’s *The Mysterious Stranger* to Heller’s *Catch-22*. (emphasis added)

This is one of the earliest important comments on West’s relation with the tradition of the so-called “black humor” in America. Pollard’s cautious reference to that mode of expression is a useful clue to the distinct feature of West’s work as a whole. In order to further understand West’s tragic vision of modern life, I think it is very important to examine more closely his contribution to the American tradition of black humor.

When asked whether he was an avant-gardist novelist, John Hawkes gave a list of his “literary ancestors” including West:

> My own concept of “avant-garde” has to do with something constant which we find running through prose fiction from Quevedo, the Spanish picaresque writer, and Thomas Nash at the beginnings of the English novel, down through Lautréamont, Céline, Nathanael West, Flannery O’Connor, James Purdy, Joseph Heller, myself. This constant is a quality of coldness, detachment, ruthless determination to face up to the enormities of ugliness and potential failure within ourselves and in the
world around us, and to bring to this exposure a savage or saving comic spirit and the saving beauties of language...\textsuperscript{13}

In the literary tradition Hawkes refers to in the above passage, the "something constant" which has constituted at least part of avant-gardism as defined by him is indeed discernible in West's work. As has been shown in the previous chapter, West's "comic spirit" and "tragic vision" have given a very special flavor to his treatment of "the enormities of ugliness and potential failure." It may be safe to say that the "comic spirit" of this kind as demonstrated in West's work has something to do with black humor. A definition of black humor given by Olderman can help us understand this point: "It is a kind of comedy that juxtaposes pain with laughter, fantastic fact with calmly inadequate reaction, and cruelty with tenderness. It requires a certain distance from the very despair it recognizes, and it seems to be able to take surprises, reversals, and outrages with a clown's shrug."\textsuperscript{14} However, it must be pointed out here that West can not be taken as a full-fledged black humorist despite the fact that his comic spirit led him to demonstrate his "particular kind of joking" which is, to a certain extent, akin to black humor.

To make a clearer distinction between West's type of humor and typical black humor, we will have to take a closer look at the precise meaning of black humor. Roy H. Copperud listed some concise definitions of this term as follows:

American Heritage gives us "The humor of the morbid and the absurd, especially in its development as a literary genre." Barnhart says, "A form of humor in literature based on absurd, grotesque, or morbid situations." Webster's version is "Humor marked by the use of usually morbid, ironic, grotesquely comic episodes that ridicule human folly."

Black Humor appears to be a modern displacement or modification of gallows humor, which, oddly enough, only Random House lists: "ghoulish or macabre humor."\textsuperscript{15}

In "Black Humor and History: Fiction in the Sixties," Morris-Dickstein writes, "All black humor involves the unseemly, the forbidden, the exotic, or the bizarre."\textsuperscript{16} Evidently there is black humor in West's fiction as he has dealt with some morbid, grotesque, and absurd situations or episodes so as to "ridicule
human folly.” But his may be regarded as a kind of rudimentary black humor, for it has been somehow mixed with too much traditional comic realism.

In an excellent essay entitled “Toward a Definition of Black Humor,” Max F. Schulz asserts black humor’s denial of “individual release or social reconciliation” by saying: “Like Shakespeare’s dark comedies, black humor condemns man to a dying world; it never envisions, as do Shakespeare’s early and late comedies, the possibilities of human escape from an aberrant environment into a forest milieu, as a ritual of the triumph of the green world over the waste land.”

West’s treatment of such grotesque characters as the midwesterners in *The Day of the Locust* may be taken as an expression of black humor for they are also condemned to the waste land. Schulz further points out that Miss Lonelyhearts and Lemuel Pitkin are not typical protagonists of black humor. He says: “Like Böll’s Clown, the protagonist of black humor does not despair with the savage bitterness of Nathanael West’s Miss Lonelyhearts. Nor does he remain aloof, dismissing society with cold imperviousness, like Evelyn Waugh’s Dennis Barlow.”

Besides, the protagonist is “never an untouched innocent like Waugh’s Paul Pennyfeather, a dismembered scapegoat like West’s Lemuel Pitkin, or an unwitting gull like Swift’s Gulliver.” Schulz opines that the protagonist is very much conscious of his relationship with his environment:

The black humor protagonist is not, like these satire foils, an authorial lens for analyzing the real, corrupt object of the satire. Nor does detachment mean for him withdrawal from the world, as it does for Gulliver, Candide, or Dennis Barlow. He is at once observer of, and participant in, the drama of dissidence, detached from and yet affected by what happens around him. Extremely conscious of his situation, he is radically different from the satiric puppets of Waugh and West, who bounce back like Krazy Kat from every cruel flattening as smooth and round as before, their minds unviolated by experience.

It is true that Lemuel Pitkin’s mind has been violated so little by his painful experiences that he seems to be a “satiric puppet” created by West to satirize the American dream. But his playing the role of a puppet can not be taken to signify that he is not a black humor protagonist at all. His constant involvement in rather grotesque or absurd situations is primarily brought about by his morbid obsession with the possibility to make “a cool million.” Therefore, West’s sense of black
humor can be felt as he has made Pitkin a funny but useful tool for attacking the Horatio Alger myth. In this connection, I think Morris Dickstein is more convincing when he, in sketching the main features of the characters of black humor fiction in the 1960's, states: "Instead of fully rounded real-life characters we find cartoonlike puppets, manipulated according to the author's moral purpose." Pitkin is exactly like a puppet who serves West's moral purpose in a grotesquely comic manner. Dickstein's comparison of the fifties realist novels and the sixties black humor novels can further illuminate West's tendency toward black humor:

Where fictional characters in the fifties can still subject life to a degree of personal control, can grow and change within the limits of their personality, the zany, two-dimensional characters in Vonnegut, Barth, Pynchon, and Heller declare not simply their authors' departure from realism but their brooding sense that life is increasingly controlled by impersonal forces. For the realist of the fifties, character is destiny; for the comic-apocalyptic writer, destiny turns character into a joke. For the fifties writer, history is remote and irrelevant compared to what Updike calls "private people and their minute concerns"; for the sixties writer, history is absurd but it can kill you. Books like Slaughterhouse-Five and Catch-22 do not slowly gravitate towards death like straightforward novels with unhappy endings. Because of their peculiar structure—in which everything is foreshadowed, everything happens at once—they are drenched in death on all sides, like an epidemic that breaks out everywhere at the same time.

Dickstein's reason for calling the black humorist a "comic-apocalyptic" writer is well suggested in this long passage. To a certain extent, this term also fits West because his pessimism has found a powerful expression in, among other things, the apocalyptic canvas called "The Burning of Los Angeles" in The Day of the Locust. In the case of Pitkin again, his destiny is controlled so tightly by such forces as violence and injustice that his character has indeed seemed nothing but a joke. Consequently, a black humor protagonist may not necessarily be "radically different from the satiric puppets of Waugh and West," as proclaimed by Schulz.

Another sign of West's tendency toward black humor is often exhibited in his treatment of the disgusting, offensive aspects of reality. His surrealist interest in dealing with the marvelous may also have something to do with his sense of black humor. As Dickstein has pointed out:
Whether it stresses the nether functions of the body, as in Henry Miller, or simply the nether side of all sentimentalities and idealizations, as in Nabokov’s Lolita, or Portnoy’s Complaint, black humor is always affronting taboos, giving offense, recalling people to their gut functions and gut reactions. . . . Thus black humor became an aspect of the libertarian, idol-shattering side of the sixties.²³

Apparently, Balso Snell’s fantastic journey in the Wooden Horse, Miss Lonelyhearts’ hard experience with the “Christ business,” Pitkin’s loss of an eye, a leg, and all teeth, and all the midwesterners’ disillusionment with their dreamed land—all these examples make clear that West’s emphasis on “the nether side of all sentimentalities and idealizations” is unmistakable. Although West was a writer in the 1930’s, his sentiment about the dark side of reality is amazingly close to that of the sixties black humorists.

It must be clear by now that West was a precursor of the mode of black humor. So far as his tragic and ironic vision of America and his particular way of joking are concerned, he was quite far ahead of his own time. However, this fact should not mislead one to think that he belonged to the group of black humorists particularly in the 1960’s. He was different from not only the “protest novelists” of the 1930’s but also many writers of the postwar decades with a general tendency toward black humor. In The Rise and Fall of American Humor, Jesse Bier makes a good comment on what distinguishes West as a modern writer. He writes that West’s

Lonelyhearts (1933) and The Day of the Locust (1939) are searing exposés of futile conduct and of a Californian world of ennui and violence about to become standard in the western world. He gives us back the grim acerbity of Bierce in both books. His mockery and deflationism qualify the books as bitter comedies, just over the line from the comic Surrealism practiced by his brother-in-law, Perelman. His vision of all those Los Angeles crowds coming to the airport hopefully to see a crash is the soul of misanthropy and nihilism, to say nothing of the riot that concludes Locust, a prophecy of Watts without the faintest aura of civil rights protest. It is Death and not Eros that he portrays. Still, there is a kind of controlled repugnance in these works. He himself will not slide over into sadistic enjoyment of his material. And when he seems to do so elsewhere in A Cool Million (1934), he is extravagant, as Professor Douglas Shepard has shown, only because of his comic opposition to Horatio Alger, a model (in Andy Grant’s Pluck) that he is
bound to reverse in every instance, his point-for-point corrective carrying him away. But in *Lonelyhearts* and *Locust*, West is mostly the strong comic realist, portraying malaise without indulging extremity or sickness himself. That is what sets him apart from the post-World War II sickniks who refer to him as their immediate predecessor. But then they would have made books like *Lonelyhearts* and Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* into uproarious sick comedy, whereas he knew the gray from the black and the difference between auctorial power and masochism.24 (emphasis added)

Bier has made a meaningful distinction between West as a comic realist whose “controlled repugnance” led him to produce “bitter comedies” and those “post-World War II sickniks” whose indulgence in “extremity or sickness” led them to produce “sick comedies.” I believe it is very important to bear this distinction in mind if we wish to obtain a thorough understanding of the true nature of West’s tragic vision. West’s “bitter comedies” have been strengthened by his “anguished humor,” which has grown out of his morally-based vision of tragedy. As has been mentioned earlier, he may be called an “embarrassed moralist” because he was “seething with indignation” in the face of the decadence of modern life, and his “brilliant comic imagination” is actually an embodiment of his anguish and “moral earnestness.” Perhaps this is the main reason why he was able to refrain himself from sliding over “into sadistic enjoyment of his material.” In this connection, a statement made by John Hawkes is illuminating: “Nathanael West, I think, did make use of a kind of sick joke, but I think he uses the sick joke always so that you feel behind it the idealism, the need for innocence and purity, truth, strength and so on.”25 If his can be called a kind of sick joke, then it is not really “sick” like the products of the “sickniks” Bier refers to.

A curious mixture of a “brilliant comic imagination” and a tragic vision of life is thus found in West’s work. The importance of this special quality can be better understood if we consult Richard B. Sewall’s comment on Socrates’ famous statement that “the genius of comedy is the same as the genius of tragedy, and that the writer of tragedy ought to be a writer of comedy also.” Sewall writes:

As for Socrates’ notion that every writer ought to be able to do both, there can be no objection. Some few have done both. What he had in mind, perhaps, was the undeniable truth that the highest comedy gains its power from its sense of tragic
possibility, and the profoundest tragedy presents a full if fleeting vision, through the temporary disorder, of an ordered universe to which comedy is witness. Without a sense of the tragic, comedy loses heart; it becomes brittle, it has animation but no life. Without a recognition of the truths of comedy, tragedy becomes bleak and intolerable.26

Undoubtedly this generalization that a profound tragic sense or vision can greatly contribute to the power of comedy is well applicable to West’s work. It is evident that West’s bitter comedies have gained remarkable power from his profound sense of tragedy. It is primarily due to his tragic vision of life that he did not become a mere “protest novelist.” His vision enables him to transcend the limitations of the regional settings and social criticism; it embraces human civilization as a whole.

Besides, the depth of West’s tragic vision can also be better understood in terms of Joseph Wood Krutch’s denial of the possibility of tragedy in the modern world. In “The Tragic Fallacy,” Krutch asserts that “from the universe as we see it both the Glory of God and the Glory of Man have departed.”27 Consequently, Krutch contends, “We can no longer tell tales of the fall of noble men because we do not believe that noble men exist. The best that we can achieve is pathos and the most that we can do is to feel sorry for ourselves.”28 He also points out that “the plays and the novels of today deal with litle people and less mighty emotions” because “we have come, willy-nilly, to see the soul of man as commonplace and its emotions as mean.”29 On the basis of our analysis of West’s four novels, we can see that West shared these pessimistic views on the pathetic, unglamorous life of modern man. Balso Snell’s dreamed world of diseases and corruptions, Miss Lonelyhearts’ futile efforts to do something for his desperate correspondents, Lemuel Pitkin’s Sisyphean struggle for the sake of his dream of “a cool million,” and the boredom and wrath of the numerous “locusts” who have been trapped in the “dream dump” of Hollywood—all these stories bear testimony to the extreme difficulty in instilling the traditional perceptions of nobility and dignity into modern man. Therefore, West would surely agree with Krutch on the conclusion: “The death of tragedy is, like the death of love, one of those emotional fatalities as the result of which the human as distinguished from the natural world grows more and more a desert.”30 It is exactly the desert
that has occupied the core of West’s creative consciousness.

West’s preoccupation with the theme of the waste land springs from his acceptance of determinism as the dominant principle of life. His tragic vision is essentially a deterministic one. The artistic nihilism in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, the failure of Miss Lonelyhearts’ “Christ dream,” the rejection of the American dream in *A Cool Million*, and the absurdity of the “dream dump” in *The Day of the Locust* have all been brought about, in one way or another, by forces beyond the control of the characters concerned. For this reason, I think Daniel R. Brown’s assertion about the influence of naturalism and existentialism on West is convincing. Brown states, “If there is one existentialist concept West deals with the most, it has to be Angst. His world is full of unnamed fears and terrors. I think this feeling is a further development of the many frustrations portrayed in naturalistic fiction.” Brown further explains the existentialist influence on West in terms of what Heidegger called an authentic life:

All of West’s protagonists seek such a life; they want to live meaningfully and honestly. . . . The trouble, as West feels it, is that practically all lives are not authentic. He represents a logical outgrowth of naturalism in this respect, I think, since he is only saying in more extreme form what the naturalists had said earlier. That is, they documented the tediousness and limitations of characters living lives thrust upon them by biological and environmental and accidental circumstances. The naturalists implied that some of these discontents are remediable; West is not so sure.

This analysis of some naturalistic and existentialistic beliefs and attitudes as reflected in West’s works can help us better understand the special nature of West’s principal thematic concerns. The futile pursuit of the “authentic” life on the part of his characters is plainly expressive of his dense pessimism. With his Dadaistic obsession with despair and destruction, he seemed to be much more deeply dyed in pessimism than the naturalists. Therefore, Brown’s reading of optimism in West is debatable. His argument that “only someone who believes in the possibility of change can ridicule so angrily” is somehow irrelevant to West’s case, because even if West held any belief in “the possibility of change,” that possibility had already been ruthlessly shattered by the kind of reality he witnessed. The deterministic concept of man’s futile quest
for an authentic life can hardly be construed as a sign of optimism. In fact, the motif of the futile quest, which is central to all of West’s novels, underlies his tragic vision very consistently. In his fictional world, all the protagonists can not escape the fate of permanent victimization. In concluding his discussion of Absalom! Absalom!, Sewall writes, “The total vision is neither of doom nor redemption, but of something tantalizingly, precariously in between. We have no hope, yet we hope. It is tragic.” Evidently, West’s vision seems even more tragic than that as shown in Faulkner’s work. His is akin to that of doom, not of redemption. His people do actually live in a hopeless world full of chaos and disasters. It is his tragic vision of the total hopelessness of the waste land as symbolized in “The Burning of Los Angeles,” rather than his possible intention to avoid a sentimental treatment of the waste land, that has led him to portray the bleak, empty, and absurd lives of the wastelanders.

The vision of tragedy has not merely determined West’s choice of the subject of the Waste land. It has also influenced his special ways of dealing with the subject. As the editors of The Norton Anthology of American Literature observe, West’s work “brought the Gothic novel (fiction marked by terror and compulsive fascination with forbidden and decadent themes) to a new pitch of intensity, and brought the comic grotesque to new heights of absurdity and inventiveness.” They conclude the discussion with a perceptive appraisal of West’s influence: “His combination of the agonized conscience with the comic had much in common with the fiction of such Jewish writers as Bernard Malamud and Saul Bellow who flourished after the war, and his parodic and grotesque effects proved to be in the vanguard of the later fiction of John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and Joseph Heller.” In fact, “the agonized conscience” combined with “the comic” constitutes an essential ingredient of West’s type of black humor. The bitter jokes he was very skilful in presenting succeed in making the absurd and poignant reality appear even more absurd and poignant. As the epigraph to this chapter indicates, West’s anguished jokes are forceful enough to call for “laughter as well as tears.”

In conclusion, West’s work as a whole offers a penetrating critique of the cultural crisis facing modern people. The presentation of his tragic vision is effective not only because the vision itself is persistent and profound but also because he was able to use his mode of black humor and some surrealist and
symbolistic techniques in a peculiarly original way. As a result, he has been widely regarded as one of the most perceptive and inspiring novelists in the thirties. He is surely "America's first important Jewish novelist and one of its most radical writers." In view of the serious critical attention he has received and of the remarkable influences he has exerted on some prominent modern writers, there is no doubt that he deserves his ever growing reputation.

NOTES

2 Daniel Aaron, "Waiting for the Apocalypse," p. 634.
3 Ibid.
4 Daniel Aaron, "Late Thoughts on Nathanael West," p. 308.
5 Ibid., p. 316.
8 Cyril M. Schneider, "The Individuality of Nathanael West," p. 18.
9 Ibid., pp. 18-19.
11 Ibid., pp. 26-27.
14 Raymond M. Olderman, Beyond the Waste Land: The American Novel


18 Ibid., p. 23.

19 Ibid., p. 24.

20 Ibid.

21 Dickstein, p. 189.

22 Ibid., p. 190.

23 Ibid., pp. 191-92.


28 Ibid., p. 127.

29 Ibid., pp. 119-20.


31 Brown, p. 196.

32 Ibid., p. 201.

33 Ibid., p. 186.

34 Sewall, p. 147.


36 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., p. 1707.
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The Tragic Vision of Nathanael West


那桑尼爾・韋斯特的悲劇靈視

中文摘要

那桑尼爾・韋斯特（1903-1940）直到一九五○年代才被完全發現為一位重要作家。他在四本小說中，以令人難忘的方式，表現出一種堅定而深沉的悲劇靈視。本論文目的即在於探討這種悲劇靈視的本質，及其特殊的表現方式，以期有助於闡明這位一九三○年代美國領銜小說家的突出成就。

全文共分六章。首章解說此項研究的基本理論架構，同時回溯韋斯特死後聲名持續升高的經過，並指出他濃厚的悲劇意識的主要成因，藉以說明他的獨特性。第二章評述巴爾索・司內爾的夢幻生活中主角在木馬裡的夢之旅，如何流露出韋斯特的虛無主義。第三章討論孤心小姐之主角如何為了解許多受難者的緣故，而追尋所謂基督夢，但卻徒勞無功。接着，第四章研討妙哉百萬所描繪的美國夢之失敗因素。至於第五章，其重點在於考察蝗蟲日如何諷刺好萊塢的夢想垃圾場。最後，在結論章裡，藉著研討韋斯特在美國黑色幽默傳統中所佔的地位，來綜合評價他對其悲劇靈視所作的藝術處理。

韋斯特的作品顯然已為現代人所面臨的文化危機，提出了尖銳的批判。他的悲劇靈視對他作品的主題、技巧與文字風格皆產生了顯著的影響。他運用黑色幽默的模式以及一些超現實主義與象徵主義的手法，創造了一些特殊的意象，而其作品結構大都以夢與現實之衝突為基礎。他筆下人物大都無法忍受荒謬的現實，而且他們的夢想往往導致惡夢。這種夢之反諷從一些荒原意象中得到有力的映襯。韋斯特不僅深獲批評界的重視，而且帶給若干當代著名作家深遠的影響，由此觀之，他被譽為美國三十年代最傑出的小說家之一，可以說是實至名歸。