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**The World Of Nathanael West:
A Critical Interpretation**

by

Carter M. Cramer

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Chapter I

West's Pursuit of Technique

by

Carter M. Cramer *

Before I go on with this short history let me make a general observation — the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time, and still function.

— F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*.

Critics who implicitly equate the word "novel" with the word "fiction" are often faced with the problem of where to place the large number of works of literature that refuse to fit their novelistic cupboard. Some must be crammed, beaten, and shoved into place; others, too individual in form, must be stored in the back closet, marked "odds and ends," never to be displayed in the central showcase reserved for the works of writers belonging to the tradition of Fielding, Austen, Meredith, and James. Critic Northrop Frye, in opposition to the Procrustean measurements too prevalent in this age, suggests that critics approach fictional narration by the use of four classifications he designates "specific continuous forms," which in their rare, pure states are of four distinct fictional forms: novel, romance, confession, and anatomy.¹

Certainly the diversity of forms evident in the works of Nathanael West demands that such a classification be made before any detailed attention can be given to a study of the evolution of style and structure in his narrative prose. West sought to blend the distinct techniques belonging to these four forms into an organic unity and vision more dramatic and universal than those offered by the conventional social realism of the proletarian novels of the 1930's.

With the exception of William Faulkner, West was probably the most experimental American novelist of any importance to write his major works during the bleak decade of the Great Depression. As a result, West, along with Faulkner, was generally relegated to a critical limbo during the era. Both men refused to follow the dictates of critics enamored of narrow social realism or the temporal dictates of Marxist's criticism. When writing his best prose, West managed, by the mastery

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¹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 308.

of stylistic and structural technique, to hold Fitzgerald's ". . . two opposed ideas in mind at the same time, and still function." The result was a unique vision of comic-pathos and satire, whose creator has been described by Leslie Fiedler as the ". . . chief neglected talent of the age . . . largely because he was immune to the self-deceit which afflicted his contemporaries; he knew what he was doing."²

Considerable criticism, in addition to Fiedler's, has been written during the past two decades in an effort to delineate the subtleties of West's style and to clarify matters pertinent to his life and to the literary influences evident in his work. Characteristic of this criticism has been the tendency to evaluate all of the works considered in this study as novels and/or to concentrate on style while dismissing form and plot structure as simply episodic. Thus, novelistic standards are applied to two of West's works belonging to the genre of anatomy or satire. West's biographer-critic, James F. Light, considers *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931) of interest as ". . . the storehouse of materials it provides for West in his later novels;"³ West's *A Cool Million* (1935) is described by Bittner as "the weakest of West's novels."⁴

One aspect of this study, therefore, centers on West's use of technique relative to the specific continuous forms defined by Frye, so that these two works may be established essentially as anatomies or satires, to be judged by the demands of that genre and by contrast with other literary works belonging to the same tradition.

West undoubtedly was a better novelist than satirist, for his two anatomies assume a thinness when compared to the efforts of great writers who have worked in the satirical genre, mainly Swift and Voltaire. However, approaching *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* and *A Cool Million* as satires reveals West's control and technique in these works to be better than the existing critical consensus admits.

A second purpose of this study is to extend Frye's definitions of forms to West's novels, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1934) and *The Day of the Locust* (1939). More complex and ambitious a work than *Miss Lonelyhearts*, West's last novel is often criticized for being choppy and episodic. This study advances that the structure in West's last work is uniquely tailored to its thematic purpose. Particularly relevant to West's novels is Watt's concept that the novel's primary criterion is its ". . . truth to individual experience — individual experience which is always unique and therefore new."⁵ Essential to any consideration of West is the recognition not only of his individuality of style but also the divergence of experimentation setting each of his works apart from the others. Thus, Frye's four "specific continuous forms" men-

² Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, p. 461.

³ James F. Light, *Nathanael West: An Interpretative Study*, p. 53.

⁴ William Bittner, "Catching Up With Nathanael West," *Nation*, CLXXXIV (May 4, 1957), 394.

⁵ Ian Watt, "Realism and the Novel Form," p. 59, as reprinted in *Approaches to the Novel*, pp. 55-81.

tioned earlier in this introduction are a valuable means of coping with West's divergence of technique. These forms must be applied to each of his works to provide an overview or antecedent for the analysis that is to follow.

Frye argues that none of the four forms — novel, romance, confession, and anatomy — exists in a "pure" state; however, in most works one form will predominate.⁶ West's works are no exception. Although *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* contains strains of the novel, romance, and confessional forms, this study will show the work's primary focus is on the world of art, particularly on the pseudo-artists' and escapists' more extreme stances during the late 1920s. West's essential attention in his first work is given to the ideas and intellectual attitudes his characters represent. Thus, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is an anatomy, for its overall form is "extroverted and intellectual."⁷ In addition, striking tonal similarities exist between this work and part four of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, a giant in the satirical tradition. West's second anatomy, *A Cool Million*, is modeled after Voltaire's *Candide*, as West attacks the innocence underlying the myth of easy financial success achieved through honesty and hard work, as portrayed in the Horatio Alger books. West's satire, in this instance, contains a strong element of the romance form; however, its inclusion is for the sake of parody.

West's first novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, comes nearer than any of his other works to being a "pure" form, though elements of the romance, the confession, and the anatomy are definitely present. With comic-pathos, West focuses on the ultimate destruction of a journalist, who in the twentieth century attempts to become a Messiah. The work is primarily "extroverted" in its description of the protagonist's environment, and "personal" in its concentration on the psychological dismantling and destruction of a single person — characteristics central to the novel form.⁸ West's last novel, *The Day of the Locust*, concentrates more on social and less on personal characterization, by including a greater array of characters with a more thorough description of their cultural and social environment.

If the subtleties of the Westian vision are to be grasped and evaluated, cognizance of them can only be reached through an understanding of the use of forms and techniques. Mark Schorer has correctly noted that creative genius ". . . burns brightest when a passionate private vision finds objectification in exacting technical search."⁹ If technique is meaning, the critic must attend to the business of determining *how* a work "means" if he is to say *what* it means.¹⁰

⁶ Northrop Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

⁸ *Loc. cit.*

⁹ Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery," 268, reprinted in *Approaches to the Novel*, pp. 249-268.

¹⁰ Wright Morris, *The Territory Ahead*, p. 137.

West's extremely experimental attitude toward the techniques of style and structure was his attempt to find a vehicle to portray the reality of the grotesque in a mass culture. His four works are indictments of the "horrible emptiness of mass lives."¹¹ These indictments are not tragic, for tragedy suggests a concept of human dignity and sense of the significance of human passions belonging to the eras of Shakespeare and Sophocles. To associate the word even with Ibsen or Arthur Miller is probably fallacious.¹² Thus the term, "comic-pathos" is used often in this work to describe the Westian attitude.

West's sense of the pathetic is directly stated in the conclusion of the first chapter of *The Day of the Locust*:

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.¹³

West's sense of the comic and its juxtaposition with the pathetic is the antecedent to the Black Humorists of the 1960's, particularly Joseph Heller, who owes much to West for his own technique. The technique is to begin with laughter and to move toward horror by the work's conclusion.¹⁴

West captures the horror of an age in which reality has been fractured and cheapened, humane values distorted and inverted, and the common man left to suffer the on slaught of dreams offered by the modern Confidence-Man in the form of pseudo-artist, journalist-cynic, politician, or movie producer. The attempt to evoke comic-pathos and horror is undoubtedly directly related to West's sense of violence—particularly modern mass man's potential for savage self-destruction. West wrote in 1932:

In America violence is idiomatic. Read our newspapers. To make the front page a murderer has to use his imagination, he also has to use a particularly hideous instrument. Take this morning's paper: FATHER CUTS SON'S THROAT IN BASEBALL ARGUMENT. It appears on an inside page. To make the first page, he should have killed three sons and with a baseball bat instead of a knife. Only liberality and symmetry could have made this daily occurrence interesting.¹⁵

¹¹ William Peden, "Nathanael West," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XXXIII (Summer, 1957), 468-472.

¹² Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Modern Temper*, p. 80.

¹³ Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Heller has commented in length on his own use of this technique and his concepts are strikingly applicable to West's works. Heller's comments appear in "So They Say: Guest Editors Interview Six Creative People," *Mademoiselle*, LVII (August, 1963), 234-235.

¹⁵ Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Violence," *Contact*, I (October, 1932), 132-133.

THE WORLD OF NATHANAEL WEST

West's productive period came after the crash of 1929, and he wrote during a period when hundreds of thousands of Americans were homeless and penniless — many of them joining the breadlines and living in Hoovervilles. Before his early death in an automobile accident in 1940, West, a Jew, witnessed the nefarious eruption of militant anti-semitism in Nazi Germany, war in China, Ethiopia, and Spain. His decade was the era of Pretty Boy Floyd and John Dillinger, of Hitler, Mussolini, France, and Tojo. West's particular attitude, his insistence that the twentieth century face its own dehumanization and its veneering of reality with the shoddily fabricated — the "unreal" and the grotesque — continues to have relevance in our own time. The problem West faced as a writer was *how* to convey the sense of dormant violence ticking like a bomb beneath the floor-boards of contemporary society.

The ultimate argument advanced in this study is that West experimented with a synthesis of forms, with structure and with style, in an effort to compress and intensify traditional episodic structure into violent imagistic "frames." When successfully employed, these frames are presented with such an economy of style that scenes move with a rapidity that causes them to clash and to amplify each other. By this structure his best works become madhouse galleries of the comically pathetic. The effect sought was an emotional concentration normally evoked by poetry or painting rather than by the novel. West's stylistic reliance on surrealist images was chosen to achieve such an effect; his techniques give to his work, particularly to his novels, an emotional progression that propels the reader away from laughter toward horror and a vision of apocalyptic destruction.

The Dream Life of Balso Snell, the first work discussed in this study, was West's initial attempt at meeting the dictates of style and form central to his own vision.

Chapter II

Balzo Snell: The Game of Art

There is a game for players still to play
 Pretending that the board was never lost,
 But still the painted counters will decay
 And knowledge sit alone to count the cost.

— Mark Van Doren

Nathanael West's *The Dream Life of Balzo Snell* is a satirical attack against literary "games" and against the perversion of art in a mass culture by those who use the arts as a tool for deception and as a mechanism for escape from their own fragmented psyches. By the use of scatological imagery, West attempted to shock the jaded nerve-endings of the pseudo-creators of avant-garde literature and their middle-brow intellectual audience.¹⁶ The work is not a fragmented novelistic parodying of such giants as Joyce and Dostoevski, as has been suggested by some critics; instead the focus centers on the pseudo-sophisticates of the late 1920's for whom the despair of having ". . . seen the mornings and the afternoons" was only a pathetic stance and a call for escape to "Anywhere Out of This World," the title of Balzo's first song in chapter one.

Thus the actual focus of West's first work is essentially much narrower than has been generally recognized. By interpreting the work as an eccentric, dadaistic novel rather than as a satire or anatomy, most critics have had to argue that *Balzo Snell*¹⁷ is essentially formless; thus, the thematic purposes ascribed to it are widely divergent. This study will first offer a cross-section of criticism demonstrating this divergence, and then suggest by analysis of structure and form that *Balzo Snell* is actually an anatomy attacking artistic pretension and escapism.

Published first in a limited edition of 500 copies in 1931, the work initially was ignored by critics writing for major periodicals. With the publication of *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* in 1957, critical evaluations, though generally cursory, were numerous. Most critics, including Light and Comerchero, who have each written an extensive analysis of the work, viewed *Balzo Snell* as an experimental first novel prefiguring West's later work. Bittner, writing for the *Nation*, advanced that thematically the work first strikes at ". . . every weakness in the world's religions, and then swings into romantic love."¹⁸ British critic,

¹⁶ V. L. Locke, "A Side Glance at Medusa: Hollywood, the Literature Boys, and Nathanael West," *Southwest Review*, XLVI (Winter, 1961), 35-45.

¹⁷ For brevity the title is shortened to *Balzo Snell*. All footnoted page numbers refer to the work as published in *The Complete Works of Nathanael West*.

¹⁸ Bittner, *op. cit.*, p. 395.

Ross, asserted that *Balso Snell* is atypical of West's later documentation of social and political disintegration: "*Balso Snell* analyzes only the disintegration of the Self, and its illusion of superiority at its most pathetic moment of neurotic isolation."¹⁹ Ross's emphasis on the deterioration of an individual ego was echoed by Peden, who saw *Balso Snell* as ". . . little more than a one-dimensional *tour de force*, with ciphers for characters."²⁰ Further compounding the confusion was Smith's insistence that *Balso Snell* was ". . . the precocious work of a young writer, still groping for technique."²¹ Smith asserts that the work's thematic focus concerns how ". . . the dream of art is swallowed up in a world of animal instincts."²²

Further variety was added by Podhoretz, who interpreted *Balso Snell* as ". . . a brilliantly insane surrealist fantasy that tries very hard to mock Western culture out of existence."²³ He asserted that the work is a novel containing several short stories that serve as "a battleground on which West the sentimentalist is pitted against West the cynic — a necessary battle, which helped West achieve control."²⁴

Locke correctly noted that *Balso Snell* is centrally concerned with ". . . the dreams of the creators of avant-garde art as well as the fantasy world of the middle-brow intellectuals who consume the product."²⁵ He criticized the work, however, on the basis that as a novel of ideas it ". . . has all the defects of the genre."²⁶

Voicing a similar criticism, Tibbetts interpreted all four of West's fictional works as attempted satires, yet he objects to the lack of ". . . real people doing real things. There is simply not enough in West's two best novels about recognizable people and recognizable situations."²⁷ Tibbetts objects to West's two-dimensional characters, asserting, "West's people are not real. They are not even physiologically real."²⁸ He concludes that West was not a successful satirist.²⁹

Too many critics, thus, deny West the privileges traditional to the satirical or anatomical genre. The result is the illustrated confusion as to even the general theme of *Balso Snell*. It is plebeian to note that exaggeration and distortion are indigenous to the satirical genre;³⁰ how-

¹⁹ Alan Ross, "The Dead Center: An Introduction to Nathanael West," *The Complete Works of Nathanael West*, xi.

²⁰ Peden, *op. cit.*, p. 469.

²¹ Roger H. Smith, "SR's Spotlight on Fiction: 'Complete Works of Nathanael West,'" *SR*, XL (May 11, 1957), 13.

²² *Loc. cit.*

²³ Norman Podhoretz, "A Particular Kind of Joking," *New Yorker*, XXXIII (May 18, 1957), 156.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²⁵ Locke, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁷ A. M. Tibbetts, "The Strange Half-World of Nathanael West," *Prairie Schooner*, XXXIV (Spring, 1960), 8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁰ Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire*, p. 5.

ever, in denying West satirical exaggeration and distortion, too many critics voice absurdities similar to the *Time* reviewer who wrote, "Art, religion, and hope itself are derided. . . ." ³¹

Such errors in critical judgment appear ridiculous when applied to older works belonging to the satirical genre. Few critics would argue that in *Candide* Voltaire's attack against an optimism rooted in ignorance and innocence means that Voltaire categorically dismissed all optimism or hope in the world. Nor is it ever suggested that Pangloss' abuse of reason is an expression of Voltaire's dismissal of the value of logic.

As a satire, the characters in *Balso Snell* are presented as purveyors of ideas, myths, and attitudes native, in less exaggerated form, to the cultural and artistic escapists of the 1920s. The spirit of escapism prevalent during the era is recorded by Malcolm Cowley in *Exile's Return*, as Cowley refers to the latter half of the decade as ". . . an age of islands, real and metaphorical." ³² Many expatriates sought refuge in Europe or Mexico from the realities of a commercialized America, while others sought indigenous havens in Greenwich Villages and its autotypes in other American cities. In retrospect, Cowley, himself an expatriate, ironically noted that ". . . escape from the mass was becoming a mass movement." ³³ West's primary concern in *Balso Snell* is to lampoon the choice of art as escapism and to criticize the divorce of the artist from society and the perverting of art by the dream makers of a consumer society.

West's satirical assault is not against art itself but against deceit and delusion in the art world. The characters are "flat" and exaggerated in the same manner as the characters in *Candide*, for both works attack particular ideas and attitudes. The focus of each is "extroverted and intellectual." ³⁴ The attention in *Balso Snell* to the dreams of a single man, the inclusion of confessional letters, and the parodying of romantic sentimentalism are all elements that link the work to the novel, confessional, and romance forms, respectively. ³⁵ However, these forms are but minor currents in the main stream of an anatomy. The vast array of literary and artistic allusions utilized belong to the encyclopedic aspect of that form, as do the verses interlaced into the prose:

The Menippean satirist, dealing with intellectual themes and attitudes, shows his exuberance in intellectual ways, by piling up an enormous mass of erudition about his theme or in overwhelming his pedantic targets with an avalanche of their own jargon. ³⁶

An analysis of *Balso Snell* in light of Frye's above observation reveals

³¹ "The Great Despiser," *Time*, LXIX (June 17, 1957), 103.

³² Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return*, p. 235.

³³ *Loc. cit.*

³⁴ Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 308.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 312-313.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

that its most consistent method of attack is an attempt to bury its opposition in their own clichés and abuses of logic.

Balso Snell's dream begins at the perimeter of the city of Troy, now symbolically surrounded by grass and in a state of decay. Balso comes upon the famous wooden horse of the Greeks — a traditional symbol of artifice, inventiveness, and deceit. Balso, the artistically impotent, clandestine poet, remembers Homer's ancient song and seeks entrance into the interior of the wooden horse:

On examining the horse, Balso found that there were but three openings: The mouth, the navel, and posterior opening of the alimentary canal. The mouth was beyond his reach, the navel proved a cul-de-sac, and so, forgetting his dignity, he approached the last.
O Anus Mirabilis!³⁷

By having Balso make such a choice, West serves notice to the reader of the work's intended effect: to shock and shatter any complacency of sensibility which the reader may feel. West's persistent use of scatological imagery is analogous to the same technique as evidenced in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. West's purpose was to establish a tenor and tone of disgust similar to that which Swift evoked when he described the Yahoos, for Balso is a comic-pathetic hero haunted by a vision of modern man's having deteriorated into the obscene and the bestial:

He thought of the Phoenix Excrementi, a race of men he had invented one Sunday afternoon while in bed, and trembled, thinking he might well meet one in this place. And he had good cause to tremble, for the Phoenix Excrementi eat themselves, digest themselves, and give birth to themselves by evacuating their bowels.³⁸

Before entering the horse, Balso offers a prayer or evocation: "O Beer! O Meyerbeer! O Bach! O Offenbach! Stand me now as ever in good stead."³⁹ Light correctly notes the parallel between this prayer and the conclusion of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.⁴⁰ Joyce's hero, Dedalus, delivers the following invocation to his new found freedom:

Welcome, O Life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the un-created conscience of my race. Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead.⁴¹

³⁷ Nathanael West, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, p. 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Light, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

⁴¹ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 199.

Light argues that West is ". . . satirizing Joycean rhetoric and agony . . . , what he felt was Joyce's artistic pretentiousness."⁴² Light's contention seems logical; however, more significant is that Balso's dialogue repeatedly reveals him to be only the grotesque product of a commercialized world. He is a vulgate who directly contrasts with Dedalus. Balso denounces the Trojan horse and the Greek tradition as inferior to Grand Central Station, the Yale Bowl, the Holland Tunnel, and Madison Square Garden. He is established in chapter one as the pseudo-artist whose virtuosity is limited to an occasional obscene verse or to the fashionable Dadaistic stance of his day:

In order to prove a poet's right to trespass, Balso quoted from his own works: "If you desire to have two parallel lines meet at once or even in the near future," he said, "it is important to make all the necessary arrangements beforehand, preferably by wireless."⁴³

As pretentious as Joyce might have been, it is hard to doubt his artistic sincerity. Also it is absurd to suggest that West was unaware of the abject facetiousness of Balso and of the contrast between Balso and Dedalus suggested by the parody.

The first chapter is extremely important, for it serves to establish Balso as the spiritually and emotionally effete poet of a commercialized mass society. Balso is ". . . an ambassador from that ingenious people, the inventors and perfectors of the automatic water-closet."⁴⁴

Light sees the work's essential theme as Balso's conflict of choice "between the philosophies of monism (or idealism) and pluralism (or naturalism)."⁴⁵ He attributes to Balso a seriousness, dignity, and intelligence which Balso lacks:

Balso himself is a realistic man, alive to the comfort that can be gained from the monistic and idealistic view of the universe, but too aware of the pragmatic foolishness of such a viewpoint to derive much solace from it. He simply cannot accept the philosophic idealism of the guide and, by implication, of the other inhabitants of the Trojan horse.⁴⁶

By implication, Light attributes to the champion of the water-closet and fearer of the Phoenix Excrementi a wisdom Balso does not possess. Light is also fascinated by *Balso Snell* as ". . . the storehouse of materials it provides for West in his later novels."⁴⁷ Light was the first critic to trace with thoroughness the influences operative in West's

⁴² Light, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

⁴³ Nathanael West, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, p. 5.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Light, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁴⁶ Nathanael West, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, p. 44.

⁴⁷ Light, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

first work.⁴⁸ However, Light's insistence on the presence of the theme of conflict between idealism and realism in *Balso Snell* seems more appropriate for the novelistic *Miss Lonelyhearts*. To support his interpretation, Light argues the following about *Balso Snell's* form:

As in a dream, *Balso Snell* weirdly unreels: it has no plot of any sequential kind, characters are physically distorted and change their shapes magically, and the manifest meanings are but the index to the latent or disguised meanings.⁴⁹

Light is also fond of psychoanalyzing West:

In fact, interpreting freely and using Jung as an imaginative starting point, one might find in it [the inclusion of the Jewish guide in chapter one] not only West's rejection of Judaism, but also his rejection of the mother.⁵⁰

In fact, however, *Balso Snell* has a definitive structure, and all of the work's episodes can be accounted for in terms of their form and content, rather than through pseudo-psychoanalysis. The ordering of time and events is sequential. As will be shown in this study, the reader is chronologically transported through a mad-house gallery of characters, beginning with a modernized tour guide for Greek heritage and ending with Balso's adventures in a sexual fantasy of the kind printed by the tons by a modern consumer press.

A second extensive analysis of *Balso Snell* appears in Comerchero's *Nathanael West: The Ironic Prophet*. Comerchero's insights into West's uses of literary allusions are often brilliant, but he attributes to *Balso Snell* a broader theme than is present, once the structure of the work is seen: Comerchero argues that West satirizes Dostoevsky, Catholic mysticism, surrealism, Freud, Joyce's artistic pretentiousness, and the "sham implicit in art. . ."⁵¹ Comerchero slights the distinct contemporaneous quality of artistic sham ridiculed in the work. West is not attacking the Greek heritage, Catholicism, Dostoevsky, Freud, or Joyce *per se*, but, instead, is satirizing those who pervert the reality mirrored by art into an escapism and those who would use art or religion as a foil for deceit and sham. Comerchero argues:

Like Eliot, West uses myth and allusion to create universality; and as Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, moves from high society to low life, so does West.⁵²

⁴⁸ Later the influence of the French Imagists was traced by Marc L. Ratner in "‘Anywhere Out of This World’: Baudelaire and Nathanael West," *AL*, XXXI (January, 1960), 456-463. Unquestionably, the most definitive work on West's education and artistic preferences is Jay Martin's *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life*, 1970.

⁴⁹ Light, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

⁵¹ Victor Comerchero, *Nathanael West: The Ironic Prophet*, p. 52.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

The literary and religious allusions act as contrasts between the ineptness of Balso and other literary charlatans and the richness of the literature of Western heritage. However, the allusions do not simultaneously operate as cultural contrasts and subjects for ridicule. As has been shown, West clearly established Balso in chapter one as a pseudo-artist and ambassador of a commercialized, mass culture. A satirizing of artistic sham in such a culture is West's essential purpose.

In discussing West's life, Light documents West's fascination as a youth with the novels of Dostoevski.⁵³ The third episode in *Balso Snell* involves a literary pretender, twelve-year-old John Raskolnikov Gilson, who shares a similar fascination with the works of the great Russian novelist. Gilson is also the only self-confessed confidence-man in the entire work. His attitude toward the pretenses of his audience is strikingly similar to the attitude of West toward his readers in the first two episodes in *Balso Snell*. Gilson's dream is to write a play to shock the apathetic consumers of avant-garde literature into a recognition that true art is not a game or pretense to be indulged in and nourished out of smug snobbery. Gilson's plot is to have the theatre ceiling open, deluging the audience in loose excrement: "After the deluge . . . the patrons of my art may gather in the customary charming groups and discuss the play."⁵⁴ *Balso Snell* was first published by an avant-garde firm catering to the type of audience Gilson detested. The Gilson episode that follows the two earlier scenes is mock self-confessional, for West has deliberately deluged his reader with myriad nonsensical, scatological images and literary allusions decorating the first two chapters. Both Light and Comerchero argue that West is burlesquing other authors and Catholic mysticism in these chapters. Comerchero feels that West sensed that the juxtaposition of these allusions to the vulgar jokes and clichés of Balso Snell himself was a mistake and that West deliberately dropped this affectation by the time he had written the Gilson episode.⁵⁵ Yet, Light and other critics have documented the extreme care accorded numerous revisions that marked West's creative process. It is erroneous to assume that West would not have corrected any structural "error" he might have felt present in the opening episodes. Unquestionably, *Balso Snell* was not a hastily written first novel:

In the hotel, he [West] developed his natural attitude of preoccupation into genuine modification and night after night between 1927 and and the last part of 1929 wrote and rewrote his book, first in pencil on yellow ruled paper, and eventually on typed sheets, correcting and retyping repeatedly.⁵⁶

⁵³ Light, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁵⁴ Nathanael West, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, p. 31.

⁵⁵ Comerchero, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁵⁶ Jay Martin, *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life*, p. 122.

West first carefully engages the reader in a literary game of allusion hunting, mixing these allusions with interesting satirical sketches, only to reveal, later, through Gilson, the attack he has thus made on the reader. Once the first two episodes are partially recognized as such an attack, the work's remaining structure is greatly clarified.

The first two episodes also contain incidents which are other than an attack on the reader. The first of these two episodes begins with Balso's meeting the Jewish Guide with "Tours" embroidered on his cap. The guide relates a ribald joke about the philosopher-saint, Apolonius of Tyana, and is immediately hired by Balso. West, himself a Jew, portrays the guide as a confidence-man only too willing to extol the virtue of any culture for profit: "Please sir," he said, "please, . . . the ages have sanctified this ground, great men have hallowed it. In Rome do as the Romans."⁵⁷ The guide is angered when Balso fails to show a solicitous attitude toward the tour and enraged by a suggestion of anti-Semitism on the part of Balso:

"Sirrah!" the guide cried in an enormous voice, "I am a Jew! and whenever anything Jewish is mentioned I find it necessary to say I am a Jew. I'm a Jew! A Jew!"⁵⁸

Balso attempts to pacify the Guide: "I admire the Jews; they are a thrifty race. Some of my best friends are Jews."⁵⁹ Balso ultimately placates the Guide with a solicitous cliché, when he assures him ". . . he would be satisfied to spend his remaining days in [the horse] with but a few pipes and a book."⁶⁰ The chapter culminates in a parody of intellectual cocktail-party chit-chat. To establish his credentials as a cultural savant, the guide quotes George Moore and Daudet. Balso counters by asserting, "Picasso says there are no feet in nature . . . And thanks for showing me around. I have to leave."⁶¹ The guide demands an interpretation of the dictum:

"Well, the point is . . ." Balso began. But before he could finish the guide started again. "If you are willing to acknowledge the existence of points," he said, "then the statement that there are no feet in nature puts you in an untenable position. . . . if everything is one, and has neither ends nor beginnings, then everything is a circle. A circle has neither a beginning nor an end. A circle has no feet. If we believe that nature is a circle, then we must also believe that there are no feet in nature."⁶²

⁵⁷ Nathanael West, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, p. 6.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

⁵⁹ *Loc. cit.*

⁶⁰ *Loc. cit.*

⁶¹ *Loc. cit.*

⁶² *Loc. cit.*

The Greek genius and heritage is rooted in a prodigious gift for abstract philosophical definition and logical deduction. The Guide, with a sign reading "Tours" stuck in his cap, makes an absurd mockery of this heritage. He is a confidence-man for whom art and knowledge provide a stance. The intellect is perverted by him into a display case to buttress his own ego.

Balso next meets the pseudo-religious mystic, Maloney the Areopagite, who wears no clothes except for a derby hat complete with a crown of thorns. Maloney is feigning to crucify himself with thumb tacks when Balso discovers him. Maloney introduces himself as a Catholic mystic:

I believe implicitly in that terrible statement of Saint Hildegarde's, "The Lord dwells not in the bodies of the healthy and vigorous." I live as did Marie Alacoque, Suso, Labre Lydwine of Schiedam, Rose of Lima. When my suffering is not too severe, I compose verses in imitation of Notker Balbus, Ekkenard le Vieux, Hucbald le Chauve. "In the feathered darkness/Of thy mouth,/O Mother of God/I worship Christ/The culminating rose." Get the idea? 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.⁶³

The juxtaposition of the lyrical "Christ the culminating rose" to the vulgar "Get the idea?" is typical of a tonal technique used throughout the work. In the midst of a matter-of-fact, how-to-do-it approach to sainthood, West has planted the five-line poem in a deliberate assault against the reader's expectations of order. All of West's characters are grotesque incongruities — fragmented men living a life of literary sham. The sham in Maloney's instance is his dedication to writing a biography of Saint Puce, a martyred member of the vermin family who lived on Christ's body and died with him on the cross. After listening to the story of St. Puce's life, Balso advises Maloney:

"I think you're morbid," he said. "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."⁶⁴

Balso is the product of a matter-of-fact world in which even pathological fixations are to be cured by the simplest remedies. His advice of games and books as a cure would do credit to any modern advice columnist.

As in the first episode, the literary allusions are numerous, and many may be unfamiliar to most readers. Though an encyclopedic cataloging of the names and allusions dropped in arty conversation

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

may be a legitimate aspect of the anatomy, by such an attack West slows the momentum of his work, and the creation of dramatic momentum was West's structural forte in his later works. Fortunately, he wisely economized on the length of the Guide and Maloney episodes. With the third episode, however, the clutter of decorative allusions cease in favor of functional allusions.

The episode begins with Balso's discovery of the diary of John Raskolnikov Gilson of Class 8B, Public School 186. The source of the Gilson episode is Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*;⁶⁵ however, the sincerity of that journal of torment contrasts sharply with the pseudo-superman pose of Gilson, the self-confessed phony. In the introduction to the diary, Gilson professes:

I am an honest man and feel badly about masks, cardboard noses, diaries, memoirs. . . . It is monstrous to write lies in a diary.⁶⁶

Yet he shortly forewarns the reader that the tale of spiritual torment in which Gilson slays an idiot is a story of duplicity: "Sometimes my name is Raskolnikov, sometimes it is Iago. I never was, and never shall be, plain John Gilson — honest, honest Iago, yes, but never honest John."⁶⁷ Gilson professes to be greatly disturbed by the nature of reality:

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.⁶⁸

Such speeches are a part of the image Gilson wants to give of himself. The Gilson of the journal, *The Making of a Fiend*, poses as a man who is eventually driven insane by his philosophical and spiritual quests: "I was completely the mad poet. I was one of those 'great despisers,' who Nietzsche loved. . . ."⁶⁹

Characteristic of the economy and power of imagery West could achieve creating portraits of surrealistic grotesqueness is his description of the idiot dishwasher supposedly slain by John Gilson:

He was a fat, pink and grey pig of a man, and stank of stale tobacco, dry perspiration, clothing mold, and oatmeal soap. He did not have a skull on the top of his neck, only a face; his head was all face — a face without side, back or top, like a mask.⁷⁰

West, through Gilson, is scoffing at those readers who would ascribe a higher "value" to crime resulting from a philosophical or spiritual

⁶⁵ Light, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁶⁶ Nathanael West, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, p. 14.

⁶⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁶⁸ *Loc. cit.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

angst than from simpler motives of lust or greed. The motives for Gilson's fantasy crime are "literary reasons."⁷¹ Actually, Gilson's motives are pathological, for he experiences sexual orgasm at the culmination of the crime, allowing his latent homosexuality to bloom into overt action as he attempts to attract sailors into following him.

Gilson's one grace is the ultimate confession of his own hypocrisy and the sham of his pretended murder. He scoffs at those avant-garde writers who take an autotelic interest in pathological perversion, searching the ". . . old issues of the medical journals for pornography and facts about strange diseases."⁷²

In the second half of the chapter, John Gilson himself appears and asks Balso for his opinion of the journal. Balso, whose supply of intellectual clichés is infinite, replies: "Interesting psychologically, but is it art?"⁷³ Echoing his advice to Maloney, Balso advises Gilson to ". . . run about more. Read less and play baseball."⁷⁴ Gilson proclaims: "What the hell do I care about art! Do you know why I wrote that ridiculous story — because Miss McGeeney, my English teacher, reads Russian novels and I want to sleep with her."⁷⁵

In the second part of the Gilson episode, Balso is given a pamphlet outlining Gilson's literary motives. The article is essentially an attack on the audiences of avant-garde literature. As such, it is strongly dadaistic in tone.⁷⁶ Gilson confesses of his art: "All my acting has but one purpose, the attraction of the female."⁷⁷ One night, he sickens of his pose and begins flailing Saniette, his mistress. Her screams bring the hotel clerk to the room. The clerk is placated, however, when Gilson asks him if he has ever heard of the Marquis de Sade or of Gilles de Rais:

Fortunately, we were in a Broadway hotel whose employees are familiar with the world. When I mentioned these names, the clerk bowed and left us with a smile. Saniette was also of the world; she smiled and went back to bed.⁷⁸

This incident parallels West's treatment of Gilson's literary motives in the murder of the idiot. West is lampooning pseudo-sophisticates who blandly accept a different code of morality for the artist than for the "temperance-cartoon drunkard" who beats "his hard-working spouse."⁷⁹ Gilson justifies his actions to Saniette by describing himself as two men, one who is the "chauffeur" within who drives him to procreate.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁷⁵ *Loc. cit.*

⁷⁶ Light, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁷⁷ Nathanael West, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, p. 26.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁷⁹ *Loc. cit.*

As a result of the eloquence of Gilson's description of the inner, creative devil, Saniette forgives Gilson: "She weathered a second beating with a slow, kind smile."⁸⁰

The episode concludes with a directly scatological satiric attack by Gilson that is Swiftian in its forcefulness. Comerchero has correctly noted that West's satiric genius is at its best in this following, concluding passage, for West had ridiculed affectation and sham by creating a grotesquely powerful incident that is dramatized in comical images.⁸¹

Saniette represents a distinct type of audience — smart, sophisticated, sensitive yet hardboiled, art-loving frequenters of the little theatres. I am their particular kind of a performer.

Some day I shall obtain my revenge by writing a play for one of their art theatres. A theatre patronized by the discriminating few: art-lovers and book-lovers, school teachers who adore the grass-eating Shaw, sensitive young Jews who adore culture, lending librarians, publisher's assistants, homosexualists and homosexualists' assistants, hard-drinking newspaper men, interior decorators, and the writers of advertising copy.

In the play I shall take my beloved patrons into my confidence and flatter their difference from other theatre-goers. I shall congratulate them on their good taste in preferring Art to animal acts. Then, suddenly, in the midst of some very witty dialogue, the entire cast will walk to the footlights and 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."

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. After the deluge, if they so desire, the patrons of my art can gather in the customary charming groups and discuss the play.⁸²

Of the concluding paragraph quoted above, Comerchero notes:

There is something just right about the phrase, "can gather in the customary charming groups." It suggests much more than it states: clever brochures, arty little theatres, and intermission "tea or coffee" in the foyer. The tendency to open new realms of implication by a careful control of tone and the echo phrase is one of West's great assets.⁸³

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁸¹ Comerchero, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

⁸² Nathanael West, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, p. 35.

⁸³ Comerchero, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

The John Gilson episode is infinitely richer and more consistent in its tone than the work's parts that preface it.

The satire's fourth episode begins with Balso's expression of disgust over Gilson's pamphlet. In typical simple-minded fashion, Balso blames the writing of the pamphlet on the following:

Balso blamed the war, the invention of printing, nineteenth-century science, communism, the wearing of soft hats, the use of contraceptives, the large number of delicatessen stores, the movies, the tabloids, the lack of adequate ventilation in large cities, the passing of the saloon, the soft collar fad, the spread of foreign art, the decline of the western world, commercialism, and, finally, for throwing the artist back on his own personality, the renaissance.⁸⁴

West has achieved in this passage a Swiftian juxtaposition of the possible and the ludicrous that renders social criticism ridiculous.⁸⁵ Also, the passage is ideally in tune with Balso's earlier cited quick remedies — the super market commodities and panaceas of newspaper columnists of a mass culture. West underscores Balso's thickness of intellect by immediately describing his reaction to seeing a young girl bathing in a public fountain: ". . . through the wood of his brain there buzzed the saw of desire."⁸⁶ Balso embraces the young girl only to have her transformed into Gilson's middle-aged teacher, Miss McGeeney, a writer as gifted as Balso at triteness:

At present I am writing a biography of Samuel Perkins. Stark, clever, disillusioned stuff, with a tenderness devoid of sentiment, yet touched by pity and laughter and irony. Into this book I hope to put whimsical humor, the kindly satire of a mellow life.⁸⁷

Through Miss McGeeney, West attacks the academy. Samuel Perkins is revealed to be the biographer of E. F. Fitzgerald who is the biographer of D. B. Hobson who wrote a study of the life of Boswell. Miss McGeeney's ultimate aspiration is that ". . . someone must surely take the hint and write a life of Miss McGeeney. . . ." ⁸⁸ West uses the character of Miss McGeeney to attack the straining of logical systems characterizing the academician much in the same sense that he used the Guide to ridicule the abuses of logic evident in "arty" cocktail-party chatter. The title of McGeeney's biography is *Samuel Perkins: Smeller*. Like the scholar who so diligently studies the elephant's foot that he never sees or senses that the entire animal exists, Smeller is a very specialized man. His entire face is dominated by his nose: all

⁸⁴ Nathanael West, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, p. 31.

⁸⁵ Comerchero, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

⁸⁶ Nathanael West, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, p. 31.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

the veins, muscles, and sinews of his body converge toward that one point. Needless to say, he possesses an acute sense of smell, a faculty he so abuses that all his other senses are dulled and eventually rendered inoperative. The history of Perkin's life is the history of his sense of smell. The account of Perkin's abilities as a "smeller" represents some of the finest humorous exaggeration in the entire work. McGeeney delivers a pedantically absurd explanation of Perkin's acute sense in terms of the theory of natural compensation. Perkins is reported to be able to ". . . distinguish between the one-smell of a violin and that of a viola."⁸⁹ He also could ". . . apprehend through the sense of smell the principles involved in isosceles triangles."⁹⁰ When he married, it was not for love but "as an artist would marry."⁹¹

He told me that he had built from the odors of his wife's body an architecture and an aesthetic, a music and a mathematic. Counterpoint multiplication, the square of a sensation, the cube root of an experience — all were there. He told me that he had even discovered a politic, a hierarchy of odors: self-government, direct. . . .⁹²

The entire episode is highly comparable to Swift's "Flying Island" in which Swift lampoons the abstractness of mathematicians. In defense of his thesis that *Balso Snell* is essentially concerned with the conflict between idealism and materialism, Light must make only cursory reference to the Smeller episode, dismissing all that follows the Gilson incident as contributing nothing new to the work's theme.⁹³

Having satirized the avant-garde writer and audience as well as the academy, West then focuses on the stereotyped bohemian writer as visualized by the movies and "pulp" fiction of a mass culture. Balso Snell, the vulgate and lyric poet and cliché expert, has been repulsed by both Gilson, the self-confessor, and McGeeney, the academician. In his dream, Balso has momentarily freed himself from Miss McGeeney by shoving her into the fountain. He seeks refuge in a cafe, orders a beer, and then falls asleep, having a dream within a dream. His interior dream is a parody of the rhetoric of romance in second-rate movies and consumer fiction. In the episode, Balso meets a strange lady in the lobby of Carnegie Hall. In typical romance fashion, he tips his hat to her: "She smiled and he snatched her from the throng, crying as he took her arm. . . ." ⁹⁴ The technique West uses for ridicule in this episode is singularly grotesque and undoubtedly repulses some readers, for the girl is a huge hunchback with an enormous hump: ". . . but for her dog-leg spine she would have been seven feet high."⁹⁵

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁹⁰ *Loc. cit.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁹² *Loc. cit.*

⁹³ Light, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁹⁴ Nathanael West, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, p. 38.

⁹⁵ *Loc. cit.*

Often in the same sentence, West combines the florid clichés of sentimental fiction with description of the woman's deformity:

Feeling his lips on her forehead, Janey Davenport, (the Lepi) gazed out over the blue waves of the Mediterranean and felt the delight of being young, rich, beautiful. No one had ever before forgotten her strange shape long enough to realize how beautiful her soul was. . . . Now she had found a wonderful poet; now she knew the thrill she had never known before. . . had found it in the strength of this young and tall, strangely wise man, caught like herself in the meshes of the greatest net human hearts can know: Love.⁹⁶

Balso attempts to seduce Janey Davenport. She refuses him, then consents, provided Balso proves his love ". . . as did the knight of old."⁹⁷ First, he must kill Beagle Darwin, whose child Janey carries in pregnancy.

Yet another pretender and fake, Beagle Darwin is the consumer press's concept of the young bohemian artist, professing love to every woman he meets and promising them life in Paris and an artist's studio. Janey gives to Balso two letters written by Beagle. In the first he jilts Janey and creates a melodramatic play out of her imagined suicide that reads like any of a thousand modern confessionals:

He claims that the only place to commit suicide is Chekov's grave. The Seine is also famous for suicide. . . . Oh, how miserable I am. . . . If I jumped from the third floor I might cripple myself. . . . And mother — what would mother say?⁹⁸

Balso also reads the second letter written by Beagle Darwin, an account of Beagle's practice of the myriad stances he might assume in reaction to Janey's suicide. The episode culminates in a theatrical speech by Beagle Dionysius Hamlet Darwin. Such a sublimely ridiculous name is, of course, in keeping with the mock spiritual Darwinism which Beagle professes concerning the ludicrous, imagined death of his mistress. Beagle theatrically laments that mere mortals are driven to emulate the Gods:

Who among us can boast that he was born three times, as was Dionysius?. . . Or who can say, like Christ, that he was born of a virgin? Or who can even claim to have been born as was Gargantua? Alas! none of us. Yet it is necessary for us to compete — as it was necessary for Janey to compete — with Dionysius the thrice born, Christ son of God, Gargantua born 'midst a torrent of tripe at

⁹⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

a most memorable party. . . . At your birth, instead of the Three Kings, the Dove, the Star of Bethlehem, there was only old Doctor Haasenschweitz who wore rubber gloves and carried a towel over his arm like a waiter. . . . Beagle Hamlet Darwin towered over his glass of cognac, and, in the theatre of his mind, over the cringing audience—tempestuous, gallant, headstrong, lovable Beagle Dionysius Hamlet Darwin.⁹⁹

Beagle's characterization is a creation of true comic-pathos; with him it is impossible to tell where literature ends and the man begins.

At the conclusion of the second letter, Balso awakens from his interior dream to find Miss McGeeney at his side, professing to be the true author of the two letters written in the epistolary style to emulate Richardson. Balso, the sentimentalist, prepares the letter: "A stormy wind blows through your pages. . . . It is a dream of passion that has all the appeal of wild living and the open road."¹⁰⁰

Balso, the ambassador of mass culture and defender of sentimental romance, had realized earlier in the satire that the wooden horse ". . . was inhabited solely by writers in search of an audience."¹⁰¹ He had avowed not to be tricked into listening to another story: "If one had to be told, he would tell it."¹⁰² Balso's only "story," however, is a long speech delivered at the book's conclusion in which he catalogues the "literary reasons" Miss McGeeney may assume for allowing Balso to seduce her. He delivers a hoarde of clichés in exposition of the artistic, political, and philosophical poses which Miss McGeeney may assume. Then, Balso concludes with the maudlin sentimentality of the "Time-argument":

My "Time" is that of the poets. In a little while love, you will be dead; that is my burden. In a little while, we all will be dead. Golden lads and chimney-sweeps, all dead. . . . O rose! Bloom in the morning, thou shalt fade ere noon. Do you realize the tune the clock is playing? The seconds, how they fly! All is soon over! All is soon over. Let us snatch, while yet we may, in this brief span, whose briefness merely gilds the bubble so soon destroyed, some few delights.¹⁰³

West creates a superb burlesque out of Balso's seduction speech—an effusive oration for which there was no need, for Miss McGeeney has listened from the very beginning stretched out on her back ". . . with her hands behind her head and her knees wide apart."¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁰² *Loc. cit.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

The satire ends with the culmination of Balso's dream in a sexual fantasy. In parodying consumer fiction, West has chosen a particularly suitable conclusion for his work, for so much of the "art" and sexual fantasies marketed in a mass culture have as their appeal vicarious sexual experience. Balso is the ambassador of such a culture.

An earlier incident in the work in which Miss McGeeney is transformed from a nude young woman bathing in the public fountain into a mannish Miss McGeeney dressed in tweeds is a foreshadowing of the multiple characters she assumes at the work's conclusion. She is a woman in a dream — a counter in a sexual fantasy; she becomes at the work's conclusion, all women. By a detailed analysis of the styles parodied following Balso's seduction speech, Commerchero traces McGeeney's transformations from sentimental heroine to historically famous lover to swooning female of pornographic literature to Oriental goddess to violent nymphomaniac — whore.¹⁰⁵ Echoing the sexual moan that concludes Joyce's *Ulysses*, McGeeney delivers the following lines:

Moooompitcher yaaaah. Oh I never hoped to know the passion,
the sensuality hidden within you — yes, yes. Drag me down into
the mire, drag. Yes! And with your hair the lust from my eyes
brush. Yes . . . Yes . . . OOH! Ah!¹⁰⁶

Balso Snell is rich in allusions contrasting sharply with the spiritually and morally effete banalities and fantasies of its central character. There are no Swiftian humane men, no Portugese captains to rescue Balso or to give to the work a suggestion of a standard of ethics men should follow. Yet the echoing of the great literary works of both antiquity and the modern age serve as such a standard when contrasted with the stances of the literary snobs and charlatans in Balso's dream.

Once the nonsensical elements in the two brief introductory episodes are recognized as nonsensical, as a "game" played on the reader by West, much as Gilson plays "games" with his audience, the structure of the work takes on a completeness and unity of scope and attack many critics have denied it. The only significant structural weakness in *Balso Snell* is its unevenness of dramatic effect — a weakness in proportioning the episodes. Only the Gilson attack on the avant-garde audience and the Smeller incident have the necessary concentrated dramatic fullness demanded. The episodes prefacing these incidents are anemic in comparison, while those following are mostly over-developed, except for the seduction scene itself. However, in West's decade, no more strident satirical attack against artistic foolishness exists in American letters.

¹⁰⁵ Commerchero, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-61.

¹⁰⁶ Nathanael West, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, p. 61.

Chapter III

A Cool Million: A Warning To The Pigeons

"Do you think," said Candide, "that men have always massacred each other, as they do today? Have they always been liars, cheats, traitors, brigands, weak, flightly, cowardly, envious, gluttonous, drunken, grasping, and vicious, bloody, backbiting, debauched, fanatical, hypocritical and silly?" "Do you think," said Martin, "that sparrow-hawks have always eaten the pigeons they came across?"

— Voltaire, *Candide*

In *A Cool Million*, West wrote the satirical history of a naive All American boy, whose innocent optimism rivals that of Dr. Pangloss and Candide. The same episodic structure is used in both *A Cool Million* and *Candide*; furthermore, both of these anatomies or satires feature protagonists innocently victimized by the bromides and clichés of their respective eras. The simple-minded, honest Candide is sent into the world to test the maxim, "This is the best of all possible worlds," while West's Lemuel Pitkin seeks "a cool million" through the mythical methods of Horatio Alger. Both characters are dismantled in the process. Candide ultimately retreats into tending his garden; on the other hand, Pitkin, the country bumpkin, becomes a martyred dupe for political myth-makers and fanatical American nationalists.

In writing his satirical warning of the dangers of a latent fascism in America, West abandoned his own style to parody the Horatio Alger novels. Stripped of his singular style, West fails ultimately to write a work rivaling the universality of *Candide*. Thus, *A Cool Million* is West's only work that appears dated after some thirty years. However, the anatomy remains the best American effort of its kind written during West's decade and is perhaps the most successful political satire in American literature. Despite the stylistic limitations inherent in the parody form chosen by West, much of the work emerges as a significant, ironic commentary of America during the painful years of the 1930's.

As with *Balso Snell*, critics have too often evaluated *A Cool Million* as a novel rather than as an anatomy to be approached by the dictates and "touchstones" of that genre. Typical of such criticism is Comerchero's assertion that ". . . as a work of art [*A Cool Million*] is hardly worthy of sustained comment. It is a bag of tricks . . . it fails to achieve anything beyond a few laughs."¹⁰⁷ Comerchero reaches this conclusion by comparing the style and structure of *A Cool Million* with that of *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Such a comparison is essentially fallacious, for West is working in two separate genres. His purpose in *A Cool*

¹⁰⁷ Comerchero, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

Million is to present characters who embody the ideas and myths offered for popular consumption by America's mass media and politicians. Though comic in his attack, he warns of a latent totalitarianism which he feared existed in American society. He makes significant comments on a complex of themes: economic myths propagated by consumer romance, Aryan supremacy, latent social violence in the heritage of the myths of the frontier West, mob behavior, and the fantasies and psychology of demagogues.

Though sympathetic to the strong liberal political movement of the 1930's, West was too detached ever to become a devout member of any political party. In 1932 and 1933, West, his brother-in-law S. J. Perelman, and E. E. Cummings became regular contributors to the short-lived magazine, *Americana*, edited by Alexander King, George Grosz, and Gilbert Seldes.¹⁰⁸ In an opening editorial, they criticized and lampooned the Republicans, Democrats, Socialists, and Communists, concluding with a nihilistic credo:

We are Americans who believe that our civilization exudes a miasmatic stench and that we had better prepare to give it a decent but rapid burial. We are the laughing morticians of the present.¹⁰⁹

The phrase, "laughing morticians," is highly descriptive of the emotional tone which West assumes toward the "Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin," the subtitle of *A Cool Million*. West could personally picket companies and even be jailed for his efforts, as he was in 1935,¹¹⁰ but he could never allow sympathy to bias his satiric attack, because he shows in *A Cool Million* that communists and fascists alike are comic-grotesque swindlers and fakes. The work is considerably more than an "anti-capitalist satire,"¹¹¹ which indeed it is, but the communist portrayed in the work is an obese, over-fed, political henchman, who drives a limousine. In its attack on political, intellectual, and artistic quackery, *A Cool Million* is predominately a universal satire.

West's attack on the Alger myth echoes his preoccupation with literary frauds in *Balzo Snell*, his portrayal of the Hollywood dream-factory in *The Day of the Locust*, and his attack on literary escapism in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Furthermore, West delivered a speech in San Francisco in 1936, before a regional meeting of the League of American Writers, entitled "Makers of Mass Neuroses."¹¹² West was ultimately a moralist attempting fervently to exorcize the evils of a mass culture — a culture he felt to be facing doom at the hands of its myth-makers.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, p. 175.

¹⁰⁹ *Loc. cit.*

¹¹⁰ Light, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

¹¹¹ Daniel Aaron, "Late Thoughts on Nathanael West," *Massachusetts Review* (Winter/Spring, 1965), p. 316.

¹¹² Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, p. 175.

¹¹³ Comerchero, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

His Grosz-like characters spasmodically jerk and blindly reel through comic-pathetic episode after episode, the victims of fraudulent myths. In a romantic-realistic style, John Steinbeck portrayed an anonymous heroic mass working nobly for a selfless cause in the proletarian novel, *In Dubious Battle*, while West portrayed only the abjectly ridiculous and grotesque which he felt inherent in the sham rhetoric and deluded dreams of mass movements.

As an Alger parody, protagonist Pitkin is the ironic embodiment of the white-Protestant American Dream; he mortgages the family cow and heroically leaves Ratsville, Vermont, to seek his fortune by emulating the hard work and honesty of Lincoln and Henry Ford. More unfortunate than even *Candide*, Pitkin suffers from the teachings of a man who is not only a successful fool but also a swindler; Pitkin's teacher is Nathan "Shagpoke" Whipple, an ex-president of the United States and present president of Rat River National Bank.¹¹⁴ Whipple lies so well and so often that the reader ultimately comes to realize that Whipple not only deludes his followers but also himself. He daily makes fervent nationalistic speeches for public consumption in front of his home:

All hail Old Glory! May you be the joy and pride of the American heart, alike when your gorgeous folds shall wanton in the summer air and your tattered fragments be dimly seen through clouds of war! May you ever wave in honor, hope and profit, in unsullied glory and patriotic fervor, on the dome of the Capitol, on the tented plain, on the wave-rocked topmast and on the roof of this garage!¹¹⁵

In the back of his garage Whipple keeps all of the necessary adornments: a cracker-barrel, boxes, spittoon, a hot stove, and a picture of Lincoln. Also, he owns a wealth of bromides and homilies: "This is the land of opportunity and the world is an oyster."¹¹⁶ He preaches, "America . . . takes care of the honest and industrious and never fails them as long as they are both."¹¹⁷ He champions John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford, as he urges the gullible Pitkins to emulate their honesty and industry. Whipple is anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, and anti-Negro. His destiny is to organize the National Revolutionary Party or "Leather Shirts,"¹¹⁸ whose uniform is a coonskin cap, a deer-skin shirt, a pair of moccasins, and squirrel rifle. As a true demagogue, he ultimately promises the panacea of total employment; he rants against the Jewish International Bankers and the Bolshevik labor unions — his

¹¹⁴ Jay Martin writes that Calvin Coolidge was the acknowledged model for Whipple (see p. 227 of Martin's biography).

¹¹⁵ Nathanael West, *A Cool Million*, pp. 146-147. All references are to the edition published in *The Complete Works of Nathanael West*.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

favorite scapegoats aside from non-Aryans. Advocating the triumph of the revolutionary middle class, he calls for violence: "We must purge our country of all the alien elements and ideas that now infest her. America for Americans!"¹¹⁹ In lampooning Shagpoke's folksy rhetoric, West makes this pseudo-patriot a crook, a swindler, and a fantastic fool. Having secured the family cow as collateral, Shagpoke lends Pitkin thirty dollars for ninety days at twelve per cent interest collected in advance.

With money in his pocket and a myth in his head, Pitkin leaves for New York City to make his fortune. He is quickly victimized by confidence men, policemen, lawyers, judges, wardens, and politicians (capitalists, fascists, and communists alike). In quick sequence, Pitkin's naive optimism costs him his money, his teeth, a thumb, an eye, a leg, his scalp, and ultimately his life. Pitkin must endure witnessing his feminine counterpart and girl friend be raped, kidnapped and forced into white slavery, rescued, and raped again. Mangled in riot after riot, Pitkin is constantly the victim, whose dismantling occurs against the backdrop of the Great Depression, with its hungry mobs. Every time Pitkin innocently turns to the police for help, he is falsely arrested, often kicked in the groin and head, beaten senseless, tried, prosecuted, and jailed. In traveling to New York to make his fortune, he is falsely arrested and sentenced to fifteen years in prison (he is later pardoned). In prison, he suffers under the penal cures of Warden Purdy, who immediately draws all of Pitkin's teeth and orders that he take daily a series of ice-cold showers as a prevention of morbidity:

"In my eyes," he said, "the sick are never guilty. You are merely sick, as are all criminals. And for your other argument; please remember that an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure. Because you have never had a toothache does not mean that you will never have one."¹²⁰

The humor and absurdity, the pursuit of a logic to its exaggerated, insane conclusion is the same technique used later by novelists of the absurd. In this sense, the Warden Purdy incident strongly anticipates techniques of the absurd used by Joseph Heller (*Catch-22*) in satirizing psychiatric treatment during World War II:

There was only one catch and that was *Catch-22*, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹²⁰ Nathanael West, *A Cool Million*, p. 166.

¹²¹ Joseph Heller, *Catch 22*, p. 47.

The countless coincidences, the slapstick action, the use of stereotyped characters, and the mocking of cliché after cliché, all are additional techniques West used to ridicule the mannerisms of the Alger novels. In addition to Shagpoke Whipple, Lemuel Pitkin, and Betty Prail, West introduces the following Alger types in the first three chapters: Sarah Pitkins, mother of Lemuel, an aging, kind, poor, helpless widow; Mr. Slempe, villainous, rich lawyer; Squire Bird, villainous land owner; and Tom Baxter, the town bully.

Baxter is important to West's ridicule of the romance, for a fearless rescue from danger of an All-American girl by an All-American boy is fundamental to any melodramatic, indigenous romance. In chapter three of *A Cool Million*, Lemuel rescues Betty Prail from the attack of Baxter's mad bulldog. Having killed the dog, Pitkin must fight Baxter, ". . . a stout fellow three years older than himself, with a face in which the animal seemed to predominate."¹²²

True to sentimental formula, Pitkin proves too fearless and skilled a fighter for Baxter to fairly defeat. The demands of the moronic cliché dictate that Baxter be won in friendship by Pitkin's skill and conduct. West, however, has Baxter trick Pitkin into shaking his hand; then, Baxter squeezes Pitkin until the poor innocent is insensible. Baxter then strips the unconscious Betty of her clothes, rapes her, and leaves her unconscious in the bushes, where she is discovered by white-slavers and taken to New York to adorn the Colonial American Room of Wu Fong's whorehouse.

The demands of the consumer romance require that characters such as Betty constantly defend their threatened chastity, as did Pamela, and remain virginal and pure until wedlock. Betty Prail, however, is molested and raped before she is old enough to defend herself. Orphaned at the age of twelve when her parents die in a fire, she is raped by a drunken volunteer fireman, one of a gang who loots the Prail's home while it burns.

In addition to satirizing, in Leslie Fiedler's phrase, the "Good Good girl"¹²³ of consumer fiction, West uses the episodes at Wu Fong's House of All Nations to strike at the Myth of Aryan supremacy. Betty is billed as the house's star attraction:

Wu Fong was confident that he would soon have six hundred dollars back with interest, for many of his clients were from non-Aryan countries and would appreciate the services of a genuine American. 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.¹²⁴

¹²² Nathanael West, *A Cool Million*, p. 152.

¹²³ Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, p. 316.

¹²⁴ Nathanael West, *A Cool Million*, p. 169.

West's later descriptions of the interior and the decorations of Wu Fong's house are, paradoxically, both a strength and weakness, for they mark the turning point at which West begins to introduce more of his own style and less of the mock-Alger prose. Though the transition breaks the tone and texture of the work, it also enables West to treat as burlesque the moronic popular romances, while implementing his own surrealistic style for the more profoundly nightmarish aspects of the American Dream as it crashes to rock bottom. Through his portrait of the business-like Wu Fong, and his compatriot, Asa Goldstein, an antique dealer, West offers a record of the shift toward fervent nationalism. Mindful of this shift, Wu Fong hires Goldstein:

He engaged Mr. Asa Goldstein to redecorate the house, and that worthy designed a Pennsylvania Dutch, Old South, Log Cabin Pioneer, Victorian New York, Western Cattle Days, California Monterrey, Indian, and Modern Girl series of interiors.¹²⁵

Motivated by his shrewd observation of fashions' fickle barometer and a Hearst paper's "Buy American" campaign, Wu Fong procures the services of new girls, properly costumed, for each of his provincial rooms and even offers an appropriate cuisine to match. Thus, a patron hiring the services of "Alice Sweethorne from Paducah, Kentucky. . . dressed in homespun, butternut stained,"¹²⁶ might also enjoy a meal of "sow belly with grits and bourbon."¹²⁷ Wu Fong, of course, does not replace All-American Girl Betty Prail, who fits equally well into any of the redecorated surroundings.

Pitkin has been pardoned from prison, but before he is reunited with Betty Prail, he first experiences a series of episodes that cost him his health, the additional money he was earned, and an eye. Finally, he manages to escape New York in the company of General Shagpoke Whipple, Betty, and Jake Raven, an Indian chief. Their destination is the Sierra Mountains of California, where Whipple and Raven intend to dig for gold to finance the National Revolutionary Army. The Sierra Mountain episodes serve West as a means to broaden greatly his attack on the myth-makers of America. Having lampooned the morality and wisdom of the Alger myth, and by implication, the pulp romance, he next attacks the violence propagated through the American myth of the Western badman and the social irresponsibility incited by certain members of the intellectual class. Two characters are introduced to implement the attack; the Missouri Pike County Man and the Indian Chief, Israel Satinpenny.

The Missouri Pike County Man is a parody of the dime-western tough guy:

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

He wore a red flannel shirt, pants of leather with the hair still on them and a Mexican sombrero. He had a bowie knife in his boot and displayed two pearl-handled revolvers very ostentatiously.¹²⁸

To an innocent, inoffensive comment made by Pitkin, the badman snaps:

. . . You'd better not rile me, stranger, for I'm powerful bad. You don't know me, you don't. I'm a rip-tail roarer and ring-tail squealer, I am. I always kills the man what riles me.¹²⁹

The badman's one solution to any personal affront is to shoot his offender. West has included him in *A Cool Million* to ridicule the violence, brutality, and lawlessness of the primitive myth of frontier justice that is so large a part of the inheritance of America. Within a few years, Walter Van Tilberg Clark, through the genre of historical realism, examined frontier justice in *The Ox-Bow Incident* — a work whose central purpose also was to warn America against the dangers of totalitarianism inherent in her myths.

West's Pike County Man ultimately rapes and kidnaps Betty, shoots Jake Raven ("The only good Injun is a dead one, is what I alluz say."¹³⁰), and severs Pitkin's leg by placing a bear trap in his path. Indians who come to avenge the wounds of Jake Raven find Pitkin and, believing him to be their enemy, loot his glass eye and false teeth. The leader of this raiding party is Israel Satinpenny, Harvard graduate. An anarchist disgusted with the society which has educated him, he becomes within the economic context of the satire ". . . the necessary product of capitalism and a reflection of the 'inner-contradictions' which will eventually destroy middle-class society."¹³¹ Satinpenny's prototype in West's fiction is John Gilson of *Balso Snell*, who shares the same animosities toward the middle class.

The choice of "Israel" for a first name is appropriate for the apocalyptic Old Testament predictions of doom the Indian preaches, much as does West himself. Yet unlike West, he is an advocate of violence, who calls for revolution. As an Indian and an intellectual, Satinpenny belongs in part to a tradition of American primitivism that celebrates the beauties of nature over the evils of civilization. He berates the white man's civilization for introducing to the continent syphilis, the radio, tuberculosis, and the cinema, exclaiming to his fellow Indians that the White Man's ". . . final gift to us is doubt, a soul-corroding doubt. He rotted this land in the name of progress. . . ." ¹³²

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

¹³¹ Locke, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 232.

In his call for cataclysmic social conflagration, Satinpenny portrays modern, urbanized man as a nefarious polluter:

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 rivers with refuse. What, in his wisdom, was he doing? I'll tell you. He was making clever cigarette lighters. He was making paper bags, door knobs, leatherette satchels. All the powers of water, air and earth he made to turn his wheels within wheels within wheels. They turned, sure enough, and the land was flooded with toilet paper, painted boxes to keep pins in, key rings, watch fobs, leatherette satchels.

Don't mistake me, Indians. I'm no Rousseauistic philosopher. I know that you can't put the clock back. But here is one thing you can do. You can stop that clock. You can smash that clock.¹³³

Nostalgic romanticism offered no exits for West, and he viewed with horror America's nurturing of violence. The horror he feared most was the communal spirit of the mob aroused by the Shagpokes and Satinpennys of America. When Satinpenny speaks, however, of America's "dying of a surfeit of shoddy,"¹³⁴ he does become the voice of West. As West's close friend, Josephine Herbst, has noted, "The heavy weight of *Things* pressed hard upon. . . West."¹³⁵ America's spawning of shoddy, fabricated manufactured goods, art, and architecture fills the pages of West's last book, *The Day of the Locust*, as it is also the target of Pitkin's next episode.

His leg amputated, Pitkin at the beginning of the episode recuperates in a hospital. At this point, Shagpoke reveals a humanity that saves him from being a total caricature. He spends his last funds for Pitkin's hospital bills, and visits the boy daily, bringing oranges and wild flowers he gathers. Well enough to travel, Pitkin and Shagpoke ultimately rejoin Chief Jake Raven, who has recovered from the bullets of the Pike County Man. Raven now sells a secret Indian elixir as part of the offerings of a road show—"Chambers of American Horrors Animate and Inanimate Hideosities." The show is managed by Sylvanus Snodgrasse, a pseudo-poet and satiric representative of the political propagandist. Having no talent, Snodgrasse has been unable to sell his poems:

Like many another "poet," he blamed his literary failure on the American public instead of on his own lack of talent, and his desire

¹³³ *Loc. cit.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

¹³⁵ Josephine Herbst, "Nathanael West," *Kenyon Review*, XXIII (Autumn, 1961), 622.

for revolution was really a desire for revenge. Furthermore, having lost faith in himself, he thought it his duty to undermine the nation's faith in itself.¹³⁶

Snodgrasse's show is sponsored by both the International Jewish Bankers and the Communists. The absurd coupling of two such disparate organizations under one banner is West's means of emphasizing Whipple's search for scapegoats to advance his own particular brand of totalitarianism. Whipple joins the show to plot the nation's ultimate overthrow. West's gothic, surrealist description of the show itself is the highlight of the episode. The show's first part consists of objects culled from the popular art of the country and manufactured articles:

The hall which led to the main room of the inanimate exhibit was lined with sculptures in plaster. Among the most striking of these was a Venus de Milo with a clock in her abdomen, a copy of Power's "Greek Slave" with elastic bandages on all her joints, A Hercules wearing a small, compact truss. . . .

All was not medical, however. 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 carpicks, 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.¹³⁷

In this passage West himself is speaking as social critic of the grotesque and the shoddy, and emphasizes that the relationship between his descriptions of the grotesque and the propagandistic plays of Snodgrasse that follow is negligible. The second part consists of a dramatic skit:

It was called "The Pageant of America or A Curse on Columbus," . . . in which Quakers were shown being branded, Indians brutalized and cheated, Negroes sold, children sweated to death. Snodgrasse tried to make obvious the relationship between these sketches and the 'inanimate' exhibit by a little speech in which he claimed that the former had resulted in the latter. His arguments were not very convincing, however.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Nathanael West, *A Cool Million*, p. 238.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

West's ability to criticize a society while he is also satirizing many of its critics gives the work a universality of attack, elevating it above mere satirical propaganda and accounting for its significance and appeal some thirty years after its publication.

Hoping eventually to incite a mob to lynch Snodgrasse, Whipple must wait for the show to move into the South, for he distrusts Detroit's population of Jews, Catholics, and members of unions. He finds his "really American town"¹³⁹ in Beulah, located on the southern Mississippi River. He organizes a meeting of the town's white, Protestant population, who assemble ". . . under a famous tree from whose every branch a Negro had dangled at one time or another."¹⁴⁰

West understood well the rhetorical tools of the politician who must appeal to bigotry in the rural South. Shagpoke compliments his audience on the beauty and chastity of its women and the gallantry of its men; he extols Protestant virtues and damns the socialists and Bolsheviks; and he pays tribute to the memory of the spirit of Jefferson Davis. To instigate mob-violence, Whipple strikes at the sexual fears of his audience — fears already rubbed raw by the myths of Negro lust and promiscuity:

You stand here now, under this heroic tree, like the free men you are, but tomorrow you will become the slaves of Socialists and Bolsheviks. Your sweethearts and wives will become the common property of foreigners to maul and mouth at their leisure.¹⁴¹

Whipple calls for the audience to lynch Snodgrasse but the poet escapes. In the riot that follows all reason vanishes. West portrays the majority of rioters and looters as having no knowledge of whom they are to lynch or any purposes other than destruction and communal, mob-animal delight.

Penniless, Pitkin escapes Beulah after being shot at several times. Returning to New York, he lives in a piano crate in Central Park, while Whipple's newly organized army sweeps through Dixie, takes the West, and marches on Chicago. Abjectly dismantled in body and spirit, Pitkin still musters the hope that he may earn his cool million. The only work he finds, however, is a job as a stooge for the comedy team of Riley and Robbins.

Having shown the political mob animal at riot, West focuses next on the mob animal's comic delights in a brutal portrait of a burlesque house audience. Dressed in an old, ill-fitting Prince Albert, Lemuel's job is to stand silently between the two comics who club him with tightly rolled newspapers, until he loses an eye, his teeth, or wig. A box in front of Pitkin contains an assortment of toupees, false teeth, and

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

¹⁴⁰ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

glass eyes, from which he replaces the objects lost. The act culminates when Pitkin is completely dismantled by blows from "an enormous wooden mallet labeled 'The Works.'" ¹⁴² The audience is treated to a surprise ending when his wooden leg is 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. ¹⁴³

Ultimately Pitkin is marked for martyrdom when Whipple moves his army against New York City. Duped into delivering a political speech prepared by an aid of Whipple, Pitkin is assassinated.

In the satire's concluding scene, the regimented youth of America celebrate Whipple's victory. As they parade past Dictator Whipple's Fifth Avenue reviewing stand, they sing:

"Who dares" — this was L. Pitkin's cry,
As striding on the Bijou stage he came —
"Surge out with me in Shagpoke's name,
For him to live, for him to die?"
A million hands flung up reply,
A million voices answered, "I!" ¹⁴⁴

The paraders stop at the reviewing stand, and Shagpoke, the mob's Messiah, speaks:

"What," he says, "made Lemuel Pitkin great? Let us examine his life. First we see him as a small boy, light of foot, fishing for bull-heads in the Rat River of Vermont. Later, he attends the Ottsville High School, where he is captain of the nine and an excellent outfielder. Then he leaves for the big city to make his fortune. All this is in the honorable tradition of his country and its people and he has the right to expect certain rewards. Jail is his first reward. Poverty his second. Violence is his third. Death is his last." ¹⁴⁵

Whipple continues by arguing that Pitkin's greatness may be attributed to his faith in American fair play and the chance of every boy ". . . to make his fortune by industry and probity without being laughed at or conspired against by sophisticated aliens." ¹⁴⁶ The myth-maker concludes with the assurance that the National Revolutionary Party has

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 250.

¹⁴³ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

¹⁴⁶ *Loc. cit.*

purged the American People of "alien diseases."¹⁴⁷ *A Cool Million* closes with the throng's shouting: "Hail, Lemuel Pitkin! ! ! All hail, the American Boy!"¹⁴⁸

By his strident ridicule of the crass aspect of the American Dream, by his lampooning of a cross-section of American myths and myth-makers, and by his satiric dissection of the demagogue's fantasies and the psychology of the mob animal, West suggests that much in American culture and thought passes beneath the lowest levels of art, myth, and imagination, reaching the depth ". . . at which an imaginative vision of an eternal world becomes an experience of it."¹⁴⁹ When West spoke of violence being idiomatic to American art, he was attesting in part to mass man's proclivity to a savagery in which the boundaries between myth, fantasy, symbol, and reality dissolve. Victimized by myths, West's mass man seeks flesh-and-blood Messiahs, and attempts literally to live his dramas and his fantasies. He seeks comedy through the witnessing of actual brutality, and primitive catharsis through the communal mob's search for a *pharmakos* or scapegoat.¹⁵⁰

West wrote his work during an era when hob-nailed boots clicked on the streets of Berlin, as Hitler acted out in Germany's arenas a savage, demonic melodrama that exploded into the monstrous violence of World War II. Hitler's propagandistic weapon was his ability to rejuvenate primitive myths, long half-dormant, and to make of life a savage drama. West saw in America the potential threat of similar myths and warned of a latent social savagery constantly nursed by violence and by a primitively naive, melodramatic search for scapegoats for our social ills. Thus, West, ironically, reverses the consumer fiction versions of the American Dream, and Lemuel Pitkin, the American Boy, becomes the real life *pharmakos* of America's confidence men and the absurd saint of a deceived populace.

As an anatomy of American myth, *A Cool Million* deserves the status of a minor classic. Its one major flaw resides in West's curbing in part his own style to parody the Alger books. Nor does *A Cool Million* have the richness and complexity that is achieved by the combination of the anatomy, the romance, and the novel forms present in *The Day of the Locust*, or the intense dramatic effect of *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Such, however, is more an inherent self-limitation of the parody and the anatomy than a weakness in West's artistry. To criticize *A Cool Million* or *Balso Snell* as inferior novels in comparison to West's other works is to state a preference for the novel form over the anatomy — little more.

¹⁴⁷ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁴⁸ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁴⁹ Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Chapter IV

Miss Lonelyhearts: History's Savage Joke

"And God said, Let there be Light; and there was darkness o'er the face of the earth."

— Aldous Huxley, *Antic Hay*

The cynical parodies of religion delivered by Coleman, a young intellectual in Huxley's *Antic Hay*, are as acrid as those spoken by Shrike, the intellectual cynic and feature editor in Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, a work which Hyman calls one of the three greatest American novels of the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁵¹ Appropriately named by West after the butcher bird, Shrike, a feature editor of a large-circulation daily newspaper, is a myth-maker; his business is the manufacturing of dreams, yet all of man's aspirations and dreams are to him but a joke to be parodied in private ("Tears of Miss L, wash me."¹⁵²) and capitalized on in public, in print. Through *Miss Lonelyhearts* (the male protagonist has no other name) and Shrike, West focuses on the spiritual wasteland of mass lives and the sterility and hysteria of the world in which men pathetically clutch for myths, or, as Shrike does, refuse to *feel*, seeking retreat into total cynicism.

If, as Hyman suggested, *Miss Lonelyhearts* represents a strident extension of the sense of melancholy and bitterness of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*,¹⁵³ West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* is also definitely indebted to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: "[West's] vision of the contemporary scene seems to have differed little from Eliot's, except for a suggested solution: West had none."¹⁵⁴ The similarities between West's work and Eliot's is essentially imagistic and only partially thematic. While both writers saw contemporary man as spiritually crippled by *things* and by a corroding doubt, Eliot offered man hope through a rebirth of the traditional myths of Christianity. In contrast, West concentrated his attack on a new system of savage myths being brewed daily out of the pulp pots of the mass press and mass media. While Eliot eventually offered "The Rock" of a perpetual church, West portrayed the nihilistic depths of modern hate in the character of Shrike:

"Miss Lonelyhearts, my friend, I advise you to give your readers stones. When they ask for bread don't give them crackers as does the Church, and don't like the State, tell them to eat cake. Explain

¹⁵¹ Stanley Edgar Hyman, introductory essay to *Miss Lonelyhearts*, p. 28.

¹⁵² Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, p. 29.

¹⁵³ Hyman, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹⁵⁴ Comerchero, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

that man cannot live by bread alone and give them stones. Teach them to pray each morning: 'Give us this day our daily stone.'"¹⁵⁵

Miss Lonelyhearts himself is unable to continue as a columnist or a myth-maker -- a job he had originally taken as a cynical joke. Once he begins to feel for the incurable suffering of those to whom he has dispensed clichés, he loses his job, his sanity, and his life. Ironically the victim of his own myth, he does not attempt to become a Christian man, but instead tries to be the Messiah, only pathetically to terminate his efforts as a very mortal schizophrenic without a single disciple.

The Westian vision, thus, is strongly ironic, particularly in Northrop Frye's sense of the ironic mode's focus on weak and powerless characters held captive in an absurd world.¹⁵⁶ Frye's theory of modes accounts for the development of literature in terms of an evolution from myth through romance, high mimetic, and low mimetic to the present ironic mode predominating many intellectuals' vision of man and his relationship to his universe. Choosing to define in terms of the hero's power of action, Frye asserts that the five epochs of Western literature can be characterized roughly as follows:

1. If superior in *kind* both to other men and to the environment of other men, the hero is a divine being, and the story about him will be a *myth* in the common sense of a story about a god. . . .
2. If superior in *degree* to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of *romance*, whose actions are marvelous but who is himself identified as a human being. . . .
3. If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature. This is the hero of the *high mimetic* mode, of most epics and tragedy, and is primarily the kind of hero that Aristotle had in mind.
4. If superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us: we respond to a sense of his common humanity, and demand from the poet the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience. This gives us the low mimetic mode, of most comedy and of realistic fiction. . . .
5. If inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity, the hero belongs to the *ironic mode*.¹⁵⁷

The relevance of Frye's distinctions in terms of West's works lies in West's use of the ironic mode to compassionately ridicule man's ultimate need to function in a world in which myth or romance or at

¹⁵⁵ Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, p. 56.

¹⁵⁶ Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹⁵⁷ *Loc. cit.*

least a high mimetic mode or perspective predominate his psyche and his spiritual vision. *Balso Snell* is filled with a profound *angst* over the separation of the poet from his audience. West recognized that if the serious writer or poet was for centuries the high priest of men's psyches, he has essentially become less so for modern man. Once the traditional Judeo-Christian and Hellenic myths and concepts of metaphysical order were threatened by the sciences and philosophies that have erupted during the past one hundred years, the mass of men turned to an entirely different set of mythical and romance visions which have been propagated in part by the totalitarian state and in part by the media of a commercialized culture — movies, newspapers, comics and consumer fiction. Thus, West has Pitkin accept with primitive intelligence the consumer romance version of Henry Ford and Abraham Lincoln as reality, and Miss Lonelyhearts fantastically sees his own position as an advice columnist as that of a Christ. He attempts not to become a Christian adherent but instead the Saviour himself.

Since West's tone in approaching his themes is both ironic and pathetic, and since he must actually encompass both myth and irony in the same moment, his choice of forms makes his novel's structure highly complex. *Miss Lonelyhearts* is generally praised structurally since those aspects of the novel form that predominate the work are more structurally conventional than those used by West in *The Day of the Locust*. The praise for *Miss Lonelyhearts* centers on its roundness of characterization (Miss Lonelyhearts' character evolves through a series of complex emotional stages), and West's use of point of view is called "superbly consistent."¹⁵⁸ However, blended with the novel form are strong elements of the anatomy, the romance, and the confessional. Aside from Miss Lonelyhearts, Shrike is the only character in the book who is other than two-dimensional. All others are caricatures used to represent spiritual or intellectual states of being and, as such, are essentially anatomical. In fact, the work has been called a contemporary *Pilgrim's Progress* by Volpe.¹⁵⁹ The work's style ("... hysteria, a snake whose scales are tiny mirrors in which the dead world takes on a semblance of life"¹⁶⁰) is certainly of a kind more generally associated with the romance form than with the novel. Also, a strong confessional aspect further influences the novel's form, as West uses numerous letters throughout the work — letters that had their counterpart in reality, for West had seen four years prior to completing his work a collection of letters owned by a columnist writing for the *Brooklyn Eagle* under the name "Susan Chester."¹⁶¹

Serving as expressions of misery that cannot be cured nor even salvaged,¹⁶² the letters from "sick-of-it-all," "Desperate," and "Harold S.,"

¹⁵⁸ Tibbetts, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁵⁹ Edmond L. Volpe, "The Wasteland of Nathanael West," *Renascence*, XLII (Winter, 1961), 74.

¹⁶⁰ Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, p. 42.

¹⁶¹ Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

in chapter one are the fulcrum between which the characters of Miss Lonelyhearts and Editor Shrike are balanced. "Desperate" is a sixteen-year-old girl born without a nose:

What did I do to deserve such a terrible bad fate? Even if I did do some bad things I didn't do any before I was a year old and I was born this way. I asked Papa and he says he doesn't know, but that maybe I did something in the other world before I was born or that maybe I was being punished for his sins. I don't believe that because he is a very nice man. Ought I commit suicide?

Sincerely yours,
Desperate¹⁶³

"Sick-of-it-all" is a middle-aged Catholic woman who suffers great pain during every pregnancy. She has had seven children in twelve years, has been twice operated on to relieve acute kidney pains, and faces possible death with the birth of each new child. Fifteen-year-old Harold S. writes Miss Lonelyhearts for help for his thirteen-year-old sister, Gracie, a deaf mute, who has been raped by a stranger:

If I tell mother she will beat Grace up awful because I am the only one who loves her and last time when she tore her dress they [the parents] loked her in the closet for 2 days and if the boys on the blok hear about it they will say dirty things like they did on Peewee Conors sister the time she got caught in the lots. So please what could you do if the same hapened to your family.

Yours truly,
Harold S.¹⁶⁴

Miss Lonelyhearts had taken the job as adviser to the lovelorn as a joke and as a possible step toward becoming society editor, but at the novel's beginning, he can no longer laugh at such suffering nor write with any success the glib clichés and platitudes demanded of him. As he sits brooding over his lead sentence ("Life is worthwhile, for it is full of dreams and peace. . ." ¹⁶⁵), Shrike enters, addresses a few cynical remarks, and then dictates to Miss Lonelyhearts a new beginning for the column:

"Art is a Way Out." Do not let life overwhelm you. When the old paths are choked with the debris of failure, look for newer and fresher paths. . . . For those who have not the talent to create, there is appreciation.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Podhoretz, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

¹⁶³ Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, p. 32.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Such strident counterpoint is maintained by West throughout the entire work. Each of the chapters is short and dramatic, and there is a constant play or tension created between the ironic events and the suffering captured in the letters and suggested in the style. Light suggests that most of the minor characters in the book act as subordinate states of mind for Miss Lonelyhearts, creating a "static pictorial quality."¹⁶⁷ Thus, the minor characters contrast against ". . . the growing alienation of Miss Lonelyhearts. . . and leave one remembering a series of independent pictures."¹⁶⁸ Certainly an imagistic frame-like quality exists; however, the novel's structure is actually more dramatic than Light suggests. In fact the work moves rapidly toward an ironic climax in which Miss Lonelyhearts is freed at last of Shrike's nefarious influence, so that Miss Lonelyhearts' pathetic death becomes but an anti-climax — the inevitable result of his insanity. His only victory is his freedom from Shrike's poisonous words — words he himself has used earlier for their cash value.

Having limited himself in chapter one almost exclusively to presenting the letters and to establishing the conflict between Shrike and Miss Lonelyhearts, West unleashes his descriptive powers in chapter two, bringing into full play almost all the remaining major techniques he employs throughout the work. The first of these techniques is the use of Eliotian images to describe nature, using exterior reality as a register of inner reality.¹⁶⁹

Miss Lonelyhearts leaves the newspaper office, sickened by his work: "He stopped reading. Christ was the answer, but, if he did not want to get sick, he had to stay away from the Christ business."¹⁷⁰ As he steps outside the newspaper building, "the air smelt as though it had been artificially heated."¹⁷¹ On his way to a speakeasy to seek "the warm mud of alcoholic gloom,"¹⁷² he passes through a park:

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.¹⁷³

West further sustains an Eliotian tone as he acidly etches the corroding spiritual *angst* Miss Lonelyhearts suffers as the protagonist makes a Shrike-like joke that "went into a dying fall."¹⁷⁴ Miss Lonelyhearts is sickened that he has ". . . given his readers many stones; so many,

¹⁶⁷ Light, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

¹⁶⁸ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁶⁹ Volpe, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

¹⁷⁰ Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, p. 33.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁷⁴ *Loc. cit.*

in fact, that he had only one left — the stone that formed in his gut.”¹⁷⁵ West concludes his wasteland scene with an image of the new “god”:

. . . the gray sky looked as if it had been rubbed with a soiled eraser. It held no angels, flaming crosses, olives-bearing doves, wheels within wheels. Only a newspaper struggled in the air like a kite with a broken spine.¹⁷⁶

To restrict the pathos from broadening into a full sympathy toward Miss Lonelyhearts' world, West constantly off-sets such description with scathing irony. For example, Shrike viciously lashes at Miss Lonelyhearts in a scene in a speakeasy: “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. . . .”¹⁷⁷ Typical of the deft, ironic counterpoint West uses is the immediate appearance of Shrike's mannish mistress, who interrupts his salacious attack: “She had long legs, thick ankles, big hands, a powerful body, a slender neck and a childish face made tiny by a man's haircut.”¹⁷⁸ West ultimately creates some sympathy even for Shrike, whose great psychic wound has resulted partially from his pathetic marriage. Spiritually and sexually impotent, Shrike kills all emotion within himself, hiding behind the “dead, gray triangle”¹⁷⁹ that is his face. Also Shrike is certainly not a traditional villain, for he also is a victim. In entitling the second chapter “Miss Lonelyhearts and the Dead Pan,” West makes an ironic mythological reference to Shrike — his emotions long ago destroyed by cynicism, he is all intellect, a symbolic mathematic triangle. Also within this same chapter, West displays his skills for compact caricature. As an allegorical character from a contemporary *Everyman*, Shrike's mistress, Miss Farkis, represents what Locke has termed “cocktail Christianity.”¹⁸⁰ “Get me a drink and please continue. I'm very much interested in the new thomistic synthesis.”¹⁸¹

Also, contained in chapter two is a particularly Westian image of the spiritual oppressiveness of an age of machines and gadgets — a motif appearing throughout the work. Shrike facetiously defends indigenous American religion by citing an Associated Press news story reporting the use of an adding machine by a sect to tabulate a prayer for a condemned man's soul.¹⁸²

The last major technique appearing in chapter two is West's repeated use of surrealistic imagery. Though generally limited to describing Miss Lonelyhearts' fantasies and dreams, this technique first

¹⁷⁵ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁷⁶ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁷⁸ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁸⁰ Locke, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

¹⁸¹ Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, p. 38.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

appears as a rhetorical weapon when used by Shrike for ridicule: "In this jungle [the human body] flitting from rock-gray lungs to golden intestines. . . lives a bird called the soul."¹⁸³

Miss Lonelyhearts' ultimate struggle is to escape from Shrike's killing words and from his own spiritual weakness, for West's protagonist has also been a cynic for whom human suffering and dreams were a joke. Though West hated the tonnage of sham dumped daily on the consumer public by the popular press, he also felt compassion for the news fraternity. He portrays in a later episode the daily retreat of reporters to Delehanty's speakeasy and the bravado of their stories of sexual conquest:

They were aware of their childishness, but did not know how else to revenge themselves. At college, and perhaps for a year afterwards, they had believed in personal expression as an absolute end. When they lost this belief, they lost everything.¹⁸⁴

Typical of the recurring machine imagery and the clashing of one sentence against another for amplification of irony is West's concluding appraisal of these men:

A button machine makes buttons, no matter what the power used, foot steam or electricity. They, no matter what the motivating force, death, love or God, made jokes.¹⁸⁵

That Lonelyhearts' ultimate struggle to *feel* compassion and humility shall lead to his mad wish to have God proofread his columns is structurally foreshadowed in the work's third chapter, "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Lamb." With an Eliotian use of allusion, West portrays the protagonist reading the eloquent plea for love that appears in the Father Zossima section of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Miss Lonelyhearts reacts to the passage in the vulgar rhetoric of a commercialized work: "It was excellent advice. If he followed it, he would be a big success. His column would be syndicated and the whole world would learn to love."¹⁸⁶ Miss Lonelyhearts has too long been a hollow man, approaching emotion only through a hysteria that gives ". . . a semblance of life . . . how dead the world is . . . a world of doorknobs."¹⁸⁷ He pathetically stares at an ivory wall statue of Christ that refuses to be other than "decorative," and hysterically chants in pathetic pep-rally rhythm, "Christ, Christ, Jesus Christ. Christ, Christ, Jesus Christ."¹⁸⁸ It is a chant he had originally delivered as a college boy looking for

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁸⁷ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁸⁸ *Loc. cit.*

a cheap laugh. Afraid, he falls asleep, only to dream. In the first dream, he envisions himself a magician successfully commanding door-knobs to flower, bleed, and speak. Yet he is unable to lead his audience in simple prayer. In the second part of the dream, he relives a grotesque drunken night spent as a college student—a night that culminated sophomore discussions of religion in a ghoulish attempt to sacrifice a lamb only to have the knife break and the bleeding lamb escape. Lonelyhearts relives the experience of hunting for the animal and crushing its head with a stone, the same symbolic stone of despair that appears repeatedly to kill the traditional symbol of Christ.¹⁸⁹ Lonelyhearts clearly has dwelled too early and too long in a Shrikean emotional vacuum; he is earmarked for defeat, and his one victory can only be his escape of Shrike. Modern man is fatally and paradoxically trapped both by myth and by myth's absence.

In the chapter "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Fat Thumb," West introduces Betty, the girlfriend of the protagonist. The "fat thumb" is Miss Lonelyhearts' tongue as he attempts to communicate his despair. Betty is introduced by West as an innocent Eve, offering Miss Lonelyhearts the escape of nature and an island of order based on the denial of the ugly and the evil in the world. She is without concept of *angst* and spiritual draught; she can only conceive of Lonelyheart's changed behavior as the result of physical illness. During their quarrel, Lonelyhearts thinks of her as ". . . a kitten whose soft helplessness makes one ache to hurt it."¹⁹⁰ The episode foreshadows the perversion of love into sadism in the next chapter into which the reader is hurled.

Lonelyhearts retreats to a speakeasy, where he fantastically imagines himself ". . . an anarchist sitting in the movies with a bomb in his pocket. In a little while he would leave to kill the President."¹⁹¹ His mood lulled by alcohol, "he forgot that his heart was a bomb,"¹⁹² and nostalgically he recalls a pleasant moment from childhood. The account of that memory and its shattering by the realities of violence in Miss Lonelyhearts' world is brutally effective:

One winter evening, he had been waiting with his little sister for their father to come home from church. She was eight years old then, and he was twelve. Made sad by the pause between playing and eating, he had gone to the piano and had begun a piece by Mozart. It was the first time he had ever voluntarily gone to the piano. His sister left her picture book to dance to his music. She had never danced before. She danced gravely and carefully, a simple dance yet formal. . . . As Miss Lonelyhearts stood at the bar, swaying slightly to the remembered music, he thought of children dancing. Square replacing oblong and being replaced by

¹⁸⁹ Volpe, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

¹⁹⁰ Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyheart*, p. 50.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

circle. Every child, everywhere; in the whole world there was not one child who was not gravely, sweetly dancing.

He stepped away from the bar and accidentally collided with a man holding a glass of beer. When he turned to beg the man's pardon, he received a punch in the mouth.¹⁹³

Violence and hysteria are the commonplace idioms of Miss Lonelyhearts' world. Enraged, his idyllic memory shattered, Lonelyhearts is driven to the perversion of love into sadism by the hysteria that flows over him. The episode culminates with his cynically lashing out against a pitiful, aged homosexual, twisting his arm until he screams. Against the first memory of childhood, West clashes a second recollection:

Miss Lonelyhearts felt as he had felt years before, when he had accidently stepped on a small frog. Its spilled guts had filled him with pity, but when its sufferings had become real to his senses, his pity had turned to rage and he had beaten it frantically until it was dead.¹⁹⁴

The rising action of the novel, thus, is a swift cataloguing of various attempts to escape despair. Having pursued memory's avenues of childhood, and sadism, Lonelyhearts turns to sex, by attempting to seduce Mary Shrike, the wife of the editor. In a night-club called the "El Gaucho," where he has taken Mary, he contemplates the unreality of its decor which only saddens him. It was ". . . part of the business of dreams."¹⁹⁵ Nor can he any longer find amusements in advertisements "offering to teach writing, cartooning, engineering, to add inches to the biceps and to develop the bust."¹⁹⁶ Mary Shrike belongs to a dream world of childish romanticism. She wears a necklace with a medallion that hangs between her breasts. Lonelyhearts thinks it may have some religious significance, but finds its inscription to read: "Awarded by the Boston Latin School for first place in the 100 yd. dash."¹⁹⁷ Mary's fantasies center on romanticizing her mother who died of cancer of the breast and her father who was a portrait painter, "a man of genius."¹⁹⁸ A middle-aged woman, Mary uses her breasts for flirtation, much as "the coquettes of long ago had used their fans."¹⁹⁹ She wants only to be fondled like a young excited girl, but is ultimately frightened by sex.

Miss Lonelyhearts, himself a sexual cripple, as his name implies, invariably fails in his attempted sexual escapes. In an attempt to make

¹⁹³ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁹⁶ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁹⁸ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

love to a woman who has written for help, he can see her only as a "police captain."²⁰⁰ Her massive hams ". . . were like two enormous grindstones,"²⁰¹ and it is she who is the aggressor, as Miss Lonelyhearts finds ". . . strange pleasure in having the roles reversed."²⁰² When she undressed, she ". . . made sea sounds; something flapped like a sail; there was the creak of ropes; then he heard a wave-against-a-wharf smack of rubber on flesh."²⁰³ West is using the sea, traditional symbol of procreation, ironically, as Miss Lonelyhearts later ". . . crawled out of bed like an exhausted swimmer leaving the surf."²⁰⁴ Sexual impotence is directly related with spiritual death in West's work, as it is in the novels of D. H. Lawrence and the poems of T. S. Eliot. Randall Reid errors in asserting that any homosexual interpretation of the novel requires us to ignore many of "the novel's details," for West uses sexual impotence and perversion as metaphors for man's total psychic misery.²⁰⁵

Physically sickened by sexual intercourse, Miss Lonelyhearts falls into a catatonic sleep for two days. He has become increasingly sensitive to the suffocation by *things* in our society. Earlier he sees the world as a desert ". . . not of sand, but of rust and body dirt, surrounded by a backyard fence. . . ." ²⁰⁶ On this fence are posters describing the news of the day, all of it violent. In the middle of the yard "Desperate" and "Broken-hearted" are spelling out his name ". . . using faded photographs, soiled fans, time-tables, playing cards, broken toys, imitation jewelry. . . ." ²⁰⁷ To West's vision, the world's junk looms large in the dreams of a mass culture. Miss Lonelyhearts imagines himself seated in a pawnshop window ". . . full of fur coats, diamond rings, watches, shotguns, fishing tackle. . . the paraphernalia of suffering."²⁰⁸

West relies heavily on surrealistic images to suggest Miss Lonelyhearts' suffering and quest. In his feverish fantasy, Miss Lonelyhearts plunges into the piles of pawned objects and shapes them first into a phallus and then a heart and later into ". . . a circle, triangle, square, swastika . . . a gigantic cross."²⁰⁹

When Betty later visits him, he attempts to communicate his despair over the letters and his self-examination which has revealed to him ". . . that he is the victim of a joke and not its perpetrator."²¹⁰ But she thinks him a fool, recommends the country, tells him ". . . all

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

²⁰¹ *Loc. cit.*

²⁰² *Loc. cit.*

²⁰³ *Loc. cit.*

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁰⁵ Randall Reid, *The Fiction of Nathanael West*, p. 77.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

his troubles were city troubles.”²¹¹ Shrike mocks Betty with an anatomical cataloguing of the avenues of escape open to modern man: “You buy a farm and walk behind your horse’s moist behind, no collar or tie, plowing your broad swift acres. . . .”²¹²

In his parodies, Shrike attacks all the fantasies and dreams conjured up by the mass media for popular consumption: the Rural Life, Hedonism, the South Seas, and Art. The parodies are sustained for five pages and surpass the best of Aldous Huxley’s. Shrike ultimately directs his vindictive attack toward Miss Lonelyhearts himself:

God alone is our escape. 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
. . . .”²¹³

Shrike’s techniques as an intellectual hater are caricature, ridicule, and blasphemy used as an effort to reduce all emotion to a black humor.²¹⁴ All his verbal skill is directed toward leveling the world by concocting grotesque poetic conceits welded out of aspirations and dreams (the church) and man’s material realities (Father, Son and Wirehaired Fox Terrier). Existing in an emotional and spiritual vacuum, he must attack Miss Lonelyhearts’ attempted escape. He parodies Miss Lonelyhearts’ efforts in an imagined letter the columnist has written to God. The letter concludes:

I read your column and like it very much. There you once wrote:
“When the salt has lost its savour, who shall savour it again?”
Is the answer: “None but the Saviour?” Thanking you very much
for a quick reply, I remain yours truly,
A Regular Subscriber²¹⁵

Miss Lonelyhearts’ ultimate fight is to free himself from Shrike, who has taught him “. . . to handle his one escape, Christ, with a thick glove of words.”²¹⁶

Miss Lonelyhearts’ last attempt to escape despair by means other than the Christ Dream is made through Betty. The two take a weekend trip to a Connecticut farm, but “Although spring was well advanced, in the deep shade there was nothing but death – rotten leaves, gray and white fungi. . . .”²¹⁷ Though Miss Lonelyhearts and Betty consummate sexual love, he cannot feel Betty’s communal emotions with

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²¹² *Loc. cit.*

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²¹⁴ Locke, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

²¹⁵ Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, pp. 86-87.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

nature. To him a thrush's song sounds ". . . like that of a flute choked with saliva."²¹⁸

Returning to his newspaper job, he attempts to write a column for his readers to tell them that only through suffering can they know Christ, but he is unable to finish the column. Rain and water imagery, symbol of rejuvenation, fills Miss Lonelyhearts with hysteria. Balancing one emotional image against another so that they clash and amplify each other, West wrote:

A slow spring rain was changing the dusty tar roofs below him to shiny patent leather. The water made everything slippery and he could find no support for his eyes or his feelings.²¹⁹

Miss Lonelyhearts reads a letter written by a woman deserted by her husband. The letter is a long, unsophisticated, naked cry of suffering. After reading it, Miss Lonelyhearts feels a sense of Christ-like humility. He avoids Betty who makes him feel ridiculous, and ". . . the farther he got below self-laughter, the easier it was for him to practice [humility]."²²⁰ The first test of that humility pushes him into insanity.

That test comes through Fay Doyle and her crippled husband, Peter, whose motions are ". . . like those of a partially destroyed insect."²²¹ Doyle is a spiritual, Kafkaesque grotesque who inspects meters for the gas company. His psychic identity, his dream, is imagining himself as a replacement in an age of frigidaires for the iceman of dirty jokes.²²² Oppressed by his drab, painful existence, he seeks Miss Lonelyhearts' help. Trying to find a message to deliver to both Doyle and his wife, Miss Lonelyhearts manages only to substitute ". . . the rhetoric of Shrike for that of Miss Lonelyhearts. He felt like an empty bottle, shiny and sterile . . . being slowly filled with warm, dirty water."²²³ The encounter ends with an attempted seduction of Miss Lonelyhearts by Fay. Miss Lonelyhearts beats her brutally in the face and runs out of the house.

In the climactic scene of the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts retreats to his apartment and to his bed; he falls into a catatonic sleep for three days – the pathetic "symbolic entombment."²²⁴ The calm release from despair he ultimately experiences is madness, yet he has defeated the predatory rhetoric of Shrike, transforming him into a "screaming, clumsy gull."²²⁵ Shrike invites Miss Lonelyhearts to a party – a party at which

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

²²² *Loc. cit.*

²²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.

²²⁴ Volpe, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

²²⁵ Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, p. 117.

the principal game in Shrike's invention: "Everyman his own Lonelyhearts."²²⁶ Yet, Miss Lonelyhearts, a pathetic modern Everyman, is now the Rock, though not the Rock upon which Eliot's new church may be founded, for to Miss Lonelyhearts, "What goes on in the sea is of no interest to the rock."²²⁷

In the interlude before his final destruction, he responds to Betty's every fantasy; impregnated by him, she is promised marriage. Having totally lost self, he has freed himself from the Shrikean glove of words, yet he has not freed his emotions to feel Christian love. All he accomplishes is the leap into insanity and into the delusion of accepting without self-mockery his own vision of himself as a high priest of America:

He did not feel. The rock was a solidification of his feeling, his conscience, his sense of reality, his self-knowledge. He could have planned anything. A castle in Spain and love on a balcony or a pirate trip and love on a Tropical island.²²⁸

Prior to the crushing trauma of his attempt to actually help the Doyles, he has stood witnessing crowds move through a street. He saw a man who appeared to be on the verge of death stagger into a movie theater 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 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 the many betrayals, this one is the worst.²²⁹

In this passage West came the closest to directly expressing the psychic rage he felt for the cheat of a mass culture, a rage he forged into *Miss Lonelyhearts*.

That rage is given full play in his last chapter, "Miss Lonelyhearts Has a Religious Experience," when the protagonist dreams of his future columns: "He submitted drafts of his column to God and God approved them. God approved his every thought."²³⁰ Standing in the hallway of his apartment, Miss Lonelyhearts sees Doyle coming up the stairs. Having come to avenge his wife who has falsely claimed that Miss Lonelyhearts has raped her, Doyle carries a gun. Miss Lonelyhearts see the visit, however, as a sign of God and runs to embrace the

²²⁶ *Loc. cit.*

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

cripple to miraculously "make him whole again."²³¹ Doyle is frightened and turns to flee, the gun accidentally discharges, Miss Lonelyhearts falls into Doyle, and they tumble down the stairs.

There is not even narrow existential hope in West's world. Half of the people of his world are cheated by their dreams, while the rest are victims of their own Shrikean rationality. The final pathetic joke is on the modern intellect – an intellect that has led man into a dreamless world in which he must continue, ironically enough, to dream. Those who continue to dream too often must consume the fantasies of the myth-makers of a mass culture, the cheapest dreams ever created. In such a world, historical progress is the last savage joke played on a neo-savage world whose new totems are collages of the junk of dreams and desire that hung in Miss Lonelyhearts' fantastical pawnshop window.

²³¹ *Loc. cit.*

Chapter V

The Day Of The Locust:

This Is The Way The World Ends

Here is no continuing city, here is no abiding stay.
 Ill the wind, ill the time, uncertain the profit, certain the danger.
 O late late late, late is the time, late too late, and rotten the year;
 Evil the wind, and bitter the sea, and gray the sky, grey, grey,
 grey, grey.

— T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*

The spiritual and cultural microcosm of West's Hollywood is certainly "no continuing city," and unfortunately for its people there is no Beckett, no hero for an age of despair, but only the cheat of the neo-myths born of the machinery of industries that capitalize on men's need for dreams. In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Nathanael West portrayed the destruction of a lone man, victimized by history's evolution toward a Shrikean world of irony and rationalism — a destructive evolution that, ironically, only left a vacuum to be filled by the new myths of mass culture. With the publication of *The Day of the Locust* (1939), West switched to a panoramic lens in an effort to encompass an entire society, as it metaphorically screams its despair and unleashes its self-hatred in a social conflagration, sparked by the violence nurtured by the grotesque cheat that West felt to be prevalent in the lives of the mass.

Though *The Day of the Locust* represents a logical thematic extension of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the essentially prophetic intent of the work called for the use of techniques and for a structure far more unconventional than those employed in the earlier novel, a fact recognized only by Comerchero and Reid. Though *The Day of the Locust* has been called by Cowley the best novel ever to be written about Hollywood.²³² many critics, who have praised the work, also find fault with its structure by comparing its intensity and economy of presentation and its handling of point of view with that of *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Therefore, this chapter begins with a cross-sectional review of criticism of the structure of the work to establish the general nature and premises of such criticism, and concludes with an attempt to show how such criticism largely fails to account for the unique purpose and intent which West designed for his last work.

Edmond Wilson criticizes West's characterization of Tod Hackett, one of three main characters, as failing ultimately to represent the norm of "an educated and healthy human" by which ". . . the defor-

²³² Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return*, p. 237.

mation of Hollywood may be criticized." ²³³ Writing in the same year, Milburn praised the work in general, but also found fault with its length, asserting that the story is too brief to sustain its shift in points of view. ²³⁴

Light also asserted that the most significant defect in the work is its shift in points of view, which he thinks makes the work less perfect in form than *Miss Lonelyhearts*, in which ". . . there is the constant development of the dramatic involvement of Miss Lonelyhearts in the story that he sees and lives." ²³⁵

The validity of such critical arguments is reduced, however, when the reader considers the prophetic nature of the work — a work that, unlike the conventional dramatic or psychological novel or the realistic and naturalistic novel, operates on a plane of almost pure symbol, in an effort not to dramatize a single character or problem but, instead, to dramatize the death rattle of a civilization. Such a view has been suggested by Comerchero, who has opened the door for a re-evaluation of the structure of West's last and perhaps greatest work:

The Day of the Locust . . . is a generalized vision of the world running down . . . and should be read as a prose *Waste Land*. This is not to suggest that the novel is a translation into prose of that poem; however, it attempts to accomplish what the poem accomplished, and to accomplish it in much *the same way*. Nothing could render the novel greater injustice than a traditional, literal, narrative reading. The reader's concern should be with the feeling evoked by the symbolic detail, by the objective correlatives; for the brilliance of the novel lies in such symbolic impressions. ²³⁶

Comerchero further advances the theory that Tod Hackett as protagonist, through whose eyes much of the action is witnessed, is embroiled ultimately in the work's violent action, while also serving as a commentator, a seer, who makes coherent the dramatizing of "the disorder of an entire civilization," and, as commentator, allows West to maintain an economy not otherwise attainable in a novelistic work of such scope. ²³⁷ Thus, as commentator, Tod becomes the anatomist who ironically catalogues the cultural grotesqueness West saw in the physical environment of Hollywood and the charades of its people. Tod's function as observant anatomist removed from the work's foreground is evident in the first chapter, which concludes with a cataloguing of the unreality of Hollywood's architecture:

²³³ Edmund Wilson, "Hollywood Dance of Death," *New Republic* LXXXIX (July 26, 1939), 339-340.

²³⁴ George Milburn, "The Hollywood Nobody Knows," *SR*, XX (May 20, 1939), pp. 14-15.

²³⁵ Light, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

²³⁶ Comerchero, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-122.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

On the corner of La Huerta Road was a miniature Rhine Castle with tarpaper turrets pierced for archers. Next to it was a little highly colored shack with domes and minarets out of the *Arabian Nights*. Again he was charitable. Both houses were comic, but he didn't laugh. Their desire to startle was so eager and guileless.

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.²³⁸

One may reasonably assume that the first paragraph of this quotation represents what Comerchero means by West's extensive use of objective correlatives, for the clash between "Rhine Castle" and "tarpaper turrets" certainly is a registering through objects of the spiritually grotesque essence of mass lives which West wished to convey. Secondly, one may assume that, as a commentator, *and only as such*, Hackett is often West himself speaking directly to the reader, as is evident in the concluding paragraph of the first chapter. Such comment is common throughout the work but is also generally brief and unobtrusive. The idea that Hackett is partially West is also supported by the painting he envisions, entitled "The Burning of Los Angeles," the pictorial equivalent of *The Day of the Locust* itself.

Early in the first chapter, West warns the reader that Hackett is ". . . a very complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside the other like a nest of Chinese boxes."²³⁹ When Hackett ceases to comment and begins to analyze and act, he largely ceases to be West and becomes partially a cripple, subservient to the aspiring starlet and Bitch-goddess, Faye Greener. Also, as the work's intellectual, he becomes the dramatic representation of West's insistence that there ultimately are no islands of aesthetic retreat or ironic vision or masks that can successfully shield one from the violence of the age. Hackett, the dramatic character, is almost always detached emotionally. His masters are Goya and Daumier, and, by using limited omniscience, West makes him the ideal vehicle through which to portray all the work's characters, except one — Homer Simpson, the middle-aged, retired midwestern bookkeeper. West obviously desired to minimize the degree of empathy the reader feels for all the characters but Homer. They are all confidence men as well as victims of their own dreams, for each belongs to the fringe element of the industry. Homer, however, is a pure victim, long, long cheated by the myth-makers of America. He is the chief dramatic representation of the locust people who have "come to California to die."²⁴⁰ Homer's one losing fight is to curb the violence latent in himself. He is truly a victim, yet ultimately the nominee for mob violence. West obviously

²³⁸ Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*, p. 3.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁴⁰ *Loc. cit.*

wished for the reader to feel initially a greater degree of empathy and pathos for Homer than could be conveyed by Hackett's viewpoint. Thus, the point of view shifts from Hackett to Homer during chapters eight through twelve and returns again to Hackett, once West has examined the incommunicable grief of the neurotically shy Homer. The transition is adeptly handled, and it is a transition that was demanded by the character of Homer himself — a man so emotionally crippled, so long a victim, that he is an automaton almost incapable of communicating with anyone. At the book's beginning, Homer is almost totally asocial — a man suffocated by ennui. Thus, for West to have approached the presentation of Homer's character through the viewpoint of Hackett would have greatly diminished Homer's significance and imposed a stifling limitation no writer could ever surmount. The validity of these introductory statements concerning structure must, of course, be proved through documentation by an analysis of the text itself.

In addition to establishing Hackett as seer, the first chapter of the work focuses almost entirely upon an anatomical cataloguing, by the use of a concise, poetic style, the unreality permeating the microcosm of Hollywood. T. S. Eliot's observation, ". . . human kind cannot bear very much reality,"²⁴¹ becomes a magnificent understatement when applied to West's world in which unreality is the norm. Thus, Wilson's criticism, that Hackett does not represent a norm of sanity against which the falseness of Hollywood can be revealed,²⁴² shows that Wilson ultimately failed to realize that West was proclaiming that there were no norms left capable of withstanding the prevalence of cultural sham. West's Hollywood is a microcosm;²⁴³ Hackett's city belongs to the same microcosmic world of Hester Prynne's puritan town and Ahab's *Pequod* — worlds that are more poetic and philosophic than realistic in import. The perversion of reality into a cheaply fabricated make-believe is sounded by the introductory scene itself.²⁴⁴ Hackett stands at his office window to observe the passing of an army of cavalry and foot soldiers. It is an army of the past, composed of Hanoverian light horse and infantry, the scarlet infantry of England ". . . the black infantry of the Duke of Brunswick, the French grenadiers with their enormous white gaiters, the Scotch with bare knees under plaid skirts."²⁴⁵ Their pursuer and conqueror follows closely behind in the form of ". . . a little fat man, wearing a cork sun-helmet, polo shirt and knickers,"²⁴⁶ who yells: "Stage Nine — you bastards — Stage Nine!"²⁴⁷ Once Tod has witnessed the past be marshalled out of sight behind half a Missis-

²⁴¹ T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, p. 118.

²⁴² Edmund Wilson, *A Literary Chronicle: 1920-1950*, p. 247.

²⁴³ Richard Gehman, introductory essay to *The Day of the Locust*, p. xviii.

²⁴⁴ Comerchero, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

²⁴⁵ Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*, p. 1.

²⁴⁶ *Loc. cit.*

²⁴⁷ *Loc. cit.*

sippi steamboat by a ludicrous high priest of a mass culture, he leaves his office to enter the streets of Hollywood, the unreal city itself.

The city's crowds are of two types, the masqueraders and the haters. This first is typified by "The fat lady in the yachting cap" who ". . . was going shopping not boating. . ." ²⁴⁸ The second type is of a different dress:

Their clothing was somber and badly cut, bought from mail-order houses . . . and they stared at everyone who passed. When their stare was returned, their eyes filled with hatred. . . they had come to California to die. ²⁴⁹

West concludes his first chapter with a brilliant cataloguing of the previously mentioned architectural monstrosities and pretensions of his unreal city; hence, the focus begins with historical allusion contrasted with the inanities of the myth-makers and, then, swiftly spreads to the city's crowds and ultimately to its architecture, which West in Ruskin-esque fashion uses as a spiritual barometer for his madhouse, micro-cosmic metropolis. In addition, he establishes Hackett's character, as *seer* and ironic visionary. The chapter itself is but three pages long, typical of the brevity and poetic concentration central to the Westian technique.

Clearly Fiedler, who wrote so well of West's women characters in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, in a later article ultimately fails to understand the full terror of West's vision of a man-made, fabricated hell of a world:

West does not seem to me finally a really achieved writer. . . . One does not know whether he is being presented with the outlines of a nightmare endowed with a sense of reality or the picture of a reality become indistinguishable from nightmare. ²⁵⁰

The profound, disquieting despair captured by West has as its very vortex West's insistence that the boundaries between reality and nightmare may be irredeemably lost. Thus, West's persistent stalking of the world of falsity seems occasionally too ardent and overplayed a hunt. ²⁵¹

The motif of the unreal extends into the second chapter in the description of the facade of Hackett's apartment building and in the account of Hackett's meeting of Honest Abe Kusick, an inordinately lecherous bookie:

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁴⁹ *Loc. cit.*

²⁵⁰ Leslie Fiedler, "The Breakthrough: The American Jewish Novelist and the Fiction Image of the Jew," *Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Views*, edited by Joseph J. Waldmeir, p. 93.

²⁵¹ Light, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

He was on the way to his room late one night when he saw what he supposed was a pile of soiled laundry lying in front of the door across the hall from his own. Just as he was passing it, the bundle moved and made a peculiar noise. He struck a match, thinking it might be a dog wrapped in a blanket. When the light flared up, he saw it was a tiny man.²⁵²

The motif is not only present in West's description of the film industry, people, clothes, and architecture, but is also extended to nature itself, for the daylight sky is "enameled,"²⁵³ while the hills and trees of Los Angeles at sunset are outlined by a ". . . violet piping, like a neon tube."²⁵⁴

Though Comerchero is astute in his observation of the unique poetic structure of the work and in his notation of the parallel between West's Hollywood and Eliot's "Unreal City" of London in his *The Waste Land*, he falters when he insists that the work is weakened by West's failure ". . . to develop this theme of the disparity between illusions and reality or any other [theme] through irony."²⁵⁵ Since Comerchero amazingly never explains why such incidents as the victory of the fat man in the cork helmet over history are not bitterly scathing irony, the reader is left wondering what an author must do to qualify as a writer of irony. Comerchero himself notes that the smallest man, the midget bookie, has the most aggressive sexual drive and is the work's most lecherous male ("Some gal! . . . A lollapalooza — all slut and a yard wide."²⁵⁶), yet he insists, "It is difficult to understand the reason for West's abandonment of the ironic mode."²⁵⁷ Comerchero's ultimate argument appears to be with the strident intensity of West's ironic vision, for he finds it "too transparently sad . . . the humor lacks the robust vigor of Shrike's rhetoric."²⁵⁸ Yet, if one is to assume, as Comerchero has, that too close a comparison between the more traditionally structured *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* is erroneous because of the more unique intent of the latter, is it not also only logical to assume that the use of irony and tone may also of necessity differ, if form and meaning is to be dictated by technique and artistic intent?

Yet a further complexity is added to the work's structure with the introduction of Faye Greener in the second and third chapters. Seventeen year old Faye gives the impression of having studied the stereotype gestures and poses of film's sex goddesses long before she even reached puberty. Though Tod is commentator, and Homer is an extremely important part of the novel, Faye is the dramatic vortex

²⁵² Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*, p. 5.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁵⁵ Comerchero, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

²⁵⁶ Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*, p. 6.

²⁵⁷ Comerchero, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

around which revolves all the violence, precipitating the mob scene at the work's conclusion. She is the archetypal blonde *femme fatale*, ". . . the dream dreamed by all of America, the dream of a love which is death . . . the degraded *anima* of a nation. . . ." ²⁵⁹ She exercises a hypnotic power over the men of the novel, including Tod. She is ambivalent, as Fiedler has suggested ". . . precisely because she is a phantom bride, she is also a child, epitome of the quest for eternal youth which is the obverse of the lust for death." ²⁶⁰ Observed by Tod, she becomes a Modigliani portrait:

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. . . .

She was supposed to look drunk and she did, but not with alcohol. She lay stretched out on the divan with her arms and legs spread, as though welcoming a lover, and her lips were parted in a heavy, sullen smile. She was supposed to look inviting. . . . 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. ²⁶¹

Yet viewed by the ingenuous Homer, she becomes the eternal child: "He thought her extremely beautiful. . . . Although she was seventeen, she was dressed like a child of twelve in a white cotton dress with a blue sailor." ²⁶² Much as Miss McGeeney in the concluding pages of *Balso Snell* becomes the symbolic embodiment of the fantasy women of consumer fiction, Faye Greener is all things to all men — a mixture of Marlene Dietrich and Doris Day. Her every gesture and move is so "completely artificial" ²⁶³ that Tod, the artist, is fascinated by her. Faye, her father Harry, and Abe are the main figures in a set of lithographs Tod has entitled "The Dancers," in which they perform in front of the sullen, inarticulate haters and starers described in the first chapter: "It was their stare that drove Abe and the others to spin crazily and leap into the air with twisted backs like hooked trout." ²⁶⁴ Despite all his coolness and ironic distance, Tod is as violently drawn to Faye as any of the work's "red-eyed" starers: "If he only had the courage to throw himself on her. Nothing less violent than rape would do." ²⁶⁵

²⁵⁹ Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, p. 317.

²⁶⁰ *Loc. cit.*

²⁶¹ Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*, pp. 10-11.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Also within the opening chapters of the novel, West uses Hackett's view-point as a means to enter the world of Hollywood's Big Money, through a party invitation given Hackett by Claude Estee, a successful screen writer, living in a ". . . big house that was an exact reproduction of the old Dupuy mansion near Biloxi, Mississippi."²⁶⁶ Estee is a dried-up small man with the ". . . stooped shoulders of a postal clerk,"²⁶⁷ yet he delights in standing on the enormous balcony of his home, rocking on his heels like a Civil War colonel, and pretending he has a large belly. The entire party is an adventure into a spiritual and cultural madhouse and peepshow containing one of the most powerful objective correlatives of unreality appearing in the work. The rich Hollywood myth-makers, jaded by their own products, seek escape through private showings of pornographic movies or through monstrous jokes, typified by the dead horse incident:

[Mrs. Schwartz] kicked a switch that was hidden at the base of a shrub and a row of submerged floodlights illuminated the green water. The thing was a dead horse, or, rather, a life-size, realistic reproduction of one. Its legs stuck up stiff and straight and it had an enormous, distended belly. Its hammerhead lay twisted to one side and from its mouth, which was set in an agonized grin, hung a heavy, black tongue.²⁶⁸

The tortured positioning of the hammerhead into its "agonized grin" recalls one of Picasso's horses in the nightmarish *Guernica*, and amplifies the impression that the world has gone mad. West has Mrs. Schwartz, a monster of affectation, jump up and down ". . . excitedly like a little girl,"²⁶⁹ and exclaim: "Isn't it marvelous!"²⁷⁰ When other people approach the pool, she urges them gleefully to hurry:

"I think its belly's going to burst. . . ." "Goody," said the man, hurrying to look. "But it's only full of air," said one of the women. Mrs. Schwartz made believe she was going to cry. "You're just like that mean Mr. Hackett. You just won't let me cherish my illusions."²⁷¹

The Big Money sequence concludes with Tod, Estee, and company visiting a rich-boy's callhouse, operated by a former silent film star, Audrey Jennings, where the guests enjoy viewing a pornographic film, "*Le Predicament de Marie ou La Bonne Distracts*." Though pornographic, the film is also a parody of the cheap romances mass-

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁶⁷ *Loc. cit.*

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁶⁹ *Loc. cit.*

²⁷⁰ *Loc. cit.*

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

produced by the film industry. Disenchanted "insiders" in such an industry, the guests delight in viewing such a film. The film breaks at a climactic tense moment, and the jaded, monstrously sophisticated party viewers stage a mock riot.

The transition back from higher echelons to the subterranean world of movie extras, bookies, and struggling starlets is made by West through the character of Mary Dove, a prostitute at Miss Jennings's establishment, who is also Faye's closest friend. Once West returns the reader to Faye's world, he executes a swift movement into the episodes devoted to Homer Simpson, the mob's scapegoat or *pharmakos*. Immediately prior to introducing Homer, West focuses on Harry Greener, who, as an old man and ex-clown, can no longer distinguish acting from life. He had mastered a clowning camouflage as a ". . . method of defense. Most people, he had discovered, won't go out of their way to punish a clown."²⁷² The zenith of Harry's career occurred when, as a young man, he received a *Times* review applauding his performance as a stooge for a comedy team. The incident and its implications of the sadism necessary to move the audience of a mass culture to laughter is closely related to similar scenes toward the conclusion of *A Cool Million*. Yet, unlike Lemuel, Harry was never dismantled for he has learned that by playing the obvious fool, he placates the cheated haters. Thus, as an elderly man, he dresses like a clown's version of a banker: "His outfit fooled no one, but then he didn't intend it to fool anyone. His shyness was of a different sort."²⁷³ In a world in which the majority of people seriously act out masquerades, Harry revels in pretending to be the poorest of masqueraders. In old age, Harry supports himself between acting jobs by peddling silver polish as a door-to-door salesman. As a salesman he has met Homer Simpson, who later calls on the bedridden Harry to deliver a gift.

The shift in point of view from Hackett to Homer is skillfully executed, as West uses a "buffer" chapter to make the transition. The chapter begins, "Tod was right about one thing at least. Like most of the people he was interested in, Homer was a Middle-Westerner."²⁷⁴ These opening lines are the last reference made to Tod, as the remaining parts of the chapter are purely commentary relating Homer's Middle-Western origins and cataloguing the unreality and grotesque mixtures of styles evident in the contents of the house he has rented in California. In earlier chapters when such anatomical detail is used, West frequently introduces Tod's name to disguise the comment's direct editorial nature. In the seventh chapter, however, he first uses Tod as a disguise and, then, cleverly allows him to fade from the narration, as the focus moves entirely to Homer. By the chapter's conclusion, the reader is prepared to step smoothly into the interior of Homer's pathetically estranged and grotesque mind.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁷³ *Loc. cit.*

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Homer is the perfect automaton of a mass culture; his only adventures have been vicarious, and he has lived most of his adult life as bookkeeper in a small hotel in Wayneville, Iowa. As a human machine, he has amassed several thousand dollars by confining himself to working ten hours a day, eating two hours, and sleeping the remainder. His one sexual experience as an adult was never culminated and occurred when a destitute alcoholic woman attempted to pay for her hotel bill while flat on her back. Physically, Homer resembles ". . . one of Picasso's great sterile athletes, who brood hopelessly on pink sand, staring at veined marble waves."²⁷⁵ West makes Homer's hand a symbol for sexual frustration and the violence latent in the bookkeeper's personality:²⁷⁶

He got out of bed in sections, like a poorly made automaton, and carried his hands into the bathroom. He turned on the cold water. When the basin was full, he plunged his hands in up to the wrists. They lay quietly on the bottom like a pair of strange aquatic animals. When they were thoroughly chilled and began to crawl about, he lifted them out and hid them in a towel.²⁷⁷

Later in the work, Homer cuts a hand while opening a can of salmon: "The wounded hand writhed about on the kitchen table until it was carried to the sink by its mate and bathed tenderly in hot water."²⁷⁸

Only when Homer is sexually aroused by the woman in the hotel room in Iowa is he able to forget momentarily the self-consciousness he feels toward his hands. When he first meets Faye Greener, his hands itch so that he must rub them along the edge of a table and eventually hold them under cold water.

During his first month in California he lives in almost total isolation, spending hours sitting in his living room ". . . as though waiting for someone in a lobby of a hotel."²⁷⁹ Often in the afternoon, he sits on his patio and watches a lizard that lives near the incinerator stalk flies: "Homer was on the side of the flies. . . Occasionally the lizard would miscalculate. When that happened, Homer would laugh happily."²⁸⁰

Once Faye Greener enters Homer's life, he is doomed to self-destruction. Faye appears to Homer not like the siren whom Tod envisions as promising violent sexual death, but as an image of youthful innocence, ". . . dressed like a child of twelve in a white cotton dress with a blue sailor collar."²⁸¹ Her mechanical mannerisms and artificial voice only

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁷⁶ Comerchero, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

²⁷⁷ Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*, p. 27.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

puzzle him. His impulse is to buy her candy and ice cream. Once he has met her, he cannot free himself of her memory, and he is frightened:

He somehow knew that his only defense was chastity, that it served him well, like the shell of a tortoise, as both spine and armor. He couldn't shed it even in thought. If he did, he would be destroyed.

He was right. There are men who can lust with part of themselves. . . . But in Homer's case it would be like dropping a spark into a barn full of hay.²⁸²

The establishment of the pathos and despair of Homer, the embodiment of psychic disintegration and the mob, demanded such a shift in point of view if West was vividly to etch such a character. Certainly, the despair of such incommunicable grief and social and sexual alienation could never be achieved satisfactorily by the use of Hackett's point of view. Nor could the novel, exclusive of the Homer chapters, be related in any other manner if Hackett were to remain partially a visionary and commentator.

Once the novel shifts again to Hackett's point of view, Faye becomes increasingly the work's dramatic center. Faye is not only in training to become a living sexual fantasy, but she is also something of a human dream machine — a grotesque collage of movie heroines. Her spare hours are spent stretched out on her bed (at the footboard there is a Tarzan photograph), selecting one dream after another from her memory, ". . . as though they were a pack of cards."²⁸³ The dreams are essentially reruns of the movie industry's more ridiculous products. The dream she selects to tell Tod culminates in a rescue scene:

It's the tropics. One morning, while she is bathing naked in a brook, a big snake grabs her. She struggles but the snake is too strong for her and it looks like curtains. But the sailor, who has been watching her from behind some bushes, leaps to her rescue. He fights for her and wins.²⁸⁴

The dream is a subconscious Freudian invitation on Faye's part for rape. Too many critics have overlooked the implications of the tropical setting of this dream, along with Faye's Tarzan photograph. In primitive society the boundaries between myth and reality dissolve. Faye is the embodiment of the neo-savage who delights in *living* savage ritual:

In "The Burning of Los Angeles" Faye is the naked girl in the left foreground being chased by the group of men and women who

²⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

have separated from the main body of the mob. One of the women is about to hurl a rock at her to bring her down. She is running with her eyes closed and a strange half-smile on her lips. Despite the dreamy repose of her face, her body is straining to hurl her along at top speed. The only explanation for this contrast is that she is enjoying the release that wild flight gives in much the same way that a game bird must when, after hiding for several tense minutes, it bursts from cover in complete unthinking panic.²⁸⁵

In the fourteenth and fifteenth chapters, West introduces two more modern savages, Earle Shoop, the cowboy boyfriend of Faye, and Miguel, a Mexican owner of fighting cocks. The bird motif cited here appearing at the end of the thirteenth chapter repeatedly appears in images that assume structural significance. At the camp of Earle and Miguel, Tod and Fay enjoy a dinner of quail. Earle had trapped the birds:

Still another quail joined the duet. This one called from near the center of the field. It was a trapped bird, but the sound it made had no anxiety in it, only sadness, impersonal and without hope.²⁸⁶

West's humans, also, are symbolically birds, yet men unfortunately can dream, and, though hopelessly trapped, they hysterically expend their energies. Drunk on cheap whiskey, the three men and Faye sit around the campfire, until Faye and Miguel, like a fighting cock and hen, begin an animalistic dance:

Fay had her hands clasped behind her head now and she rolled her hips to the broken beat. She was doing the "bump."
 "Tony's wife.
 They're fightin their duels about Tony's wife. . . ." The Mexican stood up, still singing, and joined her in the dance. They approached each other with short mincing steps. . . . They met head on, blue-black against pale-gold, and used their heads to pivot, then danced back to back with their buttocks touching, their knees bent and wide apart. While Faye shook her breasts and her head, holding the rest of her body rigid, he struck the soft ground heavily with his feet and circled her.²⁸⁷

The scene ends in a fight between the human male cocks, as Faye takes flight. At the conclusion of the camp scene, Tod returns as commentator to emphasize that his Hollywood world is a symbolic microcosm. He wonders if he has not exaggerated ". . . the importance

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

of the people who come to California to die. . . Maybe they were only the pick of America's madmen and not at all typical of the rest of the land."²⁸⁸ West significantly labels Hackett a Jeremiah: "He changed 'pick of America's madmen' to 'cream' and felt almost certain the milk from which it had been skimmed was just as rich in violence."²⁸⁹

West embraces yet another segment of modern society as he uses the event of Harry Greener's death to examine the violence and death-wishes latent in the funeral rituals. Mrs. Johnson, a tenant in the same apartment building as the Greeners and Hackett, makes the arrangements for the funeral, for funerals are her hobby. West makes use of Bach's chorale, "Come Redemmer, Our Saviour," to clash against the monstrous funeral scene itself. Bach's message is addressed to Christ:

"Come or don't come," the music seemed to say, "I love you and my love is enough." It was a simple statement of fact, neither cry nor serenade, made without arrogance or humility.²⁹⁰

Contrasted with Bach's music is Hackett, who is drunk; Faye, who has earned the funeral expenses by whoring for Mrs. Jennings's rich clients; Mr. Johnson, who takes a ghoulish delight in overseeing the proceedings; and a gathering of mourners who had never known the deceased. Tod turns to view the latter who occupy the back rows and considers their place in his painting:

While not torchbearers themselves, they would run behind the fire and do a great deal of shouting. 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.²⁹¹

Following the funeral chapter, West begins to move increasingly toward neo-Gothic horror in the work's tone. Faye has moved from her apartment, and Tod wished to find her. He spots her on the movie lot and hunts for her from set to set in what is a chapter devoted to the unreality motif. West's Gothic terror far exceeds any ever conceived by Monk Lewis, for it is based on the normality of the grotesque and the surrealistic in his novel:

Throwing away his cigarette, he went through the swinging doors of the saloon. There was no back to the building and he found

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

²⁸⁹ *Loc. cit.*

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

himself in a Paris street. He followed it to its end, coming out in a Romanesque courtyard. He heard voices a short distance away and went toward them. On a lawn of fiber, a group of men and women were eating cardboard food in front of a cellophane waterfall. . . .

Next he came to a small pond with large celluloid swans floating on it. Across one end was a bridge with a sign that read, "To Kamp Komfit." He crossed the bridge and followed a little path that ended at a Greek temple dedicated to Eros. The god himself lay face downward in a pile of old newspapers and bottles.²⁹²

Eros has, indeed, fallen in West's world. Tod does not find Faye on the movie lot, but returns to discover her sitting in his office and to learn that she has moved in with Homer Simpson: "It's a business arrangement."²⁹³ There is no sexual relationship between her and Homer, who is paying for her wardrobe and meals. A visit by Hackett to Homer's residence enables West to introduce into the work his last significant grotesques and to suggest the "Dream Dump's" effect upon children. Adore, an eight year old aspiring child star, is Homer's next door neighbor. When Adore makes a face at Homer, the boy's mother apologizes for him, "He thinks he's the Frankenstein monster."²⁹⁴ He is in fact a monster, created by his mother's dream that he be a star. At his mother's request, he sings a song heavy with sexual overtones (" . . . his buttocks writhed and his voice carried a top-heavy load of sexual pain."²⁹⁵), then runs about the yard dragging his sailboat by a string and imitating a tug boat.

Through this visit with Faye and Homer, Hackett questions if he himself does not " . . . suffer from the ingrained, morbid apathy he liked to draw in others. Maybe he could only be galvanized into sensibility and that was why he was chasing Faye."²⁹⁶ To avoid Faye, Hackett stops working on a series of drawings of her and turns to drawing the patrons of Hollywood churches. It is West's technique for quickly focusing upon the violence and hate latent in many neo-religions, as Hackett visits an assortment of churches, the last of which is the "Tabernacle of the Third Coming," where a man from Sioux City speaks " . . . a crazy jumble of dietary rules, economics and Biblical threats."²⁹⁷ The section on such religions is but four paragraphs in length and exemplifies the brilliant economy found throughout the work. In less than one hundred pages of imagistic prose coupled with an adept handling of point of view, West encompasses and dissects an entire society and then swiftly pushes the novel toward

²⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁹⁶ *Loc. cit.*

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

its conclusion. If the novel seems uneven, one suspects such unevenness is not the result of failure of technique, but rather the product of portraying so well in the last seven chapters the unshackling of the violence and hysteria that has ticked like a bomb beneath the novel's surface for some one hundred pages.

Comerchero argues that Faye Greener possesses the sanest and most wholesome sexual responses of any of the work's characters;²⁹⁸ however, he essentially ignores the symbolic bird motif that runs throughout the second half of the novel. Faye is the embodiment of destructive sexual rage. Her desire to act is only a disguise for her subconscious yearning to participate as a goddess in a primitive sexual rite. In a scene at the "Cinderella Bar" that specializes in floor shows featuring female impersonators, she brutally browbeats Homer, who reveals to Tod his repulsion for the dirty black hen that Earle Shoop and Miguel now keep in Homer's garage:

You never saw such a disgusting thing, the way it squats and turns its head. The roosters have torn all the feathers off its neck and made its comb all bloody and it has scabby feet covered with warts and it cackles so nasty when they drop it into the pen.²⁹⁹

Not only is the hen used as an indication of Homer's revulsion by sex, but also as the symbolic embodiment of Faye's character. As she has earlier been the "hen" at the campsite, she becomes once again the "hen" in a human cockfight that ultimately occurs in Homer's living room. Faye is not only living off Homer, but she has also bullied him into allowing Earle Shoop and Miguel to move into the garage. Following a cockfight in the garage that Claude Estee, Abe Kusich, and Tod attend, a party is held in Homer's living room. Faye has dressed in silk lounging pajamas, leaving the top three buttons undone. As the men become increasingly drunk, Faye dances with them, instigating a brutal fight scene that is a savage human re-enactment of the earlier cockfight. Homer is shattered by the violence of the evening and by the recognition that Faye is as Tod has asserted, "a whore!"³⁰⁰ When Faye deserts Homer, he is broken. Tod discovers him the next day sitting in his disheveled living room, sobbing: "The sounds was like an ax chopping pine, a heavy, hollow, chunking noise. . . . It would never reach climax."³⁰¹

The work's final, brutal irony is that Homer becomes the *pharmakos*, the scapegoat, for the movie-première mob rather than Faye, for Homer is the mob's blood brother:

All their lives they had slaved at some kind of dull, heavy labor, behind desks and counters, in the fields and at tedious ma-

²⁹⁸ Comerchero, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

²⁹⁹ Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*, p. 97.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

chines of all sorts, saving their pennies and dreaming of the leisure that would be theirs when they had enough. Finally that day came. They could draw a weekly income of ten or fifteen dollars. Where else should they go but California, the land of sunshine and oranges?

Once there, they discovered that sunshine isn't enough. They get tired of oranges, even of avocado pears and passion fruit. Nothing happens. . . . There wasn't any ocean where most of them came from, but after you've seen one wave, you've seen them all. The same is true of the airplanes at Glendale. If only a plane would crash once in a while so that they could watch the passengers being consumed in a "holocaust of flame," as the newspapers put it. But the planes never crash.³⁰²

Homer packs his bags to leave the land of sunshine to return to Iowa and is caught in the mob that has gathered for a world première in front of the Kahn Persian Palace Theatre. Hanging over the middle of the street is a gigantic sign: "MR. KAHN A PLEASURE DOME DECREED."³⁰³ Though in West's Hollywood, dreams are the only realities, his unreal city is a garish nightmare in comparison to Coleridge's ethereal city. Into its mob walks Homer:

Homer walked more than ever like a badly made automaton and his features were set in a rigid, mechanical grin. He had trousers on over his nightgown and part of it hung out his open fly. In both his hands were suitcases.³⁰⁴

Seen by Tod, Homer is led to a small park near the out-skirts of the crowd, while Tod attempts to find a taxi so that he may take Homer to a hospital. While Tod is gone, Homer is struck in the head by a stone thrown by the child Frankenstein, Adore. Homer's mind snaps, and he attempts to stomp the boy to death. The mob charges, and Tod and Homer are both swept away:

[Tod] saw Homer rise above the mass for a moment, shoved against the sky, his jaw hanging as though he wanted to scream but couldn't. A hand reached up and caught him by his open mouth and pulled him forward and down.³⁰⁵

Thus, the "red-eyed" starers' ultimate expression comes in the form of explosive mob violence. Many are caught and pressed together momentarily in a stationary position. They amuse themselves by telling pervert stories or by molesting strangers. As Comerchero has noted, West has used psychosexual manifestations as the index of social and

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 131.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

spiritual disorder, so that the portrayal of sexual ineffectuals becomes ". . . the objective correlative of an effete civilization."³⁰⁶ Love no longer exists in a world perverted into a Dream Dump; only the hysterical spasms of its dying body remain to be nurtured by violence. Mass Man no longer is capable of responding to Bach's Christ. His nature requires the new Messiah of Tod's painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles":

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.³⁰⁷

Nor is there any ironic vision or artistic distance offering ultimate escape in West's microcosm. Hackett is injured in the riot:

He was carried through the exit to the back street and lifted into a police car. The siren began to scream and at first he thought he was making the noise himself. He felt his lips with his hands. They were clamped tight. He knew then it was the siren. For some reason this made him laugh and he began to imitate the siren as loudly as he could.³⁰⁸

So ends the world, not with a bang but with a scream — a scream funneled and amplified into a particularly unique verisimilitude that makes *real* the monstrous unreality of a mass culture.

In *The Day of the Locust*, West has not only combined elements of the romance, the anatomy, and novel into a compact work of great scope, but he has also, through allusion and symbol, created a masterpiece in the demonic mode. If, as Northrop Frye has suggested, one earmark of the advance of civilization was the change of act into ritual,³⁰⁹ then West's work ultimately becomes as terrifyingly significant as any written in this age. In West's vision, the demonic does not exist in the poetic past of an *Inferno*, nor does the neo-savage lurk in a distant future of a 1984 or *Brave New World*, but is present, here and now. The new myths and moronic fantasies are mass produced and fed daily to a mass culture, and ritual is daily turned back into act and recorded on the front pages of every metropolitan newspaper. West's insistence that ". . . violence is the American idiom" was also his way of saying that violence is largely the American way of life. Although he probably would have smiled in ironic and embarrassed amusement, the tenor and tone of his protest ultimately makes him not only an artist but a moralist as well.

³⁰⁶ Comerchero, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

³⁰⁷ Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*, p. 139.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³⁰⁹ Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

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