25 CRITICS DISCUSS

Nathanael West

(1906-1940)

"The longer he stayed in New York, the more writers [Faulkner] met. A number of them he liked. One was Nathanael West, a tall, dark, mustachioed man who was manager of the Hotel Sutton. Deriving some security, perhaps, from the fact that the hotel's owner was a relative, West would let writers stay free if they were in financial difficulties. He would divert himself from the uncongenial work by 'snooping around the lives of the other rather strange guests,' but what he wanted most was to write. His first book, published in 1931, was a fantastic novel called *The Dream Life of Balso Snell,* which appeared only to vanish almost without a sound. Though a sad and gentle man, West was a fanatical hunter, spending money on guns and hunting gear he could scarcely afford. He loved talking hunting rather than books, a quality which Faulkner must have found agreeable."

[1931]
Joseph Blotner
Faulkner: A Biography I
(Random House 1974) 740

"It is easy enough to indicate the materials which Mr. Nathanael West has used in his grotesquely beautiful novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts.* But it is a far more difficult matter to convey some notion of the intensely original incandescence of spirit which fuses these simple elements. Chapter after brilliantly written chapter moving like a rocket in mid-flight, neither falls nor fails. The book itself ends with the sudden, swift delumination of a light going out."

Florence Haxton Britten
New York Herald Tribune
(30 April 1933) 6

"Mr. West pierces beneath the surfaces of his material. The tragic lives of his characters impress us even more powerfully because they are made to seem stupid and comic. We may laugh with the author at those people, but we recognize the essential seriousness which has given his writing its impetus….Mr. Dreiser would have made a tragedy out of this material; Mr. West, in making a satiric comedy of it, has perhaps given a more adequate rendering of men whose warped lives do not offer any theme considerable enough for tragedy."

T. C. Wilson
Saturday Review
(13 May 1933) 589

"Two years before, the big, sad, gentle West had published *Miss Lonelyhearts* [1933]. It had been no more successful than his first novel, though a number of discriminating readers including Faulkner had liked it. West, like Faulkner, was in Hollywood to earn enough (writing Westerns, chiefly) so that he could afford time to write his books. In the [Stanley Rose] bookshop the two men renewed the brief acquaintance made in New York nearly five years before. The author-to-be of *The Day of the Locust*--the most acid study of Hollywood in fiction--was a passionate hunter who would escape from screenwriting through long weekends which might start on Thursday and continue through until Tuesday. While the other patrons talked writing, West and Faulkner would talk hunting. When they went dove-hunting together in the Tulare marshes, Faulkner found West a 'damned good shot.' He was congenial, too. 'Pulled his weight,' as Faulkner tersely remarked later, 'didn't talk too much.' West found it odd, however, when his companion addressed him as 'Mr. West' throughout the entire trip."

[1935]
Joseph Blotner
Faulkner II, 934-35

"Here is a book (The Day of the Locust) that attempts to do a great deal more than just pillory the foibles and flimflammery of the movie industry. While its setting is Hollywood and the miasma of the studio naturally permeates the lives of the people concerned, Mr. West has sketched an acidulous mélange of Southern California grotesques, including…some examples of the queer folk you don't read so much about: the Middle Westerners who have saved up a few thousand dollars and moved to California to end their days basking in its vaunted sun. These people, mostly middle-aged, often semi-invalid, invariably bored with their self-chosen life of idleness, inhabit an appalling spiritual wasteland….There is abundant material here for scathing satire or careful social study, and the principal objection to The Day of the Locust is apt to be that it merely scratches the surface."

Louis B. Saloman
Nation
(15 July 1939) 78-79

"His new novel, *The Day of the Locust*, deals with the nondescript characters on the fringe of Hollywood studios….And these people have been painted as precisely and polished up as brightly as the figures in Persian miniatures. Their speech has been distilled with a sense of the flavorsome and the characteristic which makes John O'Hara pedestrian. Mr. West has footed a precarious way and has not slipped at any point into relying on the Hollywood values in describing the Hollywood people….The doings of these people are bizarre, but they are also sordid and senseless. Mr. West has caught the emptiness of Hollywood; and he is, as far as I know, the first writer to make this emptiness horrible."

Edmund Wilson
New Republic
(26 July 1939)

"By God, if I ever publish another Hollywood book, it will have to be 'My 39 Ways of Making Love,' by Hedy Lamarr."

Bennett Cerf
West's Editor & Publisher
Random House (1939)

"West, Nathanael (1903-40), pseudonym of Nathan Wallenstein Weinstein, New York author who, after graduation from Brown University (1924) and two years in Paris, returned to his native city to begin writing his bitter, macabre fiction, which attracted little notice in his time but great recognition from critics after his death. His first works were *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931), a scatological fantasy dwelling on human corruption; *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), a sad and bitter satire of a newspaperman enmeshed in the lives of the writers to his lovelorn column; and *A Cool Million* (1934), a fantastic travesty and savage attack on the Horatio Alger theme. Script writing in Hollywood gave West a sense of that community and business that led to his most significant novel, *The Day of the Locust* (1939), a grotesque depiction in surrealist style of the sham of the city and the pathological misfits who inhabit it. West, who was S. J. Perelman's brother-in-law, was married to Eileen McKenney, the heroine of Ruth McKenney's *My Sister Eileen.*"

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 812

"Not only were the French translating or planning to translate dozens of prominent American novelists and the plays of Eugene O'Neill; they were also discovering and publishing, in the midst of a paper shortage, American books that had been largely neglected at home; for example, the fantastic *Miss Lonelyhearts*, by Nathanael West, which had been published here in 1933 and had promptly gone out of print."

Malcolm Cowley
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-83) 1378

"West's contemporaries were realists; he was a kind of superrealist. He often used enormous incongruities to make his points, which gave him a kinship with French writers of the school of Rimbaud

and with the later surrealists; but instead of documenting his perceptions with magnifying-glass clarity, he preferred to distill them into images and situations painfully barren of minutiae. He was an extreme pessimist, which may have been the reason why he never reached a wide audience while he was alive."

Richard B. Gehman
Atlantic
(19 September 1950) 69

"West's friends and contemporaries were then turning out hard-hitting, tough-minded novels of social protest….He too deplored the emptiness of Twentieth Century life in the United States, but he chose to reflect that life in terms not of characters who were consciously involved in a struggle, but of those who were unconsciously trapped--characters who were, in the blindness of their lives, so tragic as to be true comic figures….Late in 1924, he joined the crowd of young Americans would-be bohemians drifting to Paris, but he evidently did not share the wide-eyed wonder of that hopeful horde; he was, as usual, a little detached….

Like the Surrealists, West often used enormous incongruities to make his points, but unlike them, he preferred to distill his perceptions into images and situations that were painfully barren of minutiae. He was a master of the portmanteau: with a few active phrases, and the Flaubertian addition of a color-word, he constructed scenes that were not only miraculous in their descriptive accuracy but also by their unashamed intensity were so far above realism as to embarrass, or frighten, the reader into acknowledging, almost against his will, the shameful and terrifying *reality* of reality. This may have been one reason why he never reached a wide audience while he was alive; as Alan Ross put it in *Horizon*, 'Perhaps the savagery of West's portrait, his making of the whole political and economic racket so undisguisedly repulsive and meaningless, was too near the bone for an American audience with a mass neurosis, and a guilty conscience….

The Day of the Locust was completed between studio assignments. If it was less perfect in form and structure than *Miss Lonelyhearts,* it was also more ambitious and showed marked progress in West's thinking and in his approach toward maturity as a writer. *Balso* was an inverted book, a young man's intellectual parlor trick performed chiefly for his own amusement and that of those inner-circle friends he permitted to watch. *Miss Lonelyhearts* and, to a lesser extent, *A Cool Million,* were highly colored by West's personal feelings of despair for his characters and his pessimistic conviction that life is one hell of a mess. Five years elapsed between the third and fourth novels, and when *The Day of the Locust* finally came out, it was apparent that West had learned to let his characters and scenes make their own points without his intrusion: the angry crusader's sword became the brush of an artist, without losing its original sharpness. For this reason alone he stands apart from most of the other Americans who were writing in the Thirties, and for this reason his writing is far more likely to remain with us.

The Day of the Locust has been called 'the best book to come out of Hollywood,' but while it certainly is that, it is not primarily a novel about that stucco haven of the queer and diseased. West used Hollywood as a microcosm. It was peculiarly fitted to his needs because, as other writers since have discovered, everything that is wrong with life in the United States is to be found there in rare purity, and because the unreality of the business of making pictures seemed a most proper setting for his 'half-world.' Some Hollywood film people who had read the book claim angrily that it does not depict 'the real' Hollywood; West never intended that it should. The people who live in its pages are not those who are foisting the mammoth Hollywood hoax on the public; only one 'successful' person is shown (the writer, Claude Estee), and he is discovered to be as unhappy, basically (although he has not admitted it, perhaps even to himself) as the poor souls who captured West's attention."

Richard B. Gehman
Introduction (1950)
The Day of the Locust
(New Directions/Bantam 1959) ix-x, xiii, xvii-xviii

"Had he gone on there would have unfolded, I think, the finest prose talent of our age."

William Carlos Williams
Review of *The Day of the Locust*
Tomorrow X
(November 1950) 58-59

"West was, fundamentally, a pessimist…But he carried his pessimism a little further than did most other writers, to the point indeed where it colored his whole outlook on life."

Robert Coates, novelist
(c.1950)

"West's Hollywood is made up of degeneracy and brothers, of failure and sexual desire, of cock-fighting and third-rate boarding houses. But more than anything it is made up of significant boredom, of an etiolated ennui: the whole canvas on which the motiveless actions take place acquires a Breughal-like stillness, as if all the monstrous things going on were part of a very ordinary pattern. And, indeed, the pattern of all West's books is ordinary; it only the extraordinary stylized grotesques on the edge, the narrative logic that touches the rim of fantasy, that charge it with the nervous garishness, the disproportionate perspective that, like the beautiful hunchbacks in *Balso Snell*, mock normality with their own freakishness."

Alan Ross
Introduction
The Complete Works of Nathanael West
(Farrar 1957) xxi-xxii

"West's symbols and grotesques are perhaps more disturbing even than Kafka's, because they more strongly resemble the real. His satire never loses its sting because it is always more real than satirical. He delves more deeply than Melville into the ingrained confidence game of American civilization, the ever-widening split between aspiration and actuality that keeps our public statements, from school days on, from corresponding with the way things are….West treats serious subjects flippantly; but that is better than treating trivial subjects, such as the 'romance of business,' seriously. He is like a perky little wind that blows, now this way, now that, until all the fog of illusion is dispelled from his hand."

William Bittner
Nation
(4 May 1957) 394-96

"The recognition grows that West wrote about something more than pseudo-surrealist characters inside the Trojan horse, a demented writer giving advice to the unloved, a bumpkin determined to act out all the Horatio Alger stories, a group of Hollywood grotesques. He had to write about something. He could not simply and starkly proclaim: here in America is a great emptiness, a vacuum sucking us all in and forcing us to die of spiritual bends. He did not tell, he showed….He sensed what Paul Tillich calls 'the shaking of the foundations.' Like an expressionistic artist, he saw the breaking up of life's surface, and in his prose he drew the fragments."

Richard L. Schoenwald
Commentary
(10 May 1957) 162-63

"Nathanael West's saving grace was that, as a man and as a writer, he practiced the fine art of detachment. Although he was as concerned as his colleagues with the ills of Depression America (once he was arrested for joining a picket line in front of a New York department store), he rarely permitted the period's numerous teapot tempests to intrude on his serious writing. As a writer, his preoccupation was with the moral bankruptcy that under lay the surface ills. Specifically, he wrote of the dreams by which man attempts to live and of the violence which perverts these dreams."

Roger H. Smith
Saturday Review
(11 May 1957) 13

"He had the gift of a grotesquely accurate imagination, so much admired in the Nineteen Twenties, but the chief reason why his work is remembered is simply that he could write. He wrote as carefully as if he were chiseling each word in stone, with space around it. He wrote as if he were composing cablegrams to a distant country, with the words so expensive that he couldn't waste them, and yet with the need for making his message complete and clear. In rereading his works one is always surprised to find how short they are. The proof of their value is that they occupy more space in one's memory than they do on the printed page."

Malcolm Cowley
New York Times
(12 May 1957) 5

"Though not widely known during his lifetime, Nathanael West had a secret reputation that continued to spread. 'Do you like *Miss Lonelyhearts*?' the young stranger would ask at a cocktail party, and the beginnings of a friendship trembled on one's answer. Not so long ago--it was seventeen years after his death--the author of *Miss Lonelyhearts* achieved the dignity and monument of a Collected Works, with an admiring but heavy-footed introduction by an English critic. It was then we discovered that his reputation was everybody's secret. The works were reviewed by dozens of American critics, all speaking in reverent voices as if in an undertaker's parlor. Two or three of them wrote in the rapt style of mystics revealing the anagogic meaning of the Four Gospels. I can imagine, but wouldn't be allowed to print, what Pep West might have said about some of the critics. He used his earthiest language when speaking of prophets and pundits. To avoid the danger of being solemn, he used to stick pins into his dearest illusions….

Though Pep liked to make fun of his own illusions, he was so gentle, so considerate, so quick with sympathy for anyone in distress, that nobody else could bear to destroy them. He was always called 'Pep,' I don't know for what reason, but somehow the nickname was fitting; it seemed to reveal a quality of continually wounded and revived innocence, as if he were everybody's kid brother. The same quality can be found in his writing. Although it was published in the 1930's, it has little to do with the other new writing of that decade, except in its background of joblessness and seedy bohemianism. What it reveals is the spirit of the 1920's, with all their reckless experimentation, their effort to be outrageous, their interest in wildly personal dreams, their sympathy for the individual oppressed not be social forces but by the laws of life itself, and finally their habit of expressing sometimes dirty thoughts in the cleanest sort of prose. Pep belonged to the age, then past, when writing had to be good fun for the writer, at any cost to the writer. Instead of being the comrade in arms of James T. Farrell, for example, he was the kid brother of E.E. Cummings, F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Dadaists….

There are only four of his works, all short, and they fit into one volume about the length of an average historical romance. Moreover, two of them are barely worth reprinting. *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931) is an elaborate joke in the manner of the 1920's, the adventures of a Dadaist schoolboy as he travels down the alimentary canal with gun and camera. There are brilliant passages--as always in West--but the joke as a whole doesn't come off. *A Cool Million* (1934) is a long series of jokes--about the Alger hero, about Calvin Coolidge, about a fascist racketeer--retold in a variety of styles, so that the ordinary reader became confused by the fireworks. As for the radicals, who should have liked the book for its opinions, I suspect that they were made uncomfortable by satire, even when it was directed against their enemies."

Malcolm Cowley
Introduction
Miss Lonelyhearts
(New Directions/Avon 1959) ii-iii

"*The Complete Works of Nathanael West* was published in 1957 with an introduction by Alan Ross. It contains just four short novels, yet it represents the work of a major figure in American fiction. West's vision of the horror and emptiness of modern life is established most effectively in his two acknowledged masterpieces, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) and *The Day of the Locust* (1939). The former is about a newspaper writer who conducts an agony column and gradually succumbs to the real agony that underlies the absurd letters he receives in great numbers daily. *The Day of the Locust* is about Hollywood as West saw it; a disturbingly surrealistic vision culminating in a riot at a movie premiere. West had been in

Hollywood writing movie scripts for three years when he began his last novel. One of his films was *Advice to the Lovelorn*, an adaptation of *Miss Lonelyhearts.* In 1940, West and his wife, Eileen McKenney, were killed in an automobile accident in California."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"During the twenties, [Fitzgerald] said, H. L. Mencken with his love of letters and contempt for what had previously passed for criticism, created a favorable climate for fiction. But now that Mencken had subsided, no one had come along to take his place, and it saddened Fitzgerald to see young talents expiring from sheer lack of any stage to act on. He cited Nathanael West."

Andrew Turnbull
Scott Fitzgerald
(Scribner's 1962) 247

"Djuna Barnes, Flannery O'Connor, Nathaniel West--at least these three disparate American writers may be said to come together in that rare climate of pure and immoral *creation*--are very nearly alone in their uses of wit, their comic treatments of violence and their extreme detachment….For Nathanael West, love is a quail's feather dragged to earth by a heart-shaped drop of blood on its tip, or the sight of a young girl's buttocks looking like an inverted valentine. Each of these writers finds both wit and blackness in the pit."

John Hawkes
"Notes on the Wild Goose Chase"
The Massachusetts Review (1962)

"The first two thirds or so of *Cabot Wright* [by James Purdy] is a cool, mordant, and deadly accurate satire on American values, as good as anything we have had since the work of Nathanael West….The older writers who mattered most--such as Hemingway, Faulkner, Eliot, Nathanael West--were the prophets of the broken moral order. In short, it was the writers--again 'the antennae of the race' in Pound's phrase--who detected the nihilistic malaise left by the destructive energies of World War II and that the nuclear age and the cold war were to keep active and poisonous."

Theodore Solotaroff
The Red Hot Vacuum and Other Pieces on the Writing of the Sixties
(1964,1967; Atheneum 1970) 159, 255

"Nathanael West lived in Paris in the middle-twenties and came under the influence of the Surrealists. His first novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, which appeared in 1931 to be almost entirely ignored, is a surrealist fantasy about the eponymous hero's wanderings within the Trojan Horse where, among other things, he meets a naked man in a bowler hat who is writing the life of Saint Puce, a flea who lived in Christ's armpit. Fiedler has suggested that West's apprenticeship to Surrealists enabled him to restore the Gothic to the American novel. Certainly it is true, as Fiedler says, that: 'Putting down a book by West, a reader is not sure whether he has been presented with a nightmare endowed with the conviction of actuality or with actuality distorted into the semblance of a nightmare; but in either case, he has the sense that he has been presented with a view of a world in which, incredibly, he lives!'

West's theme is the horror and anguish of the human condition. He expresses it in comedy that is shocking and grotesque, bitter and savage. His two major works are *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) and *The Day of the Locust* (1939). Besides these novels and *Balso Snell*, he also wrote *A Cool Million* (1934), a brilliantly funny satire on the Horatio Alger myth of the rise to success of the virtuous poor boy. It is, as it were, a twentieth-century American version of *Candide*. It has been overshadowed by West's other novels, for by writing it in a heavily mock-heroic style, West had necessarily to sacrifice his extraordinarily economic and nervous prose; and he was probably the most economical novelist who ever wrote. Much of his power comes from this, from an extreme and desperate concentration, the sense we have that the books have been wrung out of the guts of the man in all his agony. West's major work springs out of his confrontation with America--by which one obviously means the entire western world--at its most

meaningless and absurd. But the meaningless and the absurd are as it were the essential conditions of life: they are what man and woman are reduced to."

Walter Allen
The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States
(Dutton 1965) 167

"He obviously matured as he got older. The excessive cleverness which sometimes mars his early books yields to an increasing candor. In *Balso Snell*, the only 'confessional' moments--the John Gibson and Beagle Darwin sections--are surrounded by such contortions of comic disguise that 'serious' interpretation is impossible. *Miss Lonelyhearts* drops the protection of total ridicule and seriously examines some of West's own preoccupations, but it embodies them in a character from whom West remains distinct and toward whom his attitude is still, in part, ironic. In *The Day of the Locust*, protective irony entirely disappears. Tod's character is defined exactly, without deprecation or indulgence. He is a witness whose authority and limitations are equally clear….

Even Miss Lonelyhearts reflects a double fantasy whose terms seem appropriate to West himself—the dream of being a savior, the fear of being a fool….The mocker can deny both his inadequacies and his sufferings, asserting a triumphant cleverness in their place….*The Day of the Locust* suggests, I think, that West had grown beyond the alternatives of mockery and pity. The world he confronts in it is repellent, but sensitive young men cannot save it and sardonic intellectuals cannot jeer it away. Roles which were inadequate are now simply irrelevant. They no longer interest West. What does interest him is the power latent in mass discontent, a power which will find its release quite independent of anyone's attempt to redeem it or laugh at. The people who occupy West's attention now are, even in their deformities, more various and more subtly examined than the brilliant stereotypes of *Miss Lonelyhearts.*

Despite his love of masks, his prose is both unmannered and unadorned, so bare that any lapse will show. There is no adverbial padding in his sentences, no swell of rhetoric, no self-conscious terseness or muscular lyricism. The idiom is, in [William Carlos] Williams' phrase, 'plain American,' but it absorbs without strain anything from parody to abstract comment. And, unlike many of our literary fashions, West's style emphasizes lucid interpretation. He always reduces incoherence to summary paraphrase….Violent action in his novels always carries a clear sense of its motives and its consequences; it is always gesture, not just melodrama….West's recurrent themes--actor/audience, order/disorder, deadness/violence, dream/misery--are finally reducible to terms so banal they are probably profound. Inarticulate desire supplies the eruptive force in each of these themes, a force so common in life that it is reflected in cliches as wearily familiar as 'I can't express it'….

The theme of decadent exhaustion is equally familiar. It is everywhere in the symbolists, the *fin de siecle* writers, and the early poetry of T. S. Eliot. It is also reflected in the attempt to revitalize…language, an attempt which has obsessed many of the century's best writers….Hemingway's famous repudiation of abstract words is perhaps another example….In many ways, primitive seeking and mass suffering and decadent collapse are all aspects of a single theme. 'I can't express it' could almost be called *the* modern problem….all that is thwarted, denied expression, all that cannot speak….

West's anatomy of collapse is as relevant to the politics of the self as it is to the politics of any state. Perhaps more clearly than any writer we have had, West understood the connection between neurotic aesthetes and vulgar masses, between the dreams of art and the stereotypes of popular culture, between the violence of a mob and the violence in himself….In West's novels, decadence is nearly absolute. The violence and suffering he portrays are the inevitable accompaniment of collapse. Though life is not all like that, some life is always like that and all life is in perpetual danger of becoming like that."

Randall Reid
The Fiction of Nathanael West: No Redeemer, No Promised Land
(U Chicago 1967) 158-63

"Burroughs, Genet, even Beckett, to some extent Mailer, do not have their niche in the history of the novel the way, for example, Faulkner, or Bellow, or Flannery O'Connor, or Nathanael West do."

William Phillips
"Notes on the New Style"
The American Novel since World War II
(Fawcett Premier 1969) 252
ed. Marcus Klein

"Criticism now is clearly baffled by the anti-humanist character of many works that seem important; we have developed a large modern literature of dehumanization, and resuscitated a whole tradition in the past: from Swift, Voltaire, and de Sade to Nathanael West, Burroughs, and Genet, we find significant lines running which lead us further into that universe of fantasy (if fantasy is the right word for a process also recognizable in history) in which the human self is dwarfed, violated, perhaps destroyed, physiological functions dominate, man (or woman) is put into thing-status in, often, an apocalyptically surreal universe, and in which both social protest and a patent emotional perversity can coincide. We cannot take such works as part of the humanist canon of literature, but, by a transitional fiction of our times…We can find qualities of literary and emotional merit in them."

Malcolm Bradbury
Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel
(Oxford, 1973) 41

"Long before the 'literature of the absurd' popped up in the America of the 1950s, West had attained an uncomfortable sense of the incongruity between the conventions and the actualities in established society. This is traditional with Jews who feel that they are hostages to fortune, spiritually homeless, marginal types. West always saw himself as an adversary of the national scene….Although West's first involvements with literature were with the esthetes and surrealists of the 1920s, his real subject matter became the lonely crowd of the depression.…West's first novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, was an expressively obscene satire on sex, on business in America, on conventional American dreams. It still shocks the unwary reader who has forgotten how deliberately brutal American writing could be during the depression. But the book with which West's name is still most associated, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), is an almost unendurable lament over the many miserable souls writing to a newspaper's lovelorn column for advice about their most personal problems. The reporter assigned to answer these letters becomes hysterically Christ-like in his effort to deal with people who sign themselves 'Desperate,' 'Sick-of-it-all,' and is symbolically murdered by the crippled husband of a woman who has been writing to him."

Alfred Kazin
Introduction
The Day of the Locust
(Penguin/Signet 1983) xi-xii

"It was not until 1957…with the publication of his collected novels, that he began to receive public acclaim. His talent for parody, brilliant nastiness, grotesquerie, and unsympathetically rendered characters is immense. At the time of his death, West was planning to move on to serious political novels as well as 'simple, warm, and kindly books.' But his enormous conscience did not lend itself to earnest expression, which in his hands too easily became maudlin. He cared about the people he portrayed, but preaching about their failings was not his way of showing his concern. His satires are fast and funny rather than somber and uplifting. His vision of horror and betrayal, apocalypse and self-delusion sometimes combines the brevity of Poe and the mordancy of Melville, but it always retains the disillusionment of the bright and strangely earnest young man who had read a great deal of Dostoevski and Nietzsche while conning his way through college.

In West's strange art, bizarre fantasies, sexual confusion, social alienation, and tortured sensibilities mingle and collide. The masks his characters don and the roles they play, like the role of Miss Lonelyhearts, come somehow to dominate and even tyrannize them. In his art, society tends to manipulate and use human beings, even to mock and taunt them, than to support, serve, and sustain them. At times the world of Miss Lonelyhearts seems almost like a cartoon. It is a stark world, a world of grotesque, misshapen characters, of strange, contorted images, of apocalyptic signs. Yet despite the stark contrasts that

define it, it is not a simple world. Miss Lonelyhearts, West's fool of pity, is only in part a victim of his world and its confusions; he is also a victim of himself."

David Minter
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1454-55

Michael Hollister (2018)