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“You Only Have Time to Explode”:

Nathanael West’s Novels, Mass Media, and Illusory Dreams

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Introduction

Forget the epic, the master work. In America fortunes do not accumulate, the soil does not grow, families have no history. Leave slow growth to the book reviewers, you only have time to explode.

Remember William Carlos Williams' description of the pioneer women who shot their children against the wilderness like cannonballs. Do the same with your novels.

-Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Miss L." (401)

The novels of Nathanael West—*The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931), *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), *A Cool Million* (1934), and *The Day of the Locust* (1939)—depict a darkly comic critique on mass media, consumer culture, and the encroachment of commodification on all aspects of American life in the late 1920s and 1930s. West's work, embedded in and reflective of Modernist aesthetics, such as juxtaposition of fragmented images, mixing of high and low culture, and self-reflexivity, was little noticed at the time by a wide audience in the immediate years following West's death in 1941. Among setbacks such as the limited printing of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and the unfortunate timing of *The Day of the Locust's* publication in 1939, West's work struggled to find an audience. His bleak, apocalyptic *The Day of the Locust* and the near nihilist pessimism in his other works contributed to West's obscurity along with the dismal sales of his novels.

However, the 1950s saw some renewed interest in West's work, marked by criticism such as W.H. Auden's essay "West's Disease" and the publication of the misleadingly titled *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* in 1957 by Farrar, Straus (containing his four novels only,

rather than his complete body of work). In 1975, John Schlesinger directed a film based on *The Day of the Locust*, bringing further attention to West's novels. More recently, West has been published in a *The Library of America* series volume that reprints his novels, a selection of his letters and correspondence, his short stories, his poems, and some of his screenplays. This volume appeared in 1997 but excludes many of his letters and the majority of his Hollywood screenplays.

Fuller critical attention to West began in 1962 with Stanley Edgar Hyman's *Nathanael West*, followed by additional studies by Victor Comerchero in 1964 and Randall Reid in 1967. More recently, Rita Barnard (1995) and Jonathan Veitch (1997) have published important studies on West. Marion Meade's biography of West and his wife, Eileen McKenney, *Lonelyhearts: The Screwball World of Nathanael West and Eileen McKenney*, has brought more recent attention to the author. The Ninth edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (2015) reprinted *The Day of the Locust* for the first time in the anthology, marking a significant recognition of West as an important American literary figure.

West's works are situated in the midst of the Market Crash, the Great Depression, the rise of cheap consumer commodities, the transition to sound-film from silent film, the rise of Hollywood studios, and the proliferation of mass media—all of which influence and historicize his novels. In both *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* the spectacle, the image or mock-up, and the real fuse together via what West sees as the omnipresent commodification of consumerist 1930s America. In West's work, mechanical reproduction problematizes the act of communication by rendering it anonymous and circular, never satisfying the desire it promises to fulfill, and with an illusion of reciprocity. Ulrike Wesienborn argues that the kind of "deferred pleasure" inherent in this dichotomy, as represented in *The Day of the Locust*, is "at the core of the culture industry's powerful domination of society" citing Horkheimer and Adorno: 'the diner must be satisfied with

the menu' (33). Hollywood renders all aesthetics as ripe to be pilfered in the service of commercial sales, and promises the illusion of stardom to anyone, while Miss Lonelyhearts's letters sputter hollow cliches promising salvation and respite from suffering. His novels argue that the rapid proliferation of mass culture is a gateway to fascism and depersonalization, in a vision that for some critics anticipates later directions in Postmodern fiction.

West wrote, in reference to *Miss Lonelyhearts*, that he aimed to write a "novel in the form of a comic-strip," a sentiment that resonates with all his novels, and his focus on external action (which is usually grotesque and often slapstick) as opposed to internal psychology demonstrates this method at play. In West's own words from his unpublished short story "The Adventurer," in his comic-book strip style narratives "A story is--and then something happened and then something else happened" (455). West renders his characters as mass, commodified, and constructed from myriad cultural references, primarily from mass media. As Rita Barnard argues, "Characters...are often not fully human, but resemble ventriloquist's dummies, party dresses, mechanical toys, poorly made automatons.... His descriptions of things, on the other hand, are charged with peculiar intensity" (141). West writes in "Notes on Miss L" that a novelist would find Freud devoid of reality, but useful as a compendium of convenient mythologies-- his mechanical characters show his theory at play, as well as demonstrating a skepticism toward individual, internal autonomy through his characters.

The “things” and objects in West’s works are fully reified and commercialized reflecting the circular desire of consumerism and the promises of mass media. Hollywood serves a role in commodity exchange, creating consumers as a transitory stage within the circulation of commodities. Barnard writes that the new consumer commodities of the 1930s (such as sound-film), as depicted in West’s novels, are “fashioned out of disguised substances, serving multiple but entirely elusive and camouflaged uses, [hinting] at the emergence of a culture of illusion, misleading appearances, and fabricated needs...” (153). In his novels, the rise of the spectacle of mass media driving desire is paramount, for instance in the form of the newspaper as a false salvation in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the illusions of the Horatio Alger stories in *A Cool Million*, and Hollywood films dictating wishes, needs, and behavior in *The Day of the Locust*.

The artificiality that pervades the characters in West’s work is evident in Faye and Harry Greener, from *The Day of the Locust*. Faye, an aspiring actress, is a poor compilation of B-Movie romantic gestures and Hollywood tropes of sexuality. Her father, Harry Greener, is a failed vaudeville performer turned door-to-door salesman, mechanically stuck in his slapstick routine and unable to communicate or act in any other fashion. Tod, the detached cinema set artist, observes Faye’s behavior as a fabricated act:

Faye's affectations, however, were so completely artificial that he found them charming. Being with her was like being backstage during an amateurish, ridiculous play. From in front, the stupid lines and grotesque situations would have made him squirm with annoyance, but because he saw the perspiring stagehands and the wires that held up the tawdry summerhouse with its tangle of paper flowers, he accepted everything and was anxious for it to succeed. (292)

The desperation behind the mechanical and rehearsed acts that Faye performs is a form of the grotesque and pervasive saturation of commodities and media tropes that reproduce themselves in the characters. West's characters are frustrated and cheated by the circular desires produced by the media industry, yet they are unable to escape or realize their predicament, trapping themselves in an infinite loop of unsatisfied desires.

Veitch argues that for West the rising ubiquity of the Hollywood culture industry produces characters like Faye Greener, whose perspective, Veitch writes, "neither allows nor understands a world beyond [the culture industry's] own making" (115). Faye's performance of sexual allure depicts her desperation to play a Hollywood role, yet, Tod observes, her invitation "wasn't to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love." The degradation of her role into a struggle and Tod's contemplation of rape depict what West in "Notes on Violence" calls the idiomatic violence of American life (399). In this article, West notes that in American literature little or no explanation should be needed to justify a murder or rape since these acts cause the audience to be "neither surprised nor shocked" at them (400).

Violence in *The Day of the Locust* reaches its peak in the final riot in which the tension and desperation of the characters and the people of Los Angeles explode into an apocalyptic chaos. On this riot, Barnard argues that West "replaces the archaic image of the triumphal march of culture with the counter-image, anarchic and frightening, but also liberatory, of the sacking of civilization" (165). However, rather than liberatory, the riot reflects a futile gesture of retaliation against mass culture. Tod's painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles," ultimately shows the inadequacy of art as

way to express, contain, and escape from the forces represented by the riot as the hysteria of the mob cannot be contained by the bounds of art in the sense that Tod desires. Such an emphasis upon the limitation of art and its social and aesthetic closure is consistent in all four of his novels, starting with *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. Veitch argues that this first novel is a work that "undertakes not just a disavowal of high modernism and the idealism of its art-for-art's sake aestheticism, but a critique of nothing less than the grand tradition of Western culture upon which it depends. That critique results in a thorough house cleaning, an operation that will dispense with everything from Plato to Picasso" (27). While *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is a minor work compared to *Miss Lonelyhearts* or *The Day of the Locust*, the assertion applies to West's oeuvre in the violently unconventional approach taken in all of his novels. For West, conventional art appears as amalgamations of digested clichés and futile attempts to transcend consumer capitalism and mass media.

Critical to West's work is the reification and commodification of dreams, clichés, and consumerist desires through mass media. Walter Benjamin's analysis of modern forms of mass media, such as film, is relevant to West's depictions. For Benjamin, mass media serves as a method by which art can exert "covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception" (12). The ability of art to be mechanically reproduced further detaches it from its source, causing a shift in what Benjamin calls the "aura" of the work. Art's purpose and meaning in contemporary society is a key focus of *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. Furthermore, the alienation felt by the mass man is ripe to be harvested by fascism, which sees opportunity in introducing aesthetics into politics. This potential is realized explicitly in *A Cool Million* and is explored

through mass media in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*. In West's work, the illusory, vicarious dreams provided by Hollywood and the hollow platitudes and promises provided by newspaper advice columns are methods to give a false impression of reciprocity.

West's novels depict mass media as an apperceptive apparatus by which the mass man is duped by misleading appearances and camouflaged meanings in commodities and media. Benjamin argues that "fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves," and this is a central tenet of West's work. In West's novels, Barnard writes, "dreams and illusions, [West] implies, have been brought under the sway of the political economy and have solidified into the obsolescent materiality of buildings and commodities: from the old vaudevillean Harry Greener's fraudulent 'Miracle Solvent' to the successful screenwriter's imitation Old South mansion" (331). In West's works, as Barnard argues, there is often a "look frozen at that horrible moment of realization when displays in which we still see traces of utopian desire reveal themselves as cheap seconds or fakes; ugly, monstrous, but above all sad" (145). *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s final religious revelation is expressed only in the platitudes he has written for his column, despite his earnest attempts to formulate a message without its cliches, while Tod sees the riot tearing through Los Angeles as the epitome of the decrepit and grotesque landscape of California, but can't coherently capture it in his vision.

In the circular never-ending desires produced in the consumerist mass media, wishes are both repetitive and constructed with tropes from Hollywood movies and their cliches. In comparing Benjamin's analysis of art and society with Auden's discussion of desire in West, Barnard writes that dreams in West's work are like "the gambler's desire, ever identical, ever

repetitive, thus [resembling] Auden's 'wishes,' those dreams of instant transformation which can never extend into commitment or belief" (334). Homer Simpson provides a clear illustration of Auden's description:

His emotions surged up in an enormous wave, curving and rearing, higher and higher, until it seemed as though the wave must carry everything before it. But the crash never came. Something always happened at the very top of the crest and the wave collapsed to run back like water down a drain, leaving, at the most, only the refuse of feeling. (273)

The circular cycle of consumerist desire propagated by mass media affects Homer in much the same way that it affects other characters in the novel: like his experience, the promise and wish is left unfulfilled and the longing remains.

Barnard's further writes that "[West's] novels (especially *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*) can be read in light of Marx's dialectical insight that religion, though the pinnacle of illusion, is also the bearer of a diagnostic truth, an accurate index of intolerable conditions" (343). Work itself is reproduced in the dreams and desires of mass man in West's work; consumers are engaged and entertained by reproductions of the conditions that dominate and control their actual lives. As Weisenborn argues, the illusions and fantasies harbored by the characters appear to exist beyond the realm of the commodity exchange; however, the movie industry renders these illusions into marketable goods (28). John Springer argues, "For Tod, as for West, Hollywood is a rich source of material...he channels both his fascination and his revulsion for what he finds there into his art" (162). Hollywood, to West, writes Springer, is a reflection of "a crisis in historical and cultural identity" as well as a "confusion of reality and illusion" (164). Springer argues that the

vision of *The Day of the Locust* finds its purest expression in Tod's "The Burning of Los Angeles." Contrary to Springer's view, the novel includes it and transcends the vision depicted in the painting by incorporating its failure into a larger context of commodification, illusory dreams, and the making of the mass man. The painting represents the inadequacy of art as a way to express, contain, and escape from the forces represented by the riot.

West's novels anticipate later trends in Postmodern fiction through self-reflexivity regarding the medium of art and the novel. Barnard argues that "if the novel traditionally problematizes and explores the meaning of life, West's 'novel in the form of a comic strip' problematizes and explores the meaning of a novel (212). The focus on rapid-fire action, mechanistic characters rendered hollow by consumer commodity culture, and relative lack of inner psychology all work to, as Barnard argues, "problematize the meaning of a novel" by subverting convention. His novels use fiction as a method to unveil fictions, complicating his sentiments on the futility of art through using unconventional art as a way to express his argument.

The Dream Life of Balso Snell

In West's two lesser acclaimed novels, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* and *A Cool Million*, he is direct and singularly focused in his central theme. The former is a disavowal of art-as-salvation and a survey of influential literary and art tropes torn down, digested, and delivered in a raw, stripped away form. The latter is a political novel in the form of a twisted and distorted Horatio Alger rags-to-riches story. *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is significantly less mature and developed than his subsequent novels yet introduces a number of themes developed more fully in his later works. *A Cool Million* was written following *Miss Lonelyhearts* and suffers from an over-reliance on what it mocks.

While these works lack the complexity of *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*, they reveal West's attitude toward art and demonstrate his political motives (which often appear completely nihilistic and pessimistic in his other works). Both novels, as Alistair Wisker points out, are "best seen as a search for a proper method and, in rejecting certain subject matter and approaches, as a method of discovering proper subjects" (37).

While the novel ranks low in critics' eyes-- judged as "schoolboyish" (Hyman), "scatological and pretentiously wise" (Aaron), "a not very successful exercise in [the] vein of phantasmagoria" (Wilson), and "barely worth reprinting" (Cowley), (cited in Veitch 27)-- the work is West's early foray into questioning the division of 'high' and 'low' culture, his skepticism toward art-as-salvation, and his pessimism toward master-narratives. One of the few advocates of the novel was William Carlos Williams who wrote a positive appraisal which helped the novel be

published by *Contact Editions*, the same press that had published Williams in the 1920s. West later leveraged Williams's favorable review into a working relationship in which the two founded and ran a revival of the early twenties magazine *Contact*.

In *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, the titular character crawls through the anus of the Trojan horse and encounters various prominent literary and art figures while traversing the entrails of the creature. West describes the novel as being composed of "elephantine close-ups of various literary positions" (398). The scatological and juvenile humor along with the loosely focused structure understandably failed to capture readers and critics. On the topic of writing, one character notes that the writer "come[s] to the paper with a constipation of ideas," where "the white paper acts as a laxative. A diarrhea of words is the result" (122)-- a good example of the style of humor throughout the text. At one point, the narrator comments on a work of fiction within the novel by saying that it's "interesting psychologically, but is it art?"-- art, in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, comes under frequent scrutiny and is constantly insulted, degraded, and mocked. The novel's central theme is the fragility of the "high" and "low" distinctions in art, as well as the matter of art being futile as salvation in the face of the violent, grotesque nature of the world.

The book progresses through loosely connected episodes tied together in the character's physical movement through the Trojan Horse's bowels wherein he encounters characters connected to literary, religious, and cultural themes. Beginning with a Jewish guide introducing Balso to his journey, his travels take him to encounter an onslaught of unusual characters, chief among them: Maloney the Areopagite, a hagiographer; John Ralskolnikov Gilson (and John Gilson, the author of his alter ego), a fictional murderer; Samuel Perkins, an aesthete; and Miss McGeeney, a biographer

(these characters being only a few of many). Balso explores each of these character's works and opinions only to discard them-- something which the novel does to the White Western Cultural tradition of Art. The avant-garde, intellectual and low-brow, and kitsch are entangled and interwoven into a complex literary style in the novel, wherein Balso reacts and ultimately rejects a variety of art forms and cultural monuments. As Veitch points out, the novel demonstrates several of the elements of West's style that he later develops; the novel displaying "small, carefully cropped frames or episodes, linked in a loosely threaded narrative, whose recurrent motifs-- laughter, violence, excess--are the real subjects of his novels" (27).

Furthermore, the con-man antics of the novel play upon the theme of, as Veitch argues, the "cheaters and the cheated," the original title of *The Day of the Locust* (27). For Wisker, the novel "can... be seen as a manual of West's themes throughout his work, sex, scatology, the grotesque, Christianity and Judaism, the flesh, letters, the crippled, violence, [and] dupes.... Principally it is a manual of terrible dreams" (49). These themes are tested in the novel, as well as his device of treating characters mechanistically-- as in his other works, characters appear to operate through action and appear as assemblages of cliches, cultural references, and repetitive action, often slapstick.

In one scene, John Gilson, a twelve-year-old who has written a story about a Dostoevskian- esque murderer keeping a journal of his crimes, sells Balso a pamphlet. The pamphlet reads:

An intelligent man finds it easy to laugh at himself, but his laughter is not sincere if it is thorough....I always find it necessary to burlesque the mystery of feeling at its source; I must laugh at myself, and if the laugh is 'bitter', I must laugh at the laugh. (25-26)

The self-reflexivity of “laugh[ing] at the laugh” and the attempt to “burlesque the mystery of feeling at its source” shows West taking the solemn and morose and subjecting it to pitiless, mocking, and obscene gestures. To *laugh at the laugh* becomes a driving force in West’s work in the way it becomes complicated as either an embrace of nihilism and pessimism or as a coping mechanism for a near hopeless world. The thought that “laughter is not sincere if it is thorough” questions the potential of laughing at the bitter laugh-- to find the situation entirely and thoroughly humorous would be to miss the mire of dark elements in the situation. To ‘burlesque the mystery of feeling at its source’ is a key element of West’s dark comedy: revealing dire circumstances and conditions through the slapstick, comedic, and clichéd. Art becomes a futile gesture, a sty unable to be popped, as described in this passage from the novel:

I go to a mirror and squeeze the sty with all my strength....I think of sandpapering my body. I think of grease, of sandalwood oil, of saliva; I think of velvet, of Keats, of music, of the hardness of precious stones, of mathematics, of the arrangement of architecture. But, alas! I can find no relief. (26)

Grotesque physicality in the novel serves as a counterpoint to the intellectual and idealist realm of art-- similar to the grotesque, fleshy Mrs. Doyle in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and her disabled husband or the physical dismantling of Lem in *A Cool Million*. This passage illustrates the novel’s attitude toward Art and intellectualism being a futile form of potential salvation against the world’s grotesque and horrific realities.

The grotesque, misshapen, and unusual are self-admitted by the narrator as being his central desire:

Balso dreamt that he was a young man again, lurking in a corner of the Carnegie Hall lobby among the assembled friends and relatives of music. The lobby was crowded with the many beautiful girl-cripples who congregated there because Art is their only solace, most men looking upon their strange forms with distaste. But it was otherwise with Balso Snell. He likened their disarranged hips, their short legs, their humps, their splay feet, their walleyes, to ornament. Their strange foreshortenings, hanging heads, bulging spinesacks, were a delight, for he had ever preferred the imperfect, knowing well the plainness, the niceness of perfection. (34)

Balso's fetishization of the women's various maladies and deformities emphasizes their doomed physicality over their futile attempt to find solace in art. This same comment that "Art is their only solace" returns in *Miss Lonelyhearts* through dismissive comments made by Miss Lonelyhearts' editor, Shrike. In that novel, he echoes sentiments expressed in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, telling Miss Lonelyhearts:

For you l'art vivant, the living art, as you call it. Tell them that you know that your shoes are broken and that there are pimples on your face, yes, and that you have buck teeth and a club foot, but that you don't care, for to-morrow they are playing Beethoven's last quartets in Carnegie Hall and at home you have Shakespeare's plays in one volume. (97)

Art, in the passage from *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, is merely a light luring in moths: the music at Carnegie Hall being only a momentary, fleeting distraction from both the "men looking upon their strange forms with distaste" and their own inherent defects. These deformities are also reflective of "low" culture as they are disdained by "most men" in Carnegie Hall. One of the women Balso encounters is a hunchback, Janey, who is in the midst of a spat with a lover. The lover, Beagle, writes a letter to her taking on her point of view, and from Janey's imagined perspective gripes:

The ridiculous, the ridiculous, all day long he talks of nothing else but how ridiculous this, that, or the other thing is. And he means me. I am absurd. He is never satisfied with calling other people ridiculous, with him everything is ridiculous—himself, me. Of course I can laugh at Mother with him, or at the Hearth; but why must my own mother and home be ridiculous? I can laugh at Hobey, Joan, but I don't want to laugh at myself. I'm tired of laugh, laugh, laugh. I want to retain some portion of myself unlaughed at. There is something in me that I won't laugh at. I won't. I'll laugh at the outside world all he wants me to, but I won't, I don't want to laugh at my inner world. (38)

Before going on to suggest her suicide if she were to have followed him to Paris, Beagle clarifies to Balso that “Janey’s death is a joke” (45). No portion or segment of a person or their surroundings remains “unlaughed” at in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*.

Several of the novel’s myriad references and distorted, often reified objects challenge and question, as Veitch writes, the “status of the ‘real,’ discursivity, sublimation, performance, hysteria, the constitution of the subject” (27). The floating points of reference and the lack of a fixed center through the novel’s progression in the bowels of the Trojan Horse contribute to the work’s skepticism of metanarratives or a hope for a return to a former cultural order, represented by the classics. Veitch writes that “West makes it quite clear that there is no father or artificer who will step in to create order out of this cultural sargasso....In a messy world of competing languages--a world that lacks a center, a strict hierarchy, or a privileged mode of expression--how and under what terms is authority legitimated?” (41). Veitch’s argument is supported by the novel’s chaotic plot and rejections of art and literature. To quote Beagle-- “The clown is dead; the curtain is down.... Of course, I know it’s old stuff; but what difference does that make? Life is a stage; and we are clowns. What is more tragic than the role of clown? What more filled with all the essentials of great art?—pity and irony. Get it?” (45).

A Cool Million

A Cool Million uses, by one estimate, about 20 percent plagiarized passages from Horatio Alger's books. The novel takes Alger's rags-to-riches premise and has the narrator physically ripped apart and repeatedly injured during his journey. Common American folk dreams, like rapid class mobility-- the potential for anyone with enough perseverance and effort to raise themselves out of poverty and become a success-- are torn down in a literal way. The embodiment of the physical effects of the journey comprise the bulk of the novel's dark humor. Much as *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* deploys profane, obscene, and crude slapstick to comment on art and artists, *A Cool Million* uses similar tropes to comment on the political landscape of the Great Depression. Primarily, the novel mocks American Exceptionalism in the context of massive wealth inequality, and the illusion of social-economic mobility through sheer force of willpower and "hard work." On the contemporary literary reception of the novel, Wisker writes that "West's work was always falling between two stools, stools which he describes...with bitter precision as the 'radical press' and the 'literature boys'....The reception of *A Cool Million* can be described in these terms" (3).

Lem, the protagonist, is a subject of the 'joke' of various forms of violence which render him crippled and eventually dead. To quote a summary of his brutal trajectory late in the novel, "His teeth were pulled out. His eye was gouged from his head. His thumb was removed. His scalp was torn away. His leg was cut off. And, finally, he was shot through the heart" (270). Contrary to West's other works, the narrative of *A Cool Million* is mostly linear and plot-driven rather than fragmented and scene-oriented. But much like his other novels, he portrays the characters as

mechanistic assemblages, driven by cliches and mass-produced ideas. The myths promulgated in Alger's numerous books take a central role: the "American Dream" wherein the impoverished can go from "rags to riches" is the main cliché that West aims to deconstruct in *A Cool Million*.

West's anti-capitalist motives in the novel, and his warning of how commodification and the aesthetics of capital can lead to fascism, are clearly demonstrated in the novel's progression through nefarious characters taking advantage of the naive protagonist and his childhood infatuation, Betty. Communists, bankers, con-men, criminals, and fascists all use and abuse Lem while he loses parts of himself and stumbles toward a grotesque end. As Wisker argues, the novel is "a work in parenthesis, marking the changes between the human engagement of *Miss Lonelyhearts* and the more surely based, more subtly warning, political and economic engagement of *The Day of the Locust*" (89). Lem's violent end and his subsequent martyrdom relate to Horkheimer and Adorno's assertion that the culture industry's dominance and manipulation lay fertile ground for totalitarianism and fascism. Violence, in their view, accelerates rather than stops the tide of the commodification of contemporary culture.

The American Dream becomes a horrific nightmare in Lem's progression through frauds, beatings, jailings, mutilations, and further complications that result in his culmination as a human stage prop for a grotesque slapstick performance. In the process of seeking the American Dream, Lem is robbed, set up by con-men and arrested, and is taken advantage of by both political actors and seedy individuals promising him things in order to dupe him. During his progress and various misfortunes, his childhood love is kidnapped, prostituted, and raped repeatedly during her own journey, which often intersects with Lem's.

The novel takes the form of Alger's novels in nearly every way, Veitch summarizes by writing that West mocks:

the humble, rural origins of the protagonist; the arrival of the naif in the city; the necessity for and danger of 'confidence' in strangers; the careful tally of accumulating assets; the frequent tests of character that prove the worthiness of the protagonist when (never 'if') success arrives; the life-threatening situation that puts the man of wealth in debt to our young hero and hence sets him on the road to success. (96)

His journey begins with a 90-day ultimatum delivered by a lawyer to his mother regarding loans on her home, and that she must pay the full value of her house or lose everything she owns. Lem seeks out Shagpoke Whipple, an ex-president and convenient neighbor, for help. Whipple encourages Lem to follow and fulfill the American dream of moving from poverty to material success in order to repay his mother's debts. Whipple decides to aid Lem by pushing him toward this American Dream, saying that "America is the land of opportunity. She takes care of the honest and industrious and never fails them as long as they are both. This is not a matter of opinion, it is one of faith. On the day that Americans stop believing it, on that day will America be lost." (344). The matter of faith in the cliché is critical, the inculcation of these ideas relies on an uncritical, passive reception. Whipple's advice echoes common American folk maxims, borrowing (and often, literally plagiarizing) Alger's format of having a mouthpiece for unrelenting adherence to the dogma of the American Dream.

Whipple, unlike Alger's more benevolent advice givers, manipulates Lem to his own ends. His advice is often tinged with fragments of rhetoric to reinforce the idea of capitalism as king, and the American Dream as real and obtainable. To Lem, Whipple declaims and insists:

“Despite the Communists and their vile propaganda against individualism, this is still the golden land of opportunity. Oil wells are still found in people's back yards. There are still gold mines hidden away in our mountain fastnesses.” (140)

Success is imminent, within grasp in Whipple's hollow claims, yet the reality is that it is a mirage that fades and recedes further the closer Lem gets to the goals and tenets set by Whipple's plan.

This trite advice sends Lem, now equipped with thirty dollars from Whipple, toward his ultimate doom. Driven by this cliché, Lem boards a train to find his fortune in New York, a place where, as he's told by a con-man on the train, “If you can't make money [there], you can't make money anywhere” (200). In the same trip, the con-man steals Lem's money then frames Lem for robbery of a ring, which he planted in his pocket. Lem's naivete in freely letting the con-man know about his plan and money comes from Whipple's American ideal--“She takes care of the honest and industrious and never fails them as long as they are both”-- Lem being honest quickly becomes a weakness.

West's vision of America is one saturated with liars, schemers, and their victims. His vision, beginning in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* and further elucidated in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, is central to *A Cool Million*. The key liars and schemers in the novel, Whipple, Goldstein, and Wu Fong, use and manipulate the American folklore to their own ends while Lem takes it without a hint of skepticism. Shrike, the malevolent editor in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, employs a similar strategy of embracing the culture of spectacle and illusory dreams to exploit the paper's readers. Later, West

develops this theme-- mixing media, politics, and culture in *The Day of the Locust's* depiction of Hollywood and its denizens.

The explicit political tone of the novel illustrates West's left-leaning sympathies ;however, his leftism was idiosyncratic, being too close to nihilism, too cynical, and too anti-dogma to appeal to the American left. Wisker writes that "West... refused to adopt the role of proletarian novelist as it was advocated by the official theoreticians and critics with similar sympathies" (95). There are no oppressed working-class heroes at the center of West's novels. Here, the novel's depictions of the false wishes propagated under a capitalist society and the complete enthrallment of characters to their implanted dreams foreshadow these themes in *The Day of the Locust*. In a letter about that novel, West wrote that he "tried to describe a meeting of the anti-Nazi league, but it didn't fit" and instead substituted it with "a whorehouse and a dirty film" (795).

Lem's final scene is one of brutal dismemberment:

Their object was to knock off his toupee or to knock out his teeth and eye.... Then Lem ... bent over and with sober dignity took from the box at his feet, which contained a large assortment of false hair, teeth, and eyes, whatever he needed to replace the things that had been knocked off or out.... For a final curtain, they brought out an enormous wooden mallet labeled "The Works" and with it completely demolished our hero.

His various replacement bodyparts show his mechanistic and constructed body as it is consumed by the dream that motivated him. During his progression, he is duped and used by political parties for nefarious ends, particularly Shagpoke Whipple's fascist party. Lem dies after reading two lines during a political rally and his death is twisted into making him a martyr for the party, and the novel ends with the fascists delivering a speech to a massive audience:

[H]e did not live or die in vain. Through his martyrdom the National Revolutionary Party triumphed, and by that triumph this country was delivered from sophistication, Marxism and International Capitalism. Through the National Revolution its people were purged of alien diseases and America became again American. (238)

Lem becomes an American Horst Wessel, the Nazi stormtrooper murdered in 1930 turned martyr by Goebbels and the Nazi Party. Following this event years later, Whipple delivers a speech where Lem's misfortune is an example of what the future government should aim to prevent while Betty and Lem's mother cry on the sidelines. Much the way Horst Wessel's death and funeral became a Nazi spectacle, Lem's death becomes a spectacle for the political gain of the American fascists of the novel. The novel ends with Whipple and his crowd of supporters proclaiming "Hail, Lemuel Pitkin. All hail, the American Boy!" (238).

Lem is a generic character built from tropes from Alger and from clichés about the American Dream. Veitch argues: "By casting his protagonist as a machine, West deliberately sets out to prevent his readers from retreating to a sentimental humanism that functioned to recuperate liberal capitalism under the guise of criticizing it" (101). He is mechanical and replaceable and his death is neither a heroic one, a tragic one, or a wide-appealing comedic one. In a larger sense, Lem's dismantling-- a term West uses instead of the more embodied "dismembering"-- is a statement on the dissolution of meaning in the cultural sargasso of modernity, wherein metanarratives are hollow clichés held out to manipulate, and the culture a fragmented "dismantled" hodgepodge.

Miss Lonelyhearts

A novelist, West writes in “Some Notes on Miss L” (1933), has nothing to learn about reality from Freud, yet his works can remain as a touchstone or a “Bulfinch” of psychological mythologies. Much as in his other novels and echoing the sentiment in “Notes on Violence,” (1932) characters in *Miss Lonelyhearts* are devoid of inner selves-- hollow amalgamations of gestures, speeches, cliches, platitudes, and mass-disseminated media. West’s rejection of inner psychology in fiction is, as Barnard argues, a way in which West has “discerned in contemporary circumstances a challenge to the very nature and existence of the autonomous self” (Barnard 171). The self to West in a commodified, reified 1930’s America is a bundle of mechanistic desires and impulses mediated by capital and driven by disseminated mass culture. The salvation by art or even the everyday gratification by consumer commodities is invalidated in *Miss Lonelyhearts* through the novel’s ruthless treatment of mass media, advertising, and the empty redemptive potential of art.

Miss Lonelyhearts, published in 1933, originally appeared in chapters published in *Contact* magazine in February, July, and October of 1932, as well as one chapter that appeared in *Contempo* in July of the same year. These chapters developed into the final novella, with the major development being that the novella was expanded and changed to third-person perspective from first-person perspective, giving the novel a broader view of Miss Lonelyhearts. In the work, a male

protagonist only known in the novel as “Miss Lonelyhearts” is an advice columnist for the “The New York *Post-Dispatch*”; an advertising summary of his column is provided in a parenthetical aside: “Are-you-in-trouble? --Do-you-need-advice?--Write-to-Miss-Lonelyhearts-and-she-will-help-you” (60). Miss Lonelyhearts responds to desperate letters with hollow, generic clichés promising religious salvation, relief, and respite from suffering and feels immense pain at his inability to truly help those writing to him. Miss Lonelyhearts had originally thought working the column would lead to a position at the sports desk, so his responsibility was not one he originally sought out. Jay Martin writes of one of the archetypal letters: “The repetitions, the calculated intensification of pain, and the pitiable, conscious reiteration of clichéd phrase and pattern all hint at a kind of torment far deeper and more significant than that suggested by the language of the original letter” (187). The newspaper, epitomized by the opinion of his editor Shrike, has no sentimental feelings toward the letter writers. Shrike suggests Miss Lonelyhearts tone down his responses when Miss Lonelyhearts begins to suggest suicide to those seeking advice, with Shrike saying it would decrease the number of papers in circulation due to fewer readers.

The trap of cliché and inarticulate suffering highlight the trauma of the letters and the monumental torment of Miss Lonelyhearts’s duty to respond to them. Mass media and the illusions disseminated in American popular culture of the 1930s confine the reader’s ability to imagine alternative solutions to their suffering. Veitch, in discussing this phenomena, writes that “Miss Lonelyhearts’ readers are so debauched by the sentimental clichés of American culture—home, marriage, and true love—that they cannot imagine any other response to their pain” (74). The clichés of his responses invade his actions as well; in a scene with Betty, his fiancée, Miss Lonelyhearts

expresses his sexual frustration but is unable to do so without resorting to a mechanistic kind of response: “He began to shout at her, accompanying his shouts with gestures that were too appropriate, like those of an old-fashioned actor” (70).

Hounded by Shrike, who finds the letters amusing and delivers constant deadpan reflections and comments, Miss Lonelyhearts desperately goes in search of answers and for a solution to his general impotence in his writing in the bleak American landscape he inhabits. He attempts to sleep with Shrike’s wife, abuses an old man, makes a pastoral trip to the countryside, meets and sleeps with a married woman who wrote to his column, and is killed while clumsily attempting to convey a religious revelation. The grotesque, dark comedy of the novel reinforces and solidifies the central themes of nihilism vs. meaning, the mechanistic character of the mass man, and the way in which mechanical reproduction problematizes the act of communication by rendering it anonymous, commercial, and circular. On the novel’s humor, Justus Nieland writes that “West's deadpan remains unsettling and doggedly, mercifully inhuman: rejecting both authenticity's ground and the lure of transcendence, it is embedded, as it were, in an abyss” (79). The “inhuman” nature of West’s humor lies in its unflinchingly cruel treatment of its slapstick characters and the dire situation of the commercialized American society. As in his other novels, the illusory dreams propagated by media in 1930s capitalist America drive characters to inescapable unfulfilled desires.

Miss Lonelyhearts’s replies promise vague messages of redemption and hope for assuaging suffering, typically written with religious overtones; one of his responses, abandoned due to its cliché and trite content, reads: “Life is worth while, for it is full of dreams and peace, gentleness

and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar” (59). These clichés echo advertising copy and generic messages about a worthwhile life; notably dreams and faith bookend his message, but in the world of the novel both have been promised too often and sold too cheaply and frequently. Inarticulate suffering and illusory dreams drive the scene in which Miss Lonelyhearts is trying to seduce Shrike’s wife, who spurns his advances with an elaborate story about her father. Miss Lonelyhearts’s response is telling of West’s attitude: “He stopped listening and tried to bring his great understanding heart into action again. Parents are also part of the business of dreams....They told [stories about them] because they wanted to talk about something besides clothing or business or the movies, because they wanted to talk about something poetic” (72).

The desperate pleas inundating Miss Lonelyhearts are riddled with spelling and grammatical errors and show the writers to be aware of their desperation and pain but unable to articulate or identify the cause of their suffering. In describing their letters, Lonelyhearts calls them “inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering” (92). They are an expression of voicelessness in modernity, muddled efforts to grasp an unreachable salvation. Furthermore, the letters he receives, initially read and responded to in a detached cynical way, are “no longer funny” to Miss Lonelyhearts as “All of them [are] alike, stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife” (66). The relative voicelessness of the suffering of the mass man and the illusion of a reciprocal message of salvation reflect West’s focus on the deleterious effects of media and commercialization of hope, as well as the potential futility of art or religion to provide respite.

Shrike mocks and parodies both the letters and Miss Lonelyhearts's attempts to respond sincerely. A parody of *Anima Christi*, written by Shrike, printed on white cardboard and resting on the writing desk taunts Miss Lonelyhearts's increasing distress over the letters:

Soul of Miss L, glorify me.
 Body of Miss L, nourish me
 Blood of Miss L, intoxicate me.
 Tears of Miss L, wash me.
 Oh good Miss L, excuse my plea,
 And hide me in your heart,
 And defend me from mine enemies.
 Help me, Miss L, help me, help me.
 In saecula saeculorum. Amen (60).

Shortly thereafter, Shrike dictates his own letter to Miss Lonelyhearts, mocking his employee's desperation:

All is desolation and a vexation of the spirit. I feel like hell. How can I believe, how can I have faith in this day and age? Is it true that the greatest scientists believe again in you?

Shrike's deadpan remarks reflect the nihilistic undercurrent of the novel. Shrike himself is a commodified man, yet knows and embraces his role. His cynicism, by suggesting that there is no true escape, mocks Miss Lonelyhearts's attempts to transcend the system of commercialization.

Early in the novel, Shrike mockingly identifies Miss Lonelyhearts with Christ, and religious imagery pervades the novel during Miss Lonelyhearts's muddled escapades and desperate attempts to find salvation and meaning in and through suffering. Biblical abstractions become gruesomely material, affecting the dreams of Miss Lonelyhearts where they materialize in the form of a distorted cross. The Christ-figure on the wall in Miss Lonelyhearts's room has no cross, showing the debauched nature of religion in the novel's depiction.

Fredric Jameson's concept of pastiche as 'blank parody' accurately describe Shrike's remarks and cold detachment; Jameson writes that pastiche is

[L]ike parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. (3)

Shrike's full embracing of the advice column and his mockery of the unanswerable pleas in the letters has a deadpan tone, most frequently without ironic distance, but rather an identification with the deleterious illusions disseminated by the paper. His deadpan is much like those of silent film characters of the type Buster Keaton plays-- a survivor of all disasters while keeping his deadpan expression. Only once does Shrike's deadpan break-- when he briefly discusses his wife's unhappy relationship with him-- before he re-establishes it. Again, much like Jameson's description of pastiche, Shrike lists a series of potentialities that Miss Lonelyhearts could live out in a pastiche-eque manner. These potentials reflect cliched ideals of romance, and their rebuttals are West's response; none of the solutions Miss Lonelyhearts could live out are possible, in Shrike's view, except for his life as an advice columnist-- stuck forever attempting to respond to desperation by sputtering cliches and generic comments. Shrike remarks:

My friend, I know of course that neither the soil, nor the South Seas, nor Hedonism, nor art, nor suicide, nor drugs, can mean anything to us. We are not men who swallow camels only to strain at stools. God alone is our escape. The church is our only hope, the First Church of Christ Dentist, where He is worshiped as Preventer of Decay. The church whose symbol is the trinity new-style: Father, Son and Wirehaired Fox Terrier.... (98)

These kind of pastiches that are, as Jameson describes, a ‘stylistic mask in a dead language’ are frequent in West’s novels. Parody exists, but in a deadpan delivery devoid of a laugh and often a punchline. The clichés Shrike uses are derivative, hackneyed ideas carefully arranged to torment Lonelyhearts’s attempts to move beyond them. Shrike’s jokes, of which Miss Lonelyhearts is the receiving, punished end, have, as Nieland writes, a “mechanical efficiency” and are as mass-produced as the media they create in the paper’s columns (76). The horror of the clichés is that the characters are trapped within them and find themselves unable to communicate without them, finding their words, ideas, and dreams all polluted by ideas hawked by mass media. Goldsmith, a co-worker and writer for the same paper as Miss Lonelyhearts, takes on writing the column briefly when Miss Lonelyhearts is absent. The machine of the paper is able to churn out another Miss Lonelyhearts, demonstrating the lack of individual identities in how Goldsmith can substitute for the role so easily.

Considering West’s novel in the context of his comment in “Some Notes on Miss L,” that it is a “novel in the form of a comic-strip,” shows the action-oriented and mechanistic characters as his method of conveying Modernist alienation (402). Nieland writes that West’s novel in the form of a comic strip must be considered in the evolution of the comic strip itself, which itself emerged in the context of a broader tradition of comedy such as vaudeville and slapstick that came from a modern, urban context. In reaction to an increasingly heterogeneous society and explosive industrialization, Nieland argues, “New Humor” (i.e. slapstick, vaudeville, etc.) was a “fast-paced, efficient, and mechanical” response to the emerging modern culture.

Vaudeville's rapid-fire jokes and what Nieland calls the "formal regularity" of comic strips evolved to capture widespread audiences through "sensory immediacy and social topicality" creating a "disembeddedness" that contributes to what Nieland argues is an "affective universality" (Nieland 64). West's work takes these forms of comedy and twists them, creating an "antisentimental deadpan" and "[a] defamiliarized slapstick" that, in contrast to the aforementioned forms of comedy, "speaks less to humanity's universal physicality than to a more historically localized awareness of the tyranny of things." (Nieland 65) This deadpan and slapstick is also a prominent feature the protagonist's plight in *A Cool Million* and is most fully developed in the character Harry Greener in *The Day of the Locust*. Nieland argues that the "anti-humanist ritual of feeling in *Miss Lonelyhearts*... does anticipate the post-structuralist insight that emotion is always second-order, requiring the death of the subject" (77). He concludes that "West's comic antihumanism... recuperate[s] a host of sentimental categories attending the human-- authenticity, identify, interiority-- whose operation West has so carefully stalled" (Nieland 79).

The cultured diagnostic of West's novel mirrors the themes in his other three novels: slapstick and dark humor turned grotesque bring the horrific commodification of American life to the surface, showing the hollow dreams and illusory wishes inculcated by mass media to be false promises. West's cynicism borders on nihilism, but avoids falling into the trap of pure hopelessness; his novels express anguish at the contemporary state of things, aiming to reveal falsehoods and illusions with the aim of bringing change. *Miss Lonelyhearts* is West's second-best expression of his themes. They are most developed in *The Day of the Locust*, which reflects the author's style at its matured peak.

The Day of the Locust

The major characteristics of West's fiction, such as his juxtaposition of fragmented images, his mixing of high and low culture, his self-reflexivity, and suspicion of metanarratives, finds its fullest expression in *The Day of the Locust*. The original title of the novel "The Cheaters and the Cheated" illustrates the perspective of the novel. This final work, written two years before his premature death in a car accident, produced the same meager sales as his earlier fiction and garnered virtually no attention. Despite its publication by the major publisher Random House, the press did little to promote the novel, leaving it largely overlooked.

The novel is centered around Tod Hackett and his encounters with Faye Greener and Homer Simpson. Tod is a Yale School of Fine Arts educated painter who joins the Hollywood movie industry with a ironic sense of detachment and continual cynicism toward the business. His aspiration is to use the characters and landscape of Hollywood for an ambitious painting titled "The Burning of Los Angeles" while he works as a painter and set designer for the studio. Springer argues that "For Tod, as for West, Hollywood is a rich source of material....he channels both his fascination and his revulsion for what he finds there into his art" (162). Tod becomes infatuated with Faye Greener, a hopelessly untalented actress, and encounters Homer Simpson, a mild-mannered naive midwesterner and former hotel bookkeeper. Homer too is in love with Faye, despite his thorough sexual repression, and desperately tries to win her affection, to no avail. The novel progresses through fragmented scenes peopled with grotesque and largely shallow, hollow characters whom Tod encounters while working on studio back lots, and while trying to seduce

Faye. The novel ends with a riot engulfing a movie premier in chaos, which Tod tries to incorporate into his plans for "The Burning of Los Angeles," but which ends with a screaming siren and the continuing riot. The novel suggests that the desires of West's characters are a result of the mass media's continuing and perpetually unfulfilled promises.

The Los Angeles of the novel matches Hollywood's back lots in its massive pastiche of disparate styles and cliches. Tod encounters "Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages." The disparate styles are in "every possible combination" along the road (290). No culture, no element, no cliché, and no combination of styles is exempt from the commodification of the landscape of Hollywood-- a projection of a culture with no identity save that from mass media. In an early scene, Tod observes a studio back lot dumping ground which parallels this condition:

In the center of the field was a gigantic pile of sets, flats and props. While he watched, a ten-ton truck added another load to it. This was the final dumping ground. He thought of Janvier's "Sargasso Sea." Just as that imaginary body of water was a history of civilization in the form of a marine junkyard, the studio lot was one in the form of a dream dump. A Sargasso of the imagination! (300)

In calling the dumping lot, and by extension Hollywood, a "Sargasso of the Imagination," West portrays this conception of the culture industry's reification, commodification, and recycling of content as an endless gyre. To borrow Horkheimer and Adorno's concept, the lot represents a "constant reproduction of the same thing" (50), that is-- the pastiche of style and the collapsing of high and low art into perpetual repetitions of dreams and desires inculcated into the masses. In the cultural Sargasso, "no dream ever entirely disappears" in its infinite recycling. Hollywood, to West,

is a reflection of what Springer claims is a “a crisis in historical and cultural identity” as well as a “confusion of reality and illusion” (164).

This atmosphere of stylization prescribes performance dictated and informed by films and media, evidenced in both the main and secondary characters of the novel, even Tod who believes himself a cynical outside observer. Veitch writes that “West's characters are all-- with varying degrees of self-consciousness-- actors who take their cue from the atmosphere that surrounds them and elaborate it into theater” (116). Harry Greener, Faye’s father and a former vaudevillian turned door-to-door polish salesman, exemplifies a character who is consumed by his performance. In one scene Harry delivers an elaborately rehearsed pitch to Homer. Weisenborn argues that “Not unlike the props on the back-lot, Harry’s personality is limited to a mere surface structure that fails to point to a genuine self underneath” (26). His performance, following a quick introduction, an “elaborate bow,” is a series of automatic gestures, to which automatic responses are expected:

Homer was astonished when he bowed again, did several quick jig steps, then let his derby hat roll down his arm. It fell to the floor. He stooped to retrieve it, straightening up with a jerk as though he had been kicked, then rubbed the seat of his trousers ruefully. Homer understood that this was to amuse, so he laughed. (296)

Homer responds to Harry’s pitch sympathetically at first, but soon becomes violently uncomfortable at the grotesque vaudeville routine, which includes a series of artificial laughs following a patronizing sales act. Harry’s concatenated gestures and reflexive sales maneuvers continue during his pitch, faltering at the end:

[Harry] bowed, sweeping his hat to his heart, then began again. He didn't get very far this time and had to gasp painfully for breath. Suddenly, like a mechanical toy that had been overwound, something snapped inside of him and he began to spin through his entire repertoire. The effort was purely muscular, like the dance of a paralytic. He jiggled, juggled his hat, made believe he had been kicked, tripped, and shook hands with himself. He went through it all in one dizzy spasm, then reeled to the couch and collapsed.

Like “a mechanical toy” Harry is rigid in his automation so that his only response to external events is reflexive, rehearsed, pantomimed actions. His legitimate pain is expressed in performance only as he is unable to do otherwise.

Earlier, Harry shows Tod a newspaper clipping of a review of his vaudeville routines in which his comic slapstick produces, as the newspaper critic writes, a “pain that almost, not quite, thank God, crumples his stiff little figure...[it] would be unbearable if it were not obviously make-believe....It is gloriously funny” (270). Harry’s suffering is, however, not make-believe but is expressed in the only way he is able; Veitch refers to him as “little more than a sentient prop” (121). Even Harry’s death falls into the trap of performance: “Harry groaned again, modulating from pain to exhaustion, then closed his eyes. Tod saw how skillfully he got the maximum effect out of his agonized profile by using the pillow to set it off” (312). Harry’s expressions are so distorted by his performance that “They wouldn't permit degrees of feeling, only the furthest degree” (280). Harry’s hope to be involved with the performance industry proves limited, his hopes to become a star little more than a pipe dream fueled by the media’s projection of anyone being able to become famous. While he does get some work, it is not to the extent or scale he hoped for. Harry’s scream does, however, become a favorite of horror film directors looking for stock sounds in their movies.

Homer, in contrast to Harry, is unable to express his emotions even through trite rehearsed gestures, or to recognize them. He is composed of a variety of ideas, desires, and gestures inculcated by mass media and its representations of American life. He represents one of "the people who come to California to die." He comes to Los Angeles from the Midwest seeking a way to soothe his "nerves" after an awkward potential sexual encounter in the hotel in which he was a manager.

In one scene he is waking up and feels ill at ease:

[Homer's] emotions surged up in an enormous wave, curving and rearing, higher and higher, until it seemed as though the wave must carry everything before it. But the crash never came. Something always happened at the very top of the crest and the wave collapsed to run back like water down a drain, leaving, at most, only the refuse of feeling. (270)

Homer's somber state is representative of what Auden called "West's Disease" which, in Auden's definition, renders its victims "incapable of converting wishes into desires" (66). His emotional frustration becomes sublimated into his hands, which are unusually animate and nearly sentient. Homer has no desire to be involved with the film industry or seek some reward promised by the media-- he spends the majority of his time in quiet boredom. His hands are the only signal that his subconscious desires more from his life, like his lack of nerve to make advances during the sexual invitation in the hotel.

His imagination is also limited by his repressed desire, leaving him unable to conceive of alternatives to his life situation. His life had been "the forty years... entirely without variety or excitement" (101) until he arrived in California. His repression is conveyed in a scene in which:

There was a much better view to be had in any direction other than the one he faced. By moving his chair in a quarter circle he could have seen a large part of the canyon twisting

down to the city below. He never thought of making this shift. From where he sat, he saw the closed door of the garage and a patch of its shabby, tarpaper roof. In the foreground was a sooty, brick incinerator and a pile of rusty cans. A little to the right of them were the remains of a cactus garden in which a few ragged, tortured plants still survived. (38).

His boredom is his meager solace after having lived a relatively uneventful life before moving to California to soothe his nerves. His mechanical makeup represses even an impulse to imagine the other views.

His lust and eventual “business arrangement,” a distinctly non-sexual agreement where Faye lives with Homer after her father’s death, provides a catalyst for action on his part. Later, after Faye abandons him, he is laying wound-up in a ball formation. The novel conveys his repression as

a steel spring which has been freed of its function in a machine and allowed to use all its strength centripetally. While part of a machine the pull of the spring had been used against other and stronger forces, but now, free at last, it was striving to attain the shape of its original coil. (132)

His ultimate expression of emotion comes during the riot, in which he brutally retaliates and murders a child-actor, Adore Loomis, who threw a rock at him.

Faye Greener, the center of frustrated lust from Homer, Tod, a Mexican rancher named Miguel, and a Hollywood Cowboy named Earle, is absorbed by the media in her obsession of becoming a movie star. Her extremely limited film career, mostly consisting of a bit role in a B-Movie, and the overwhelming surrounding culture of mass media’s illusions, give her a false hope of achieving fame. She is constantly daydreaming about a lucky break and fantasizing about Hollywood movies she could star in. Her dreams are standardized, interchangeable amalgamations and loose collections of cliched tropes pulled into plots that often have no ending. Her technique is

mechanical-- she sorts through her dreams "as though they were a pack of cards"-- and her dreams are reified. Her overarching goal is to have them bought by Hollywood studios and produced into films; specifically, she requests that Tod write them down and turn them from fantasy to screenplay.

Much like her father, she is a compulsive performer of automatic gestures. Her disputes with Harry appear as "rehearsed" wherein "Their bitterest quarrels often took this form; he laughing, she singing" (45). Despite her desire for a career as a movie star, she projects only a hollow, cheap sexual allure; a pastiche of B-Movie romance tropes. Tod, in analyzing Faye, notices that "Faye's affectations, however, were so completely artificial that he found them charming" (54). Faye's suitors all abound with sexual frustrations-- Tod in particular fantasizes rape in several instances and multiple scenes erupt into violence between men lusting after Faye.

West portrays love and sex as reified commodities; screenwriter Claude Estees remarks to Tod "Love is like a vending machine" (17), further adding that the "mechanical" exchange is like inserting a coin, pulling a lever, and receiving love, albeit a disappointing, fleeting form of it. The men interested in Faye all treat her as a commodity, an impression she herself encourages (going as far as prostituting herself briefly). Homer allows her to live with him in a "business arrangement," the cowboy seeks to impress her, the Mexican sleeps with her, and Tod continually follows her, completely enthralled despite his attempts to detach from the cultural miasma of Hollywood.

Claude Estees, in a similar way to Shrike, embraces the commodity-driven society and thrives through using it to his advantage. He was, in a very early draft of the novel, the narrator behind the entire novel according to one of West's letters to Bennet Cerf (West, Library of America, 783), one of the editors of the novel and co-founder/publisher at Random House.

The riot at the end of the novel is a mixture of media-driven frenzy, mob mentality, and a chaotic breakdown of order. The sudden catastrophe, fueled by the crowd awaiting a celebrity at the opening of a movie premiere, a feverish media announcer, and Homer's attack and brutality toward the child, create a horrific explosion of violence. The media announcer at "Kahn's Persian Palace Theatre" covering the celebrity's arrival stirs the tension that finally erupts in the riot. He holds out the microphone to project the crowd's roar between his announcements, building up the chaos, and creating the very frenzy that he then reports:

"Did you hear it? It's a bedlam, folks. A veritable bedlam! What excitement! Of all the premieres I've attended, this is the most . . . the most . . . stupendous, folks. Can the police hold them? Can they? It doesn't look so, folks. . . ." (379)

Not only does the media cover the feverish crowds closely, projecting their fervor outward, but actively revels in the potential violence of the crowds pushing against the police guarding the entrance, with the announcer saying it's a "stupendous" premiere. West's description of the masses' discontent portrays the repression beneath the disillusioned surface of the Los Angeles masses:

Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They resent that they've been tricked and burn with resentment. Every day of their lives they read the newspapers and went to the movies. Both fed them on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, wars. This daily diet made sophisticates of them. The sun is a joke. Oranges can't titillate their jaded palates. Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing. (380)

Finally, the apocalyptic moment Tod had envisioned for his painting arrives. The masses, inculcated with hollow dreams and violent tendencies with no outlet, explode into an attack on Homer that quickly escalates into a full-scale riot. Tod loses his sense of detachment despite his

attempts to imagine the scene as a coalescent image of his potential masterwork and he is swept away by the frenzy. The result of Tod's aspiration for "The Burning of Los Angeles" is that it fails to incorporate or overcome the omnipresent commercialization and breakdown of societal order. Weisenborn puts the last point succinctly: West's riot, and the novel as a whole, "mocks the concept of art as an enduring aesthetic form which might be capable of resisting the process of commodification" (31). Tod's scream mingling with the siren at the end of the novel show his complete collapse of distance from the commercialized, media saturated, and illusion-filled masses.

Contrary, to Springer's view, the novel includes the chaos that overwhelms Tod's vision of his painting and succeeds in transcending the vision depicted in the painting by incorporating its failure into a larger context of commodification, illusory dreams, and the making of the mass man. The painting represents the inadequacy of art as a way to express, contain, escape from the forces represented by the riot. Weisenborn argues that Tod at the end of the novel becomes engulfed by the riot, finding the siren and his own noises indistinguishable.

To quote Horkheimer and Adorno, "film, far surpassing the theatre of illusion, leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience..." (67). The media-saturated landscape of Los Angeles encapsulates the characters within a world of illusory promises and unfulfilled desires, rendering them starving for violent relief. West writes of the masses who had "come to California to die" that they feel it would be a boon if some terrible catastrophe were to erupt: "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" (140). The planes, of course, finally "crash" during the riot. The novel's end leaves Los Angeles in

metaphorical flames and Tod an artist unable to bring a coherent, stable aesthetic to the blistering chaos. Similar to Horkheimer and Adorno's conception of mass media, West's work represents a society in which the "whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry" and "the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen..." wherein "real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies..." (73).

Conclusion

After several years working in skid row studios, West was a success in the industry and was on the verge of being offered a contract by one of the more important studios. However, on December 21, 1940, while driving back from a trip with his wife, West ran a stop sign, got in a horrible car accident, and was killed almost instantly. This event was the day after F. Scott Fitzgerald had died of a heart attack. Fitzgerald had written glowingly of *Day of the Locust* and his own reputation would be restored posthumously with the reception of his own Hollywood novel, the unfinished *The Last Tycoon*. West's death was overshadowed by Fitzgerald's, and West's immediate literary influence was limited to his friends, colleagues, and the few that managed to both buy copies of his novels and appreciate them. Seeing as many contemporary critics dismissed him, it was possible that his works could have languished in obscurity. Both critics and writers recognized his literary merit in the decades after his death and his works were saved from these outcomes. Appreciation of West's achievement would take years; however, one early admirer was Flannery O'Connor.

In the introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, a collection of Flannery O'Connor's short stories, Robert Fitzgerald writes that O'Connor pushed *Miss Lonelyhearts* on her friends, urging them to read it. *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner and West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* were chief among her favorite novels. Her debt to West is clearly evident in her satirical methods, ironic use of cliches, and complex grotesques-- the noseless girl or the gun-shot following religious revelation in *Miss Lonelyhearts*-- find their way into O'Connor as one-armed men, a girl with artificial legs, and a woman gored by a bull as a way to Christ.

Although canonization by the academy and the *Norton Anthology*, of the kind West would probably have both scorned and secretly enjoyed, would not come for another sixty years, his novels are now recognized as important works of 1930's American literature.

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