

INTRODUCTION



Nathanael West

(1903-1940)

Nathanael West wrote the best novel about Hollywood of the 20th century, *The Day of the Locust* (1939), and a novella some critics consider his most perfect work, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), a challenge to Christianity that recalls Melville and was influenced by Dostoevski. The power of his writing derives from extreme compression, vivid Expressionist imagery, intense situations and apocalyptic climaxes.

AESTHETICS

West is in (1) the Gothic tradition of C. B. Brown, Poe, Melville's *The Confidence Man*, the later Twain and especially Ambrose Bierce. Gothicism in America originated in the 17th century with the Calvinism of the Puritans and later fed into (2) late 19th-century Naturalism--Dreiser, Norris and London. Like Bierce, Stephen Crane and Edith Wharton, West treats Naturalist themes but his aesthetics are the opposite of Naturalist. Like them and like F. Scott Fitzgerald he is (3) a painterly Impressionist. Like Bierce in his famous story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," West extends Impressionism into a sometimes hallucinatory Expressionism that is common among the intellectual Modernists. (4) West is a Modernist in the mode of *intellectual expressionism*, using techniques of T. S. Eliot in "The Waste Land" while his Atheist vision is the opposite of Eliot's.

He also uses Modernist methods in the mode of *holistic realism*, influenced in particular by Sherwood Anderson's grotesques in *Winesburg, Ohio* and by Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*: (1) linear plotted narrative; (2) submerged allusions; and (3) archetypal symbolism. (4) In *The Day of the Locust* he uses the "mythic method" in both the analogical manner of Joyce and Eliot and in the nativist manner of Fitzgerald. West is also a (6) parodist and black humorist like Poe in "The Cask of Amontillado" and a precursor of Thomas Pynchon, the most influential Postmodernist novelist. Flannery O'Connor, likewise famous for grotesques, acknowledged a debt to the atheist West, though she is a Catholic.

West bridges Modernism and Postmodernism. Though as an artist his aesthetics are Modernist, his vision is Postmodernist: (1) secular; (2) urban; (3) Atheist; (4) cynical; (5) apocalyptic; (6) focusing on the marginal and extreme; (7) assimilating popular culture; (8) carnivalesque; (9) alienated from Nature; with (10) cartoonlike characters; and (11) a tone of ironic detachment lacking in sentiment and soul. Readers are unlikely to identify with his vision unless they are suicidal. His appeal is artistic, intellectual, and humorous. His two short masterpieces are brilliant in style, form and wit. *Miss Lonelyhearts* is startling in its force and *The Day of the Locust* is often funny as well as vivid, sad, bizarre, horrific and resonant.

BIOGRAPHY

Nathanael West was born Nathan Weinstein, the first child of prosperous Jewish immigrants. Like Stephen Crane, as a boy he spent most of his time playing baseball. Unlike Crane, he was awkward rather than athletic. He was given the mocking nickname Pep because he could not walk very far without losing his breath. He disappointed his parents by doing poorly at everything. Independently, he read Tolstoy, Dostoevski, Flaubert and Henry James. His sister recalled that as a boy he trained his bull terrier to bite anyone who came into his room while he was reading. He dropped out of high school in 1921 and forged documents to gain admission to Tufts University, where he flunked out. He could not spell, he did not respect conventions, and he came to regard organized religion as a hoax.

A hoaxer himself, he transferred to Brown University by posing as Nathan Weinstein, a Tufts student with the same name who had passed the subjects West disliked the most, science and mathematics. He was able to concentrate on courses in literature, though he failed a course in modern drama. A cousin wrote papers for him and he graduated in only 2 and a half years in 1924. At Brown he dressed as a dandy and tried to behave like a gentile, adopting the fashionable pose of a decadent aesthete like many young writers since the 1890s such as Ezra Pound and John Dos Passos. He drew cartoons and wrote surrealist sketches. He read the French Symbolists, medieval mystics, Nietzsche, Huysmans, James Joyce and other current experimental writers. At Brown he met his best friend, the humorist S. J. Perelman, who later married West's sister and wrote screenplays for the Marx brothers. Another of his friends said of West, "When he was out with a girl, he sometimes spent the evening telling her about some battle of Napoleon's." The Brown yearbook described West as "a bit eccentric at times, a characteristic of all geniuses."

PARIS

After graduation he hoaxed his father into postponing his entry into the family construction business and paying for two more years of study. West joined the many American artists and writers in Paris during the peak of the Modernist movement in the 1920s, though like Faulkner he kept to himself, writing on the fringe of the Left Bank expatriate culture dominated by Gertrude Stein, Pound and Joyce. While he was in Paris, Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Hemingway *The Sun Also Rises* (1926).

"By the time I got to Paris, the business of being an artist had grown quite difficult. Aside from the fact that you were actually expected to create, the jury had been changed. It no longer consisted of the tourists and the folks back home, but of your fellow artists. They were the ones who decided on the authenticity of your madness. Long hair and a rapt look wouldn't get you to first base. You had to have something new on the ball. Even dirt and sandals and calling Sargent a lousy painter was not enough. You had to be an original... When I got to Montparnasse, all the obvious roles had either been dropped or were being played by experts. But I made a lucky hit. Instead of trying for strangeness, I formalized and exaggerated the costume of a bond salesman. I wore carefully pressed Brooks Brothers clothing, sober but rich ties, and carried gloves and a tightly-rolled umbrella. My manners were elaborate and I professed great horror at the slightest breach of the conventional. It was a success. I was asked to all the parties."

This account of himself is another hoax. At one time in Paris his only presentable garment was a big plaid overcoat. His friend the screenwriter Wells Root reported that West "grew a flowing red beard and became something of a character in the Latin Quarter, striding up and down in the red beard and the long plaid coat which, of necessity, he never removed indoors or out."

NEW YORK

Back home in New York City he confessed his hoax to his father and refused to enter the family business as a career. Instead he became a clerk in a series of small hotels, where he wrote at night and gave free rooms to struggling Leftist writers including James T. Farrell and Dashiell Hammett. West allowed Hammett to spend over a week in the finest suite of the seedy Kenmore Hall Hotel writing *The Maltese Falcon* and also to live free at the Sutton Hotel while he wrote *The Thin Man*. Lillian Hellman recalled that she frequently helped West steam open the mail of guests in the Sutton.

The stock market crashed in 1929 and West's father was ruined. With the family business wiped out, West was freed from any sense of obligation or regret. His novella *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931) is about a cynical American tourist in Turkey, an obscene allegorical fantasy anticipating Thomas Pynchon. He could not find a publisher and printed it at his own expense. He told a reporter he had written *Balso* "as a protest against writing books." Snell was the name of a professor at Brown. The novel went unnoticed, but his next one got recognized immediately by critics--*Miss Lonelyhearts*.

Miss Lonelyhearts (1933)

West's friend S. J. Perelman once dated a young woman who wrote an advice-to-the-lovelorn column for the *Brooklyn Eagle*. She suggested that Perelman turn the letters into a humor piece for the *New Yorker*, but Perelman considered them too pathetic. He showed them to West, who used them as the basis for his bitter little novella about a sensitive male advice columnist who becomes so empathetic with suffering letter-writers that he takes on the role of a Christ. The negative reviews of the novel were extreme. One said, "Never have I read anything to compare in vileness and vulgarity." However, they were far outnumbered by favorable reviews. Unfortunately, just as sales began to increase, his publisher went bankrupt and the book sold only 800 copies.

Miss Lonelyhearts and Melville's young idealist Pierre both take on the role of Christ and are in a sense "crucified." *Pierre* (1852) is a long, ponderous, complex, allegorical tragedy. *Miss Lonelyhearts* is a short, ostensibly simple, allegorical satire. Pierre is a tragic artist hero doomed by his virtues, whereas *Miss Lonelyhearts* is a fool in a Gothic universe who commits adultery with the wife of a cripple, exposing himself to become the victim of a fatal accident. The editor of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, named Shrike after the butcher-bird, is a destructive cynic identified in the allegory with Satan. West himself is an iceman shattering illusions, as in the play by Eugene O'Neill. The book has been filmed 3 times, staged once and rendered as an opera. The movie adaptation *Lonelyhearts* (1958) was written by the head of MGM Dore Schary, already infamous for having ruined John Huston's splendid adaptation of *The Red Badge of Courage*. Schary turned the dark satire into a sentimental Romance that West would have shat upon. The director explained that "Dore didn't believe the Christ figure needed to be crucified."

A Cool Million (1934)

From 1932 to 1934 West was an editor at several literary magazines including *Contact*, where he worked with William Carlos Williams. His third novel *A Cool Million* (1934), a parody of Horatio Alger success stories, has been called an American *Candide*: The hero is robbed, loses parts of his body and gets shot. After this book went unnoticed like his first novel, he decided to try screenwriting. He had chosen his new name West inspired by the famous motto of Horace Greeley, "Go West, young man!"

HOLLYWOOD

He found screenwriting easy--mainly westerns--but he was soon disillusioned by California and went back to New York. Soon disillusioned again he returned to Hollywood in 1935. He lived in a cheap hotel on Hollywood Boulevard and observed the people there while he worked for Republic Pictures, Universal and RKO. As he wrote to the critic Edmund Wilson, "I once tried to work seriously at my craft but was absolutely unable to make even the beginning of a living. At the end of three years and two books I had made a total of \$780 gross. So it wasn't a matter of making a sacrifice, which I was willing enough to make and will still be willing, but just a clear cut impossibility." As an RKO scriptwriter he made more in one month than he ever earned from all of his novels put together.

Pep West met fellow screenwriter Bill Faulkner and they often went quail hunting together in the hills, avoiding any talk of writing or politics. West loved dogs, smoked a lot, and had the worst possible taste in jokes. Though not as well paid as Faulkner or Fitzgerald, he began to make a lot of money, which may have troubled his conscience in the midst of the Great Depression. He was a pessimist rather than a utopian, yet he attended Communist rallies, always a popular cause in Hollywood, especially among screenwriters. Working on the script of *Five Came Back* (1939) with the Communist screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, West portrayed an anarchist character negatively and Trumbo changed the portrayal to a sympathetic one.

Faulkner ignored politics and Fitzgerald disliked the Leftists for their intolerance, whereas West was fascinated by mass psychology--“the secret life of the masses”--and his attendance at political rallies prepared him to write the mob scene climax of *The Day of the Locust*.

The Day of the Locust (1939)

West emphasized that he is not a Realist, he is an Expressionist: “If I put into *The Day of the Locust* any of the sincere, honest people who work here and are making such a great, progressive fight, those chapters couldn’t be written satirically and the whole fabric of the peculiar half-world which I attempted to create would be badly torn by them...I believe there is a place for the fellow who yells fire and indicates where some of the smoke is coming from without actually dragging the hose to the spot.”

Hollywood in movies and music produced most of American popular culture throughout the 20th century. The “dream factory” was the most prolific purveyor of the American Dream of success and a literal as well as a psychological magnet to dreamers. During the 1930s Hollywood movies catered to an audience suffering through the Great Depression with dramas of happiness despite poverty and success despite the odds, tantalizing and vicariously gratifying the deprived with opulent settings and displays of wealth featuring romantic stars in tuxedos and gleaming white satin. West exposes the illusions and the sordid reality behind the glitter, ironically by focusing on the margins like a Postmodernist--on the minor players, failures and victims of the dream factory. West insisted that “I am not a Surrealist” because he was exaggerating, selecting, and distorting reality (as by excluding nearly all ordinary people, who are far more numerous) in order to express the extreme feelings of a nightmare--loss, revulsion, paranoia, horror, and madness. *The Day of the Locust* is hyperbole, like Hollywood.

West compares Hollywood, hyperbole for all America, with “decadent Rome” (end chapter 19). He makes Hollywood the ironic culmination of the westward movement of civilization and of the pastoral myth of the Garden of the West. Walt Whitman celebrated that myth, Willa Cather dramatized it in her novels about the pioneers, and John Steinbeck extended it in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), published the same year as *The Day of the Locust*. Tod Hackett is no Okie. He is a sensitive observer who graduates from an elite eastern university intending to become an artist and goes to Hollywood to make a living, like West. *Tod* in German means death and the best in Tod dies when he tries to hack it in Hollywood and falls in love with a superficial dream like Jay Gatsby.

The other protagonist, the simpleton Homer, embodies the collective unconscious of the human race. Tod and Homer together represent aspects of a single psyche in the process of disintegration. The name of the poet Homer evokes the origin of western civilization, recalls the love goddess Helen of Troy, grounds the vision of the novel in archetypes of depth psychology, and contrasts the heroic past with the decadent present in the manner of Joyce in *Ulysses* and Eliot in “The Waste Land” (1922). Both Tod and Homer become grotesque when they fall in love with Faye Greener, the aspiring movie actress and prostitute who is a superficial manifestation of the archetypal love goddess and West’s answer to Daisy Buchanan and the green motif in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*.

America did not fall like Rome. The Depression was temporary. Within 6 years America emerged from World War II with the strongest economy of any nation in the history of the world. Now at the beginning of the 21st century, however, due to the utopian economics of Postmodernism, America is in decline and the national mood and mass psychology West dramatizes in *The Day of the Locust* are timely once again. Postmodern Hollywood is more decadent than ever--a world capitol of materialistic fantasy, false hopes, hedonism, pornography, drugs, pedophilia, bloodlust, greed and propaganda. The movie adaptation of *The Day of the Locust* done in 1975 is faithful to the book.

Soon after publication of the novel West wrote to his friend Fitzgerald, “So far the box score stands: Good reviews--fifteen per cent, bad reviews--twenty-five per cent, brutal personal attacks--sixth per cent.” To another friend he wrote: “All my books always fall between the different schools of writing. The radical press, although I consider myself on their side, doesn’t like my particular kind of joking, and think it even Fascist sometimes, and the literature boys, whom I detest, detest me in turn. The highbrow press finds that I avoid the big, significant things and the lending library touts in the daily press think me shocking... The

proof of all this is that I've never had the same publisher twice--once bitten, etc.--because there is nothing to root for in my work and what is even worse, no rooters."

DEATH

West wrote to his publisher in 1939: "My plans are simple. I hope to keep writing pictures until the hunting season is over (it starts September first with doves and ends some time in March with ducks)." In 1940 at age 37, he sold the movie rights to *A Cool Million*, he got a better job at Columbia Pictures, and he married Eileen McKenney, the subject of the hit movie *My Sister Eileen* two years before. Finally, his own dream life had come true.

Six months after their wedding, West and his bride prepared to fly to New York for the Broadway opening of the stage version of *My Sister Eileen*. Before leaving they went on a quail hunting trip down to Mexico. There they got news that F. Scott Fitzgerald had died the day before of a heart attack. They set out the same day and drove back to Hollywood to attend the funeral. His friends considered West the worst driver they had ever seen. Once in New York City he drove through 11 red lights, barely missed colliding with a trolley and then crashed into a taxi. Now it began to rain. At a crossroads near El Centro, California, West ran a red light--disregarding convention for the last time--and his station wagon smashed into another car. Eileen was killed on impact, West died on the way to a hospital.

Michael Hollister (2012)

WEST DISCUSSES *Miss Lonelyhearts*

"Miss Lonelyhearts became the portrait of a priest of our time who has a religious experience. His case is classical and is built on all the cases in James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* and Starbuck's *Psychology of Religion*. The psychology is theirs not mine....Lyric novels can be written according to Poe's definition of a lyric poem....The novelist is no longer a psychologist. Psychology can become something much more important. The great body of case histories can be used in the way the ancient writers used their myths. Freud is your Bulfinch; you can not learn from him....Leave slow growth to the book reviewers, you only have time to explode. Remember William Carlos Williams's description of the pioneer women who shot their children against the wilderness like cannonballs. Do the same with your novels...I can't do a review of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, but here, at random, are some of the things I thought when writing it: As subtitle: 'A novel in the form of a comic strip.' The chapters to be squares in which many things happen through one action. The speeches contained in the conventional balloons. I abandoned this idea, but retained some of the comic strip technique: Each chapter instead of going forward in time, also goes backward, forward, up and down in space like a picture. Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events."

Nathanael West

"Some Notes on *Miss Lonelyhearts*"

Contempo III (15 May 1933) 1-2

CRITICAL SUMMARY

"West is routinely cited as a precursor of current literary trends, his name is sure to be dropped in any discussion of the grotesque, and book reviewers automatically compare new Hollywood novels with *The Day of the Locust*. *Miss Lonelyhearts* has even undergone that ceremony which, in some literary circles, constitutes ritual initiation--two recent critics have detected in it a case of repressed homosexuality.... None of his books has ever become a campus fad, and none is ever likely to. He frustrates too many of the common motives for reading. West does not invite the reader to see himself as a sensitive soul in a cruel world, a world made cruel by the stupidity and heartlessness of others. Nor does he allow a reader the comforts of superior laughter. In the deflationary world of his books, simple mockery collapses as completely as simple self-pity. So do all the customary poses: ironic detachment, passionate involvement, heartfelt compassion...Though he is now officially recognized even by those scholars and critics who do not like him, he is still classified, often with an almost passionate insistence, as a minor writer....

His vision is too narrow, his subjects are too extreme, there are no normal people in his books, and life isn't like that....A few writers--notably John Hawkes and Flannery O'Connor--have acknowledged him as a literary ancestor....West is the permanent enemy of all 'non-realistic' visions fed on mushrooms or LSD. In his work, most hallucination is involuntary and dreadful, not euphoric. The 'oceanic feeling' is simply a late state of hysteria. And the expansive vision of any kind--whether comic, horrible, or ecstatic--has no place in his books....He was always the writer of mixed vision, mixed attitudes, mixed modes....At its best, it is a style so simple that it does not even strive for the effect of simplicity...West was a parodist himself, as completely a parodist as anyone who ever wrote 'serious' novels...The combination of parody, pastiche, allusion, and direct quotation in the work of Joyce and Eliot is so familiar and so admired that it constitutes a modern orthodoxy....In West's work, the stream of consciousness is almost non-existent....

West's style was never constant. At times his pictorial technique closely resembles collage--but only at times. It also resembles cartoon strips, movies, and several different schools of painting....He repudiated social Realism, but focused on sociological themes, dismissed psychological novels but was an acute literary psychologist, laughed at art but was a conscious and dedicated artist. He was a dandy with proletarian sympathies, a comic writer who specialized in unfunny jokes."

Randall Reid

The Fiction of Nathanael West: No Redeemer, No Promised Land
(U Chicago 1967) 1-6, 9, 12

Michael Hollister (2012)

