

7 CRITICS DISCUSS

The Day of the Locust (1939)

Nathanael West

(1903-1940)

“Tod Hackett, a recent Yale graduate in the 1930s, moves to Hollywood to make set and costume designs for a film studio while also pursuing his own painting. There he meets Faye Greener and her father, Harry, a down-and-out actor reduced to selling homemade silver polish door to door. One of his customers, Homer Simpson, a bland 40-year-old bookkeeper, becomes enamored of Faye and in a ‘business arrangement’ offers her lodging in his cottage just to aid her. She in turn houses a cowboy from Arizona and a young Mexican in the garage, stages a drunken party at Homer’s house, and goes to bed with Miguel, the Mexican. Disillusioned, Homer walks to the railroad station to return to Utah but on the way is attacked by a pesky boy and knocks him down. Then Homer is attacked by a swarming crowd of people who had gathered to see the arrival of stars at a premiere and out of boredom were seeking any excitement they might find. In a frenzied scene, reminiscent of Tod’s surrealist painting, *The Burning of Los Angeles*, the mob overwhelms Homer and Tod loses his own self-control.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 188

“It is longer, more realistic, and somewhat less concentrated than *Miss Lonelyhearts*; the pace is slower, the emotion a little more diffuse. Although it ranks second among his works, it perhaps ranks first among the many novels about Hollywood; *The Last Tycoon* is its only rival. It is the story of little people on the fringes of the movie world, and especially of the men who surround Faye Greener, a young woman with no morals, no talent, and a plunging neckline. Faye seems to represent the mindless energy of a city where all the characters are going to pieces. Tod Hackett, the narrator, saves himself by painting an apocalyptic picture that expresses his fascinated hatred: ‘The Burning of Los Angeles.’ Homer Simpson, a hotel clerk from Iowa who is also in love with Faye, can’t stand the strain of living in the same house with her crazy friends; he retreats into a sort of catatonic dementia, almost like *Miss Lonelyhearts*. In the end Homer is killed in a riot at the world premiere of a new picture; it is the biggest and maddest of all the mad scenes that West imagined in his brief career.”

Malcolm Cowley, Introduction

Miss Lonelyhearts
(1933; Avon/New Directions 1959) 96

“West’s last novel, written after he went to Hollywood as a scriptwriter, is not so much a story of Hollywood as a kind of parable of the failure of the American dream. Homer Simpson, the central character, finds himself in the midst of people who have been brought up on the movies and are bored with life as they find it. He is typical of the thousands of middle-aged middle-class folk who save their money and go to California in search of sunshine and glamour, only to find monotony and tinsel, and finally to die. Other characters include Faye Greener, a stage-struck and empty-headed blonde; her father Harry, a former music-hall performer; Tod Hackett, an idealist who gave up his own attempts at art; a Mexican who owns fighting cocks; a man who dresses in gaudy cowboy outfits; and a bookmaking dwarf. West’s characters are a melange of degeneracy, failure, and boredom, grotesques inhabiting the satiric half-world West has created. The book was to have been entitled *The Cheated*, a story of people who wanted to believe a dream and could not face disagreeable realities. The novel’s underlying motif is the falsity of American values: everything in the book is phony—the language, the buildings, the actors, and finally, life itself as seen in Hollywood. If the novel is depressing in its truth, it is brilliant in its power and artistry.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff

The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 242

“More considerable than either of Schulberg’s books is Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* (1939). West, like Schulberg, worked in Hollywood, but he is less concerned with understanding the film world or presenting it realistically than with defining the meaning of Hollywood in its relation to American society as a whole. Thus he concentrates not on the more spectacular aspects of Hollywood but on the little people, the extras and miscellaneous hangers-on of the film-world, and those who have no direct connection with the cinema and have simply ‘come to California to die.’ West, with his nightmare vision, sees Hollywood as a kind of limbo, populated by ‘the people who come to California to die; the cultists of all sorts, economic as well as religious, the wave, airplane, funeral and preview watchers—all those poor devils who can only be stirred by the promise of miracles and then only to violence.’

Their chief representative in the novel is Homer Simpson, a huge but helpless schizophrenic, sunk deep in a despair which eventually finds vent in uncontrollable sobbing. Homer’s sobs make ‘a heavy, hollow, chunking noise.... Each chunk was exactly like the one that proceeded. It would never reach a climax.’ As Homer sobs, so he lives. The cranks, cultists and sun-seekers, the people who come to California to die, are incapable of any kind of climax: they achieve ecstasy only by submerging their identities in a crowd and finding release in mob-violence. To Hackett, the book’s central character thinks of them as the ‘cream’ of America’s madmen, but feels ‘almost certain that the milk from which it had been skimmed was just as rich in violence.

It is Hollywood and the motion-picture industry, it appears, to which this cream naturally and irresistibly clings. All these marginal film-people are grotesques; from the Gringos, a family of Eskimos who had been brought from Alaska for retakes of a film about polar exploration but then refused to go home again, to Claude Estee, a writer, whose house was an exact reproduction of a Southern mansion and who himself ‘teetered back and forth on his heels like a Civil War colonel and made believe he had a large belly. Yet, ‘He had no belly at all. He was a dried-up little man with the rubbed features and stooped shoulders of a postal clerk’... In a similar vein West describes the riot of a preview crowd at the end of the book, the sad chaos of a studio lot—a crazy ‘Sargasso Sea,’ in West’s phrase, of dreams made into plywood, filmed, and dumped—and the disastrous attempt to film an ambitiously reconstructed Battle of Waterloo. West sees Hollywood, in fact, as at once the symbol and the inner citadel of an insanity rampant throughout America.”

Michael Millgate
American Social Fiction: James to Cozzens
(1964; Barnes & Noble 1967) 154-55

“Though more mature, more ambitious than *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *Day of the Locust* lacks its intense drive. The pulsations of anguish are more intermittent. This is partly for technical reasons. In the earlier novel, we feel and see everything through the tortured hero himself; it is his world we inhabit. In *The Day of the Locust*, West’s values are enshrined much less dramatically in the figure of Tod Hackett, a painter working at a film studio, who, though involved in the action, pities rather than suffers. *Miss Lonelyhearts* does both simultaneously. Tod is much more of an observer, and that this is so is shown by the fact that he has come to work in Hollywood partly in order to paint an apocalyptic painting called ‘The Burning of Los Angeles.’

The people whom he meets and whom he is concerned for are, so to speak, characters in his canvas. He expresses, in other words, a normality that is not found in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and this undoubtedly diminishes the nightmare intensity, the surrealistic quality, which makes the earlier novel so powerful and disturbing. And apart from this, there are passages where it seems that West has forgotten that Tod is his central character; and his place is taken by Homer Simpson, the clerk who has come to California from Iowa for his health. Homer is much more like the lame-duck figures of *Miss Lonelyhearts* but is still a described figure, a character rendered from the outside; he does not encompass within himself the whole of the action as *Miss Lonelyhearts* does.

All this is to say that *The Day of the Locust* approximates much more closely to the novel as normally understood. For all that, it is still an extraordinary work that rises to an apocalyptic climax which is the counterpart in words of Tod’s painting, ‘The Burning of Los Angeles.’ Just as in *Miss Lonelyhearts* West had seized upon the newspaper-sob-sister’s column as a symbol of hopeless sufferings, so in *The Day of the Locust* he seizes on Hollywood as a symbol of the unreality in which western man largely lives. The novel

is not concerned with the film industry—except in so far as the film industry, on the fringes of which most of the characters live, represents the pursuit of unreality as an end in itself.

The novel opens with a brilliant brief impression of a film set. Tod looks out of his office window at the studio to see an eighteenth-century battle in progress; the armies disappear behind 'half a Mississippi steamboat.' But as we walk with Tod immediately after through Los Angeles we realize that what is depicted in the studio is no more unreal than what lies outside.... In West's Los Angeles we are in the realm of the truly monstrous. Nothing is what it is. Its inhabitants? There are the hangers-on of the studios, cowboys who have never roped a steer, and in particular Faye Greener, whom Tod and Homer both love, the blonde who wants to be a star, who is caught completely in a world of illusions and at the same time is as hard as iron, without scruples or morals....

And behind Faye and her father, a broken-down music-hall actors, the studio cowboys, and 'Honest Abe Kusch,' a dwarf in a perpetual fury, there is the nameless mob, the locusts that have borne down on California. It is impossible now to read *The Day of the Locust* without thinking at the same time of *The Grapes of Wrath* and Steinbeck's Okies flooding west like lemmings. But they were in search of the good earth, whereas West's locusts are the middle-class retired middle-aged who have crawled from Iowa to die in an exacerbated boredom in a Never-Never Land that has deceived them. So the novel rises to its magnificent conclusion, with the vacant, hopeless hordes of displaced Mid-Westerners pouring into Hollywood to watch the goings-on at a premiere at Kahn's Persian Palace Theatre. As the mob goes berserk and Tod is crushed almost to death, he sees almost as in a vision his completed canvas of 'The Burning of Los Angeles.' It is on this apocalyptic note that *The Day of the Locust* ends. It is as though one has witnessed the final ironical presentation of the American Dream."

Walter Allen
The Modern Novel: In Britain and the United States
(Dutton 1965) 169-72

"West was the sort of man who is sure to be patronized, especially by his inferiors.... *The Day of the Locust* can be read as a statement of what must follow the failure of the Christ dream. In this novel, even the pseudo-savior is missing. Miss Lonelyhearts is dead, and so is his dream. Tod Hackett, who takes his place, specifically says that 'he had never set himself up as a healer,' referring to himself instead as a Jeremiah, a prophet of the coming destruction (p.78). In the background, of course, we have a variety of lunatic churches-militant, symbolized by that leader of the 'screwballs and screwboxes,' Dr. Know-All Pierce-All (p.165). And the helpless sufferers who sought redemption in *Miss Lonelyhearts* here have become, in *The Day of the Locust*, an embittered mob which seeks revenge....

Unlike the alternately static and jerkily animated scenes of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, this picture slowly changes while we watch it. The gradual darkening of color here is characteristic of the novel's methods and it signals a basic change in form. *The Day of the Locust* is a motion picture, not a comic strip. The change in pictorial style also derives in part from the change in central character: a painter is substituted for a quasi-mystical priest. Though he too searches external reality for clues, Tod does not expect to confront him with ready-made revelations. His clues are the symbols he can fashion into pictures of his own. He is analytical, not hallucinatory, attentive to detail, not receptive to suggestion. And the choice of such a viewpoint character suggests, in West, that respect toward his materials which Tod attributes to Magnasco—a determination to forego the distortions of pity and satire, a conviction that the world which confronts him is so 'truly monstrous' (p.4) that clear vision, not imagination, is the artist's fundamental tool.... The world remains discordant, peopled by natural grotesques who have been further twisted by the influence of stereotypes and bad art....

The Day of the Locust creates its 'surrealistic' landscapes out of actual materials. It transfers *A Cool Million's* meticulous descriptions of décor to a world where illusion is an industry, where fantasies take architectural form and the rubbish of dreams forms 'a Sargasso of the imagination' (p.97). Though its images are slower to focus and its plot lacks the relentless acceleration of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *The Day of the Locust* has the veracity of acute, wakeful vision, not that of a dream.... In West, the interaction between performer and audience is compulsive and mutually degrading, like mechanical stimulation. It is also the paradigm for all interactions—demagogue and mob, redeemer and sufferer, seducer and victim. Whether

the interaction is private or public, it is always disproportionate; the audience demand exceeds the performer's ability, and the actor is first distorted by the strain and then destroyed by it. The audience is left cheated, unappeased, unfulfilled. Love affairs and religious missions therefore share a common doom. Politically, the dissatisfied audience becomes a mob eager for violence and ripe for fascism....

The myth of success only emphasizes the reality of their failure. It lures them but always eludes them, until they become caricatures of the dream they follow. They are, that is, representative of that class of near failures which any dream spawns—tank-town performers, minor-league ballplayers, third-rate painters, businessmen who never get rich.... The use of masks inevitably suggests Greek drama.... West's mythic figures, ritual violence, and compressed, formal rhetoric probably owe a general debt to the Greek theater. *The Day of the Locust*, however, seems particularly Euripidean. Its frenzied, destructive mob recalls the fury of the bacchantes in *The Bacchae*, and Tod's vision of the burning of Los Angeles is, like the burning torches about to fire the palace in *Orestes*, a pageant of violence, a culminating revelation of the destructive forces implicit in the drama's action.... Trivial characters are possessed by demonic forces. The mythic roles they assume define the nature of the forces, and the triviality of their own characters merely reveal their powerlessness to control the forces or escape them. Riot and destruction are the natural consequences.

The set speeches and confessions of *Miss Lonelyhearts* are, in *The Day of the Locust*, largely replaced by songs. They are of two kinds: the actual songs, which combine grotesque unsuitability to the singer or the scene with a curious appropriateness to both; and the background music of birds.... Just as the set speeches of *Miss Lonelyhearts* were accompanied by hieroglyphic images, the formal songs of *The Day of the Locust* are accompanied by ritual dances. Faye's movements are constantly choreographed.... Choreography is not limited to Faye. Harry's performance for Homer is a dance composed of his entire repertoire of comic pantomime.... The dance metaphor is so omnipresent and descriptive that Tod automatically applies it to his lithographs of Abe, Harry, and Faye. And the cock fight, with its ritual passes like those in a dance, fixes the metaphor in an image whose significance extends throughout the novel. Both song and dance are ritual performances, and both suggest at once theatrical artificiality and instinctive animality. In *The Day of the Locust*, human behavior is controlled by a double set of ceremonial patterns: the stereotypes of bad art, and the rituals of nature....

Though the impulse may be animal in its simplicity, it is expressed in a human context where human values define its meaning, even if they cannot control its expression. And the animal impulse is also warped by the frauds and illusions of a collapsing civilization. It therefore combines cruelty with deceit, primitivism with decadence, real pains with illusory satisfactions.... Faye eludes unwanted embraces as easily as she eludes destruction. To most of those who desire her, she is therefore just a phantom, 'fatally suggestive [to] the imaginations that she haunts and fertilizes.' The phrase is Baudelaire's, and it defines a second major theme in the Symbolist-Decadent treatment of the Bitch: her dream function, especially her effect upon imaginations already addicted to fantasy and bored or frustrated by actuality....

The combination of jaded senses and fevered imagination described here is of course the familiar condition of the decadent hero. It is also exactly the condition of the shadowy spectators in *The Day of the Locust*, those lower middle-class fanatics who impress Tod with the 'contrast between their drained-out feeble bodies and their wild, disordered minds' (p.109) Like the dandy, they have lost even the capacity for fulfillment in the ordinary world....

Where *Miss Lonelyhearts* was an ersatz Christ, Faye is a debased Venus, a transient focus of eternal desire. Her appeal is universal. She attracts Tod and Homer and Claude Estee and Earle and Miguel and Abe Kusich, and she is also the naked girl who flees the mob in Tod's painting, the principal object of revenge for all those whose dreams have embittered and betrayed them. She is at once the natural object of sexual desire and the object of a desire hopelessly perverted by fantasies. She embodies the fatal power of all illusions, inflaming and degrading desire without ever satisfying it. When Tod tells Homer, 'She's a whore!' (p.136), his condemnation extends to all those dreams which Faye represents....

To discover the falseness of an illusion is not, however, to be delivered from it. Insight may only intensify frustration. The lurid colors of fantasy make reality pale and insufficient, and those who have become addicted to dreams of 'lynchings, murders, sex crimes'—or to 'convulsions which elude the

flesh’—can only regard the actual world with ‘an expression of vicious, acrid boredom that tremble[s] on the edge of violence’ (p.91). The psychology of decadence may be fascinating when it is novel or when it can be confused with sensitivity. When it becomes a mass phenomenon, however, when the streets are full of dandies with cheap, mail-order clothing and manufactured dreams, violence is ominously real....

West’s visions of sexuality in *The Day of the Locust* often inspire horror, but it is a horror of pain, not a ‘humid’ revulsion from uncleanness.... Where sex was in *Balso Snell* a disguised motive for arty imposture and in *Miss Lonelyhearts* a symbol of the misery inherent in Nature, it is in this novel specifically associated with cruelty and torture. Faye herself is described by Tod in terms of fascinated horror.... Faye finally becomes the full dream goddess. Her bits of make-believe drama and fan-magazine legend become, mixed with the ‘almost pure’ gestures of her body, suddenly real, suddenly completely compelling. ‘It worked that night; no one even thought of laughing at her. The only move they made was to narrow their circle about her’.... Faye’s transformation precipitates Homer’s ruin and, thereby, the mob violence which almost literally fulfills Tod’s vision of the burning of Los Angeles. When Faye, the whore of everybody’s dreams, succeeds in totally destroying Homer, the fury of all the cheated dreamers is unleashed. The mob riots, threatening to destroy everyone and everything except Faye herself....

The choreography of *Winesburg, Ohio* is, of course, the choreography of both *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*. The role of central figure is enacted first by Miss Lonelyhearts and then by Faye Greener, and the grotesques “whose sole distinctive characteristic is an extreme deformity of movement or posture,’ are omnipresent in both novels.... Echoes of Anderson are everywhere in West’s two best novels, and in *The Day of the Locust* they are so explicit that he must have intended his readers to notice them, perhaps even to regard them as a variation upon—almost a sequel to—the themes of *Winesburg, Ohio*. Homer’s hands are, of course, taken directly from Wing Biddlebaum [in “Hands”]....

The feminine sea imagery is matched by the masculine flame imagery of Tod’s ‘Burning of Los Angeles,’ and in the midst of the crowd’s wave-like surges, an ‘old man, wearing a Panama hat and horn-rimmed glasses,’ attacks a helpless and hysterical girl. ‘He had one of his hands inside her dress and was biting her neck’ (p.162). Like the destructive forces in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the mob’s fury is both masculine and feminine. It is the violent release of all desire—desire so basic that the sexes are just alternate and mutually destructive forms of a single impulse. The desire combines savagery and depravity. It is an instinctive force which has been thwarted and perverted without being civilized. In Freudian terms, it is the anarchic revolt of a mass id against those ‘higher’ powers which have denied it and tricked it. In Marxist terms, it is the outrage of victims who have been cynically exploited by a system. In Nietzschean terms, it is the revenge of Dionysian frenzy against a fraudulent Apollonian dream. The phenomenon is so fundamental that it can be understood in several descriptive languages....

In that grotesque Darwinism which is the condition of life in *The Day of the Locust*, the rewards go only to the fittest—the rich and the handsome. Yet the modern victors are as debased and trivial as are modern gods and modern dreams. The ‘criminally handsome’ Earle Shoop is a fool with ‘a two dimensional face’ (p.66).... Faye’s beauty is not only denied to Tod and Homer, but wasted on those to whom it is given, a waste almost like that in the marriage of Eula Varner to Flem Snopes [in Faulkner’s *The Hamlet*].... Apocalypse is an appropriate culmination of the themes first announced in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. *Balso* reveals the falseness of the world of dreams, art, and culture, and *Miss Lonelyhearts* represents the real victims of that falseness. In *The Day of the Locust*, the victims turn victimizers. The Burning of Los Angeles is the inevitable vengeance of those who, cheated by life, find that even their dreams have betrayed them.”

Randall Reid

The Fiction of Nathanael West: No Redeemer, No Promised Land
(U Chicago 1967) 151, 116-21, 124-25, 127, 129-30, 132-33, 135-40, 154, 156-57

“*The Day of the Locust* features grotesques. A dwarf makes his living as a bookie, talks tough, and frequents a prostitute who throws him out of her room like a bundle of old clothes; an unsuccessful comic dying of heart disease peddles a wretched homemade silver polish to householders who are then forced to watch him doing his act; his daughter is a frigid platinum blonde who excites the dwarf, the studio artist Tod Hackett, and a retired hotel bookkeeper, but her own emotional life consists of daydreaming stories,

sometimes for days at a stretch. There are also Eskimos...There are studio cowboys and assorted Mexicans who specialize in cockfights.

West pointedly left out of his novel the actual making of movies and emphasized people who are more than usually numb, lacking in vitality. The most poignant example of mass man is Homer Simpson, for twenty years the bookkeeper of a Midwest hotel, who has come out to recover his health and has rented a cottage in Pinyon Canyon. 'It was only the second house the real estate agent showed him, but he took it because he was tired and because the agent was a bully.'

Homer is just barely attached to his surroundings; these surroundings do not exactly *include* him. Homer is somehow pasted onto Southern California, like so many settlers there who never cease to feel transient. West, through his surrogate eye Tod Hackett, brilliantly make us look at every artificial detail with which poor Homer has to live.... Poor Homer falls totally, fruitlessly in love with vacuous Faye Greener. This is the emotional summit of his life. Up to then Homer has been deficient in feeling, *afraid* to feel. Waking up in the morning he feels 'even more stupid and washed out than usual. It was always like that...only the refuse of feeling.' Homer is the mass man who is the symbolic center of *The Day of the Locust*. But now he lives for the sight of Faye Greener—who even if she were not occupied with her fantasies would be incapable of responding to so insignificant a man as Homer Simpson.

Eventually, Faye allows herself to be supported by Homer (who gets nothing in exchange); she wearies of his attentions and throws him out. When Faye's father Harry, the failed clown, finally dies, his fatal heart attack is interpreted by his self-absorbed daughter as just more of his pathetic clowning. She is not even heartless, just inattentive. West's satire turns the funeral itself into the one distraction open to these listless, bored characters. Like the Eskimos who remain in Hollywood after their picture has been released, all these strangers to Harry Greener enjoy his funeral as they do nothing else. So much boredom, vacancy, meaninglessness at the heart of Hollywood! It is a portent. The 'cheated' in their rising dismay will soon turn to the violence that is a daily feature of American life. The mob eruption that ends the book has its counterpart in California's earthquakes, the stormy Pacific eroding the shore, the picture constantly in Tod Hackett's mind of the burning of Los Angeles at *high noon*.

The Hollywood crowd, so deceptive when it pursues a star's autograph and lines up for an opening night in seeming adulation, really wants to kill its idols. That is one of West's keenest insights. In the last chapter, the extraordinary climax in which the crowd at an opening turns mad and strikes out at random. Tod studies the crowd just before he is swept away by its force and is saved from injury by the police. He reflects on the discontent of those who have come to Hollywood seeking paradise, the reward for their hard, painfully insignificant lives: 'Once there, they discover that sunshine isn't enough....' Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize that they've been tricked and burn with resentment. Every day of their lives they read the newspapers and went to the movies. Both fed them on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, war. This daily diet made sophisticates of them.... Nothing can ever be violent enough....'

[*The Day of the Locust*] is sharp, cutting, merciless in its aggressive satire. But unlike [Joan] Didion, a very subjective and even self-pitying specialist in feminine tremors, Nathanael West was objective, political, penetrating—and so the most despairing of the Hollywood novelists. *The Day of the Locust* is Hollywood without glamour, without the slightest softening of the actual absurdity and cruelty implicit in a town—actually an industry—so geared to 'success' that it automatically rides over anyone who falls under its wheels. Like all good Hollywood novelists, West saw the place as a symbol of whatever is most extravagant, spoiled, and uncontrolled in American life.

But more than any other novelist preoccupied with Hollywood's specialized styles, West apprehended the American future in all these people who thought they had discarded their past. Himself a product of the 1920s and its individualism, he recognized the enduring truth of American conditions in the depression. He saw that we were living in an era not only of mass taste (Hollywood was the key manufacturer) but of uncertain control. The lonely crowd would not always consent to be held in. Such somber views reflect all the bitterness of the 1930s, with...the possibility of an American Fascism.... Its despair and humor will always find an echo in the American mind."

Alfred Kazin, Introduction
The Day of the Locust
(Penguin/Signet 1983) xiii-xvii

Michael Hollister (2015)