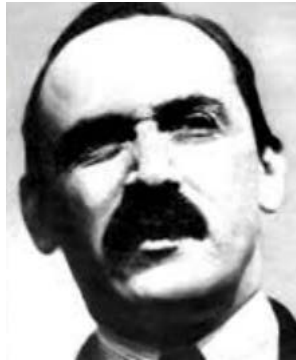


## ANALYSIS

*The Day of the Locust* (1939)



Nathanael West

(1903-1940)

### 1

The novel opens and ends with a mob scene, the first artificial and the last real. Circular structure is a characteristic of the transcendental mode and of Modernism, as in *The Sun Also Rises* and *Finnegans Wake*. In contrast, the structure of *Locust* implies a downward rather than an upward or progressive movement—to madness rather than transcendence. The great noise outside the office of Tod Hackett is a fake army moving “like a mob; its lines broken, as though fleeing from some terrible defeat.” This image prefigures the defeat of illusory dreams that provokes the mob riot at the end of the novel.

The soldiers of European nations at war evokes the brutal recent history of western civilization, culminating in decadent Hollywood. They are stampeding to the wrong “stage” and their leader, in a cork sun-helmet that evokes colonialism, is chasing after them cursing and shaking his fist like a fool in a dark farce. Late in the novel Faye Greener, another force of Nature, is said to be “like a cork. No matter how rough the sea got, she would go dancing over the same waves that sank iron ships and tore away piers of reinforced concrete.” That the dominant forces of history and Nature are beyond control is a Gothic and a Naturalist vision of life. Naturalistic also is the detached view West takes of the retired people who “had come to California to die.” They are like locusts.

West implies that believing in what you see on the movie screen is as foolish as believing that the set of “half a Mississippi steamboat” will get you somewhere. The reference to “masquerades” brings to mind *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade*, set aboard a Mississippi steamboat. Melville depicts society as a masquerade in which people are either con men or the conned. On the Hollywood dreamboat of West, everyone is both conned by their dreams and conning others to attain them.

Tod is said to have talent as a painter, but “he was lazy” and his looks—appearances are everything in Hollywood—“made him seem completely without talent, almost doltish in fact.” With his “large sprawling body, his slow blue eyes and sloppy grin,” he resembles the doltish Homer. But appearances are deceiving. The rest of the chapter illustrates that from the clothes people wear to the incongruous mix of imitated architectural styles, including castles and palaces, Hollywood epitomizes the illusions of the modern world. Previously T. S. Eliot in “The Waste Land” and Sinclair Lewis in *Babbitt*, both published in 1922, had likewise illustrated modern decadence and loss of cultural integrity with incongruous imagery, mixed styles, cheap imitation and fakery. Artifice clutters the landscape in Hollywood, coloring the trees “like a Neon tube.” A repetition of the color “violet” is a submerged allusion to the “violet light” in “The Waste Land,” as West dramatizes a pessimistic rebuttal to Eliot’s affirmation of faith.

Tod will express his vision in his painting called "The Burning of Los Angeles," analogous to the burning of Rome under Nero and to this novel by West. The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire is legendary or mythic. West's analogy approximates the "mythic method"--making correspondences between a myth from the past and a narrative in the present--advocated by Eliot and illustrated by Eliot and Joyce. Although his friends accuse him of selling out as a set designer, Tod believes he can still rise in the world as a painter even though he envisions the world coming to an apocalyptic end: "He reached the end of Vine street and began the climb..." Tod and West reject the Realism of Winslow Homer and the Romanticism of Thomas Ryder and will be Expressionists in the dark style of Goya and Daumier. The chapter ends with a direct statement of West's feelings about what he will be depicting in the novel: "It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous."

2

Tod lives in a place called ironically the San Bernardino Arms. He is in no sense living in the arms of the Christian Saint Bernard. Religions are merely styles of decoration here. With its pink Moorish columns, the apartment house is another example of lost integrity, meaning and faith in the modern world as epitomized by Hollywood. This technique of incongruity and degradation also is borrowed from "The Waste Land." Degeneration is also represented by the hustler Honest Abe Kusich, a slave to his audience neither honest nor tall like Abe Lincoln, who freed slaves. The slavery theme is expressed when Abe says, "Who gave her forty bucks for an abortion?" Forty dollars and a mule were promised to emancipated slaves after the Civil War. Then the promise was aborted, implying by parallel that Abe's sex partner was not freed by abortion. Sexual exploitation and abortion are also themes in "The Waste Land." As a dwarf Abe is a metaphor of arrested development in show business and "grotesque depravity" induced by desperation to please a resentful audience: "It was their stare that drove Abe and the others to spin crazily and leap into the air with twisted backs like hooked trout."

Abe wears a green Tyrolean hat, introducing the motif of green from *The Great Gatsby*—as in money, the green light meaning Go for it! and the original promise of the American Dream imaged by Fitzgerald in "the fresh green breast of the New World." Tyrolean refers to heights and the "high, conical crown" of the hat is a peak, imaging aspiration. "There should have been a brass buckle on the front." Abe looks like an elf in a fairy tale. He is West's view of the American Dream during the Great Depression of the 1930s: ridiculous, malformed, dishonest, and vulgar. He uses gutter slang, gives his sex partner money for an abortion and threatens her when she gives him the "fingeroo" and throws him out: "I can get her leg broke for twenty bucks." Abe claims to have the lowdown and tries to bully Tod into placing a bet, the American Dream reduced to a horse race.

3

Tod awakens into his dream of attaining Faye Greener. He gazes infatuated at his studio picture of her in a farce. His infatuation is a farce because "He had nothing to offer her, neither money nor looks, and she could only love a handsome man and would only let a wealthy man love her." West emphasizes her perversion of spiritual values with a romantic cliché undercut by irony: "She put love on a special plane, where a man without money or looks couldn't move."

In his picture of Faye she is in a harem, one of many women available only to a Hollywood sultan with money and power. She is hard in "breastplates," animalistic in a "monkey jacket," and conditioned to luxury "stretched out on a silken divan." She has a romantic "moon face" with "her arms and legs spread, as though welcoming a lover, and her lips were parted in a heavy, sullen smile." The modern love goddess cannot love. A siren of death with "swordlike legs," she is identified not with the traditional Garden of the heart, but with the heartless City: "If you threw yourself on her, it would be like throwing yourself from the parapet of a skyscraper."

The first chapter of *The Great Gatsby* ends with the image of Gatsby stretching out his arms toward the distant green light at the end of Daisy's dock. Daisy is equated with the green light and Gatsby goes for her with lots of green money. Faye Greener is "greener" than Daisy in being more of an attraction to more men--more promiscuous, greedy, superficial and corrupt.

Claude Estee is a screenwriter like West. The name Estee may derive from *Est*, the French word for East, indicating that he is the opposite of West--the same geographical symbolism used in *Gatsby*. Estee lives in a reproduction of a southern plantation mansion in Mississippi, extending the theme of slavery. He incarnates the artifice, pretense, illusion and prostitution typical in the movie industry. Screenwriters in particular saw themselves as prostituting their talent. Estee falsifies everything: “‘Here you black rascal! A mint julep.’ A Chinese servant came running with a scotch and soda.”

Estee impersonates a gentleman, leaves his wife behind to go to a call house and advocates Hollywood charity to “give the racket a front.” His wife Alice lives in a Wonderland and her friend Mrs. Schwartzen loves illusions. Her German name suggest darkness and ignorance. At the party she asks Tod to “convoy” her over to a group of men because she thinks they are telling dirty stories, as if he is merely her vehicle. She “adores” smut and obscenities and brothels. She jumps “up and down excitedly like a little girl” and calls Tod “mean” for not being fooled by the fake dead horse in the swimming pool. “How impolite!” She fakes near tears: “You just won’t let me cherish my illusions.”

Tod walks away from Mrs. Schwartzen, but he finds it harder to resist Estee’s invitation to Audrey Jennings’s call house: “She makes vice attractive by skillful packaging. Her dive’s a triumph of industrial design”—like popular movies. Pornography depresses Tod and prostitutes are like vending machines. Estee lives on the surface of life and makes no distinction between mechanical sex and love. His morality is based entirely on what makes a popular movie--“amour and glamour.” The projection of human artifice onto Nature in the movies is conveyed by another Impressionistic image: “Through a slit in the blue serge sky poked a grained moon that looked like an enormous bone button.”

West is able like Stephen Crane to strike ironic notes in almost every paragraph. The former actress Mrs. Jennings runs her call house “just as other women run lending libraries, shrewdly and with taste.” Her taste is manifest in her policy of not letting “a girl of hers go to a man with whom she herself would not be willing to sleep.” She is considered “really cultured” and “refined” because she knows two subjects—and apparently none other—Gertrude Stein and the Cubist painter Juan Gris. Though an Expressionist himself, West here expresses his distance from the circle around Stein in Paris and satirizes intellectuals of the day who were exclusively interested in fashionable Modernists.

The pornographic movie shown by Mrs. Jennings is about a French maid who takes on all comers but is essentially a lesbian pedophile. Mrs. Schwartzen is so eager she whistles and stamps her feet before it begins and again when it gets interrupted, inciting the audience to protest. Tod sneaks out “under the cover of a mock riot” that prefigures the much larger riot at the end of the novel. He wants to get some fresh air, but he returns to see the rest of the porn flick, seduced by the values of Hollywood.

Lusting after Faye Greener, Tod meets her father Harry Greener, a former vaudeville clown who failed in Hollywood. Greener is “like certain humble field plants which die when transferred to richer soil.” Now he is reduced to selling his homemade silver polish door to door, yet he dresses like an “unconvincing, imitation banker.” Ironically, he has no polish. He is crude. Tod sees his clowning and Faye’s dreams as clues to understanding “the people who stared”—the audience of resentful, frustrated retirees who have come like locusts to California to die.

When he meets Homer, Tod is struck by the fact that “this man seemed an exact model for the kind of person who comes to California to die.” Then he concludes that Homer is only “physically the type.” Tod has already been described physically in a way that makes him similar to Homer. Both of them differ from the locust people in still believing in a dream, though it is only the superficial anima figure and love goddess Faye Greener, who is so much worse than Daisy Buchanan. Likewise both Tod and Homer are more pathetic than *Gatsby* with none of his success or glamour.

Just as Tod is an artist like West, Homer worked in a hotel like West. The artist is an individual, hotels represent society. Tod and Homer to some extent personify aspects of the psyche of West. Homer is the collective unconscious, West's connection to the human race and the most universal figure in the novel. Homer is the masses--the consumer, the dupe of Honest Abe, the audience of Harry Greener, and the fan of Faye. He is so easily influenced that he moves to California because his doctor advised it in an "authoritarian manner." He rents a cottage because "the agent was a bully."

His rented cottage is another example of deception, with a fake thatched roof and a front door "of gumwood painted like fumed oak" and machine-made hinges "carefully stamped to appear hand-forged." The place is like a studio backlot of movie sets in a diversity of styles and periods. One bedroom contains a "governor Winthrop dresser painted to look like unpainted pine." The reference to Winthrop evokes American history from the start, implicitly contrasting the robust integrity of the Puritans to the decadent population of the present, as Hawthorne did in his fictions. The inertia of Homer is comparable to the somnolence Hawthorne describes in "The Custom House" introducing *The Scarlet Letter*. West extends the history of decline from pious Puritanism into pagan Hollywood.

The real estate agent also deceived Homer about the wildlife in the neighborhood. Instead of birds, traditional metaphors of spiritual freedom and transcendence, Homer sees only spiders and a lizard. "He grew very fond of the lizard." They loll in the sun together. The human has not evolved very far beyond the reptile. In the next chapter his head bobs like the head of a toy dragon.

Homer has a small head and sleeps half the time—*12 hours a day!* He can barely wake up. He gets out of bed "like a poorly made automaton." His hands seem independent of his will, emphasizing how subject he is to deterministic forces beyond his control. This theme and comparisons of Homer to animals—lizard, dog, dragon—are characteristics of Naturalism. His hands "crawl" about and he carries them like burdens. Critics have noted the influence here of Sherwood Anderson's "Hands," the first story in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Homer is a more representative figure than Wing Biddlebaum in "Hands," embodying as he does a vision of mass depth psychology in America during the Great Depression. When he is overcome by desire for the prostitute Miss Martin and hugs and gropes her, "He was completely unconscious of what he was doing." Completely unconscious, he is conditioned by the still Puritanical culture of the Midwest and "hurriedly labeled his excitement disgust."

Impressionist imagery here is so extreme—so unreal--it becomes Expressionism, exaggerating artifice. Miss Martin resembles a doll: "Her youthfulness was heightened by her blue button eyes, pink button nose and red button mouth." All these buttons are clichés. Homer likewise is rendered as if he has been mass produced in an artificial romantic world: "He was like one of Picasso's great sterile athletes, who brood hopelessly on pink sand, staring at veined marble waves." He is so out of touch with reality he still cries because he has never seen Miss Martin again, as if he actually knew her. And now her replacement in his dream world is the even more unattainable Faye Greener. In contrast to his namesake the great heroic poet Homer, this modern Homer is "neither strong nor fertile"—he is impotent.

One night he goes down to Hollywood Boulevard for food. "If he just sat around, the temptation to go to sleep again would become irresistible." He gets intimidated by a beggar, shops at a market and returning home is so frightened by the steep climb in the dark he takes a taxicab. His timidity emphasizes the contrast with the heroic age dramatized by the poet Homer.

Homer is a drone who has always "worked mechanically." Now he appears to be "sleep-walking or partially blind. His dissociation from himself is evident when he is cut severely opening a can yet seems to

feel no pain, as if he is numb, as people can be when deeply depressed during a Great Depression. In his backyard he reclines in the sun without looking at the book in his lap or at the vista of canyon twisting down to the city. He defines his outlook on life by choosing to sit facing the closed door of the garage, a sooty incinerator and the remains of a cactus garden. Homer himself is compared to a plant. Although he is fond of the lizard, he identifies with its victims the flies. He could feed the lizard something else, but he chooses not to interfere, not to influence outcomes. He is inert, like the masses who do not respond to calls for social revolution. Homer surrenders to events, like most humans in depression and war.

11

Harry Greener performing his routines door to door thousands of times is mechanical like Homer and is likewise a failure. He “let his derby hat roll down his arm. It fell to the floor.” Harry like Homer does not know himself, “wondering himself whether he was acting or sick.” The gothic or “black humor” in this chapter derives from (1) Harry’s pathetic clowning while having a heart attack; (2) the fact that such a clumsy vulgar butt of his own jokes is selling polish; and (3) that the consumer Homer, a poor loner, buys polish for silver he does not own: “I really need some silver polish.”

Harry’s clowning repertoire is a sample case full of slapstick cliches. He keeps trying to hustle Homer the “sucker” even while he is dying: “He was really sick... Suddenly, like a mechanical toy that had been overwound, something snapped inside of him and he began to spin through his entire repertoire...like the dance of a paralytic. He jiggled, he juggled his hat, made believe he had been kicked, tripped, and shook hands with himself...then reeled to the couch and collapsed.”

His daughter Faye is as callous toward him as he is toward Homer. Her father is dying and she is casually dismissive: “He has a vile heart, poor dear.” Faye is already hard at 17, yet remains immature, “dressed like a child of twelve.” She has an “artificial” voice and “seemed a dancer rather than an affected actress.” Homer does not notice how rude she is to him—that she is totally self-absorbed—whereas Harry is offended: “In a serious moment like this, her ham sorrow was insulting.” Yet no one is more a ham than Harry. Suddenly facing death, Harry drops his clown act. His defense mechanism of reflexively laughing at everything becomes sincere and exaggerates into a “machinelike screech.”

Facing reality infuriates Faye. She shakes the dying man to shut him up and then smashes him in the face with her fist. “I’m a fright,” she says looking into a tiny mirror, becoming more grotesque for her preoccupation with cosmetics. All she wants is to be a star. “She talked on and on, endlessly, about herself...” Even after getting socked in the heart and in the face, her father remains a slave to illusion—claiming to be “Fine and dandy, baby. Right as rain, fit as a fiddle and lively as a flea.” He “tried to disguise how weak he was by doing an exaggerated Negro shuffle”—sustaining the slave motif. At the end of the chapter Harry is still trying to hustle Homer the sucker until he grabs his Adam’s apple as if gasping his last breaths. As Faye says, “We Greeners are all crazy.”

12

Homer is “troubled by dreams” that make his fingers twine “like a tangle of thighs in miniature.” Like Wing Biddlebaum in Anderson’s “Hands,” Homer suppresses his hands and impulses: “He snatched them apart and sat on them... He somehow knew that his only defense was chastity, that it served him, like the shell of a tortoise.... He couldn’t shed it even in thought. If he did, he would be destroyed.”

When in his loneliness he resorts to singing aloud to himself, he sings the national anthem—“the only song he knew”—still loyal despite his great depression, making him a metaphor of America, of the national unconscious, of the mass psychology of frustrated American dreamers. He makes himself more miserable by daydreaming of escape to glamorous Mexico and Hawaii, until he cries himself to sleep. Though knowing that “his anguish is permanent,” he continues to dream by courting Faye. Whereas in Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* dreaming is affirmed as spiritual aspiration, in West dreaming is illusion that can lead to severe depression and madness. Anderson’s story “The Egg” is closer in spirit to West, though Anderson is sympathetic and still hopeful, whereas West is detached and pessimistic.

Visiting the invalid Harry Greener, Tod is increasingly attracted to Faye, who likewise has an invalid persona. Tod is being seduced by the values she embodies. Her affectations “were so completely artificial that he found them charming. Being with her was like being backstage during an amateurish, ridiculous play.” Faye is humanized a little by her ability to laugh at herself: “He had even seen her laugh at her dreams.” She admits that her way of dreaming is “too mechanical for the best results” but that “any dream was better than no dream and beggars couldn’t be choosers.”

Tod is charmed by the trite scenarios Faye wants him to turn into scripts and sell. He pretends to go along with her scheme. “All these little stories, these little daydreams of hers, were what gave such extraordinary color and mystery to her movements.” Tod is corrupted by deceiving Faye to get what he wants, lying like everyone else does in Hollywood. Even so, she treats him like a mere business partner, and then like a child: “Mama spank!” He is so frustrated he is provoked into fantasizing rape. “It was her completeness, her egglike self-sufficiency, that made him want to crush her.” After she fends off his advances Tod envisions her in his painting chased by a mob, a naked beauty with a half-smile and a “dreamy repose” on her face--like a game bird enjoying “wild flight.”

This chapter dramatizes the metaphor of the game bird in “wild flight.” Faye is being pursued by a number of hunters besides Tod, including Earle the movie extra, a cowboy from Arizona. Faye agrees with Tod that Earle is a “dull fool,” but she is attracted to him anyway because is handsome: “He had a two-dimensional face that a talented child might have drawn with a ruler and a compass.” When she kisses Earle he “puckers up his lips like a little boy.” By implication Earle is just as immature and shallow as Faye, with the mentality of a movie publicity poster. Earle’s “resemblance to a mechanical drawing” indicates that as a cowboy in Hollywood he has become unnatural—the Existentialists would say “inauthentic”—mechanical like Harry, Faye, Homer and Tod. Earle is mechanical in society, an extra who does as directed, but out in the hills when he gets teased beyond his endurance he reverts to instinct and becomes all too natural: “The way Earle had gone from apathy to action without the usual transition was funny. The seriousness of his violence was even funnier.” Funny as in gothic or black humor, for Earle is now motivated to murder.

Traditionally in American literature the movement into Nature usually offers spiritual renewal and sometimes even transcendence. On the contrary, West sees life in Nature as did the philosopher Thomas Hobbes—“nasty, brutish and short.” This is the Nature that Homer enjoys vicariously when he watches the lizard hunt flies in his backyard. This chapter expands West’s vision in the tradition of Naturalism. The first canyon Tod enters with Faye is colorful with flowering weeds and poppies, whereas the second is “sterile,” bare ground and rocks, yet “even more brilliantly colored than the flowers of the first.” As the landscape gets prettier, it also gets more predatory. Just as a jungle full of tropical flowers may hide a tiger. “They watch a hummingbird chase a bluejay. The jay flashed by squawking with its tiny enemy on its tail like a ruby bullet. The gaudy birds burst the colored air into a thousand glittering particles like metal confetti”—like flak in an air attack in World War I.

Miguel shows off his fighting cocks, analogous to himself and the other men competing for Faye. Birds are natural metaphors of ascent and transcendence because they fly. This chapter is full of birds expressing various aspects of Nature, including a lovely mocking bird, a trapped quail and kept chickens. The setting is a camp of homeless men during the Great Depression of the 1930s when many people were living in similar circumstances, just as many are doing again today. The brutality of such conditions is dramatized by West in an example of what T. S. Eliot called the “objective correlative”: “Earle caught the birds one at a time and pulled their heads off before dropping them into his sacks.” As something of a wild game bird herself, Faye does not want to face this reality. She cannot look and she covers her ears from the cracking of cut bones when Earle butchers the birds. West here is closer to Earle. He himself related to the natural world by hunting game birds for sport, often in these same hills.

Tensions are raised by tequila and jealousy in the heat of their campfire. Faye plays the men off against each other, bringing Tod tagging along. She necks with Earle as if she means it, but then embraces Miguel. She drinks like the three men and grows increasingly excited, reckless and sexy while dancing with Miguel in front of Earle. Finally the cowboy bashes Miguel over the head with a stick. Faye runs away, chased by Tod until he falls on his face, hearing an ironic comment from Nature on his failure to fulfill his rape fantasy: "Somewhere further up the hill a bird began to sing."

Ironically, this last bird does signal, even inspires, a degree of transcendence via his art. "When the bird grew silent, he made an effort to put Faye out of his mind and began to think about" his visionary painting. The bird sings again and he envisions his painting as a prophecy of "civil war"—implicitly a Marxist revolution. Speaking for West as well, Tod concludes that it does not matter whether his prophecy comes true. "His work would not be judged by the accuracy with which it foretold a future event but by its merit as painting." West was right. The merits of *The Day of the Locust* as art transcend its failure as prophecy, in contrast to *U.S.A.* (1930-36) by Dos Passos, which is more invested in Marxism.

15

The theme of mechanical behavior continues as Tod decides he has to let the unstoppable clowning Harry "run down like a clock." Harry sees a movie as a "vehicle," as Mrs. Schwartzen considered Tod when she asked him to "convoy" her across the room. Harry has been acting for so long that his head "was almost all face, like a mask." Like an actor after poor cosmetic surgery. Due to "years of broad grinning and heavy frowning...he could never express anything either subtly or exactly. They wouldn't permit degrees of feeling, only the furthest degree."

The life story of Harry is comparable to Tod's—"an idealist who desired only to share his art with the world." He was disillusioned by his repeatedly unfaithful wife, like bitter Wash Williams in *Winesburg, Ohio*: "Again he forgave her and again she sinned. Even then he didn't cast her out, no, though she jeered, mocked and even struck him repeatedly with an umbrella. But she ran off with a foreigner." Just as Harry was led on and betrayed by his wife the dancer, Tod is led on by Faye who is compared to a dancer. Whereas Wash Williams is traumatized into hating all women and becoming a recluse, Harry the polish salesman hides his contempt for all suckers under his clown act.

16

The death of Harry the fool corresponds to the death of Tod's foolish dream of Faye. Although she appears to feel guilty enough to blame herself for Harry's death, Tod sees that Faye is merely acting: "Faye had begun to act and he felt that if they didn't interfere she would manage an escape for herself." She has internalized the scripting of movies—contrived, trite, sentimental—as her personal way of life, to avoid reality and evade adult responsibility as represented by her dying father. "She asked him how he was, but didn't wait for an answer. Instead, she turned her back on him to examine herself in the wall mirror." Looking into a mirror yet not seeing yourself for what you are is a stock ironic situation in fiction. "She realized that he must be pretty sick" but she does not pay attention "because she noticed what looked like the beginning of a pimple." When she proceeds to sing lyrics of "Jeepers Creepers" emphasizing eyes, the effect is both ironic and creepy. "Where'd you get those eyes?"

As a childish narcissist, Faye lacks the intelligence to script her roles. She depends on "vehicles" like Tod to do it for her. The tone of gothic or black humor continues as the janitress Mrs. Johnson takes over the funeral arrangements for Harry as if disposing of some trash: "She shook hands with Faye, as though she were congratulating her." Faye "wore a hard smile" as she asks Mary Dove to get her a job working in Mrs. Jennings' call house. She has been planning this all along and has just been waiting for her father to die: "I was saving it." Faye inverts traditional values by saving herself for prostitution rather than for marriage—a cynical Postmodernist irony. "The change that had come over both of them startled Tod. They had suddenly become very tough." At the end of the chapter they treat him with contempt. Both ironic names of the whore Mary Dove are iconic in Christianity, reflecting the subversive attitude toward religion common in Hollywood since the 1930s.

Tod gets drunk on the day of Harry's funeral, preparing to confront and quarrel with Faye. "He shouted at her like a Y.M.C.A. lecturer on sex hygiene." She runs away from him and performs her role as the grieving daughter. There are gawkers seated in the back of the chapel. "It seemed to Tod that they stared back at him with an expression of vicious, acrid boredom that trembled on the edge of violence." They represent the frustrated masses. "When they began to mutter among themselves, he half turned and watched them out of the corner of his eyes." Paranoia such as this is a characteristic of dark Postmodernist fiction later in the century, epitomized by Thomas Pynchon.

The carnivalesque and the socially marginal, other characteristics of Postmodernism, are expressed at Harry's funeral by diversity that is comic in its incongruous extremes: Eskimos brought here for a picture about polar exploration who stayed because they like Hollywood, neurotic locust people from the Midwest, the obscene dwarf Honest Abe Kusich, and Bach played on an electric organ. Christian music is played but the narrative tone is mocking: "If there was a hint of a threat, he thought, just a hint, and a tiny bit of impatience, could Bach be blamed? After all, when he wrote this music, the world had already been waiting for its lover more than seventeen hundred years."

West ends this funeral chapter in the spirit of Postmodernist black humor with Mrs. Johnson, whose hobby is funerals. Strict and inescapable, with a common name, Mrs. Johnson insists upon the reality of death as common to us all. She intimidates people into facing the fact of annihilation in the form of Harry in his coffin, while Tod, whose name means death, sneaks out.

Faye is now playing a role in "Waterloo," about the great defeat of Napoleon—the violent end of his dream. Influenced by the French Surrealists, West deconstructs the making of movies and modern dreams with abrupt juxtapositions of incongruous backlot sets that become increasingly absurd: Tod rests beside an ocean liner of painted canvas, crosses a desert being extended by dump trucks, passes a paper mache sphinx and a jungle with a tethered water buffalo where "an Arab charged by on a white stallion." He pushes through the swinging doors of a saloon in a set with no back onto a street in Paris. "On a lawn of fiber, a group of men and women in riding costumes were picnicking. They were eating cardboard food in front of a cellophane waterfall." He passes "celluloid swans" on a pond and a Greek temple containing a fallen god. He skirts the skeleton of a Zeppelin, a bamboo stockade, an adobe fort, the wooden horse of Troy, a flight of baroque palace stairs, part of the Fourteenth Street elevated station, a Dutch windmill, the bones of a dinosaur, the upper half of the Merrimac, the corner of a Mayan temple, a vista of Venice and a charwoman on a stepladder washing the face of "a Buddha thirty feet high."

The studio lot is a "dream dump," analogous to the unconscious of an individual and to the collective unconscious of the country. "A Sargasso of the imagination! And the sump grew continually, for there wasn't a dream afloat somewhere which wouldn't sooner or later turn up on it, having first been made photographic by plaster, canvas, lath and paint." As in this production of the battle of Waterloo: "The French killed General Picton with a ball through the head and he returned to his dressing room." West is witty, using techniques of compression, analogue and irony learned from "The Waste Land" while presenting an Atheist rebuttal to Eliot's vision. His depth psychology is reductively materialistic—the unconscious is merely a dump—as opposed to Jung, Eliot and most other Modernists.

Ironically, the director of "Waterloo" makes the "same mistake" made by Napoleon, thinking the terrain is suitable for a cavalry charge. Hollywood dreamers never learn. Obscured by cannon smoke, the as yet unfinished set collapses under the horses in a director's nightmare and the "whole hill folded like an enormous umbrella and covered Napoleon's army with painted cloth." Hollywood is rarely accurate about history: "Waterloo instead of being the end of the Grand Army, resulted in a draw."



At his office Tod is surprised when Faye is friendly to him, though she is insincere in pretending she has reformed. “She wasn’t angry, but grateful for his lecture on venereal disease. It had brought her to her senses.” Ironically, Tod has persuaded her to move in with Homer, who has agreed to board and feed and dress her until she becomes a movie star. “The reason she wasn’t a star was because she didn’t have the right clothes.” Faye has found a sugar daddy who is greener than Harry Greener. “All she wanted was a career. Homer did the housework.” And Faye becomes a Feminist.

Tod’s thought that he has a better chance with Faye than Homer because he is better looking is countered by his realization that Homer has the advantage. Homer is a “humble, grateful man who would never laugh at her.” Because of her great fear of being laughed at “she could live with him on what she considered a much higher plane.” A higher plane of comfort. Though he desires Faye, Tod feels superior to her—“on a much higher plane.” From her point of view, Faye is better off with Homer, who is no threat and also has a house and charge accounts.

Enter another southern California grotesque, Maybelle Loomis, a stage mother and “raw-foodist” who believes “death comes from eating dead things.” Her leader is Know-All Pierce-All, whose name may have suggested Pierce Inverarity in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). Maybelle is managing her son Adore’s career as a child actor, turning him into an obscene little monster who thinks he is Frankenstein. The child actor who turns into a monster in *Lot 49* is Baby Igor.

West identifies the Maybelles of the world with all the stupid people, the ridiculous causes, quacks and illiterates—in particular the kooky Christians. He singles out worshipers in “the Hollywood churches,” including the “‘Church of Christ, Physical,’ where holiness was attained through the constant use of chestweights and spring grips; ‘The Church Invisible,’ where fortunes were told and the dead were made to find lost objects.” They have “feeble bodies...wild, disordered minds...[and a] messianic rage.” These Christians “had it in them to destroy civilization.” They are the locust people—a plague. West represents them with a speaker whose message he compares to such as “an illiterate anchorite might have given decadent Rome. It was a crazy jumble of dietary rules, economics and Biblical threats.”

West’s prejudice against Christianity is another characteristic of Postmodernism and reflects the condescension of Marxist intellectuals and New York urbanites toward middle America—epitomized by the Midwest. In contrast, one of the differences between *Locust* and *Gatsby* is that Fitzgerald uses the Midwest to represent the traditional moral standards of Nick’s father and expresses hope for America in having Nick reject the values represented by New York City and the Valley of Ashes wasteland and return home. At the end of the chapter West enlarges the target of his scorn to include all Christians by concluding with the “entire congregation” singing the old hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers.” As if the fascist threat to civilization was not the international Communist Party taking over Hollywood at the time, but feeble old retired Christians from the Midwest who “have come to California to die.”

The year West wrote this novel Stalin signed a pact with Adolph Hitler, identifying Communists with the fascist movement that exploded in World War II. Though he was a Jew, West seems unaware of what Stalin was doing to Jews at the time. As a screenwriter he knew that the Communists ran the only screenwriting school in Hollywood. He belonged to the Screen Writers Guild and he knew that it too was run by the Communist Party. The newsletter of the Writers Guild was edited by the celebrated Communist screenwriter Dalton Trumbo. West attended Communist rallies and in *Locust* he implicitly sides with them against Christians as a plague at the very time that Stalin was collaborating with Hitler in the planned extermination of the Jews as a plague.

West knew who the actual revolutionaries were in Hollywood. He witnessed them working toward a violent revolution to overthrow the U.S. government and he knew they were funneling millions of dollars in donations to Stalin. He concealed such information, instead pointing his finger at elderly Christians dependant on social order for their retirements. Like Dos Passos in *U.S.A.* he falsified history at a critical period and he used his Expressionism as a disguise for propaganda, artfully enough to escape the notice of

most readers and save his novel. The more artful the writing, the less forceful the propaganda. That is why Marxists and Feminists are intolerant of art.

20

At the Cinderella Bar, Faye treats both Homer and Tod with condescension: “Mama’ll spank... No, baby...” The floor show of female impersonators reflects the emasculation of the men. Homer twists from her “as though he already felt the ruler on his behind.” Later he “leaned away as though she were going to hit him.” Faye has further imposed on Homer by inviting her other boyfriend Miguel to live in his garage—with cages of fighting cocks—as West adds to the atmosphere of the Great Depression: “Lots of people are out of work nowadays”; “There’s a lot of unemployment going around.” Tod has vowed to get real and stop running after Faye. When she flirts with him he refuses to dance.

21

Cock fighting is analogous to the fighting of the men over Faye. West’s hunting companion Faulkner had used the cock fight pun 8 years before in his story “A Justice” (1931), where the analogy is both allegorical and very humorous. West is not so funny. Like Stephen Crane he combines Naturalist themes with pretty Impressionistic imagery for darkly ironic effects: “It was one of those blue and lavender nights when the luminous color seems to have blown over the scene with an air brush. Even the darkest shadows held some purple.” Earle and Miguel look “picturesque.” West’s blending of beauty and disgust, sublimity and horror is reminiscent of Poe in literature and the Surrealists in painting.

According to the tone, the savagery of the cock fight is ugly, abusive and pathetic: “Abe, moaning softly...licked its eyes clean, then took its whole head in his mouth.” Although West sides with the Reds and portrays the red cock as noble, his view of the Reds is also expressed in the fact that the red cock—the noble cause—is being managed by an arrogant, stupid, crude, disgusting and pathetic dwarf. The red cock in the hands and mouth of Abe has no chance with the additional handicap of a cracked beak, just as Abe has no chance with Faye. In contrast to Abe the bird is “very gallant.” Earle “handled the dead cock gently and with respect,” unlike the way he treats Abe, who responds to frustration and abuse by becoming profane and abusive himself. West is the best writer after Stephen Crane at combining Realism, Naturalistic themes, Impressionistic techniques, gallant heroism (of the red cock) and irony. The unusual length and detail of the cockfight episode also makes it stand out as an allegory, as in Faulkner’s story: The fate of the red cock is a prophecy that in the coming civil war, the Reds will lose.

The word *red* lights up like a neon sign. During the 1930s Communists—the Reds—were prominent in show business in New York and Hollywood, as well as in journalism, publishing and universities. Patriotic and religious groups boycotted movies and picketed theaters, reducing attendance and sometimes killing a picture at its premiere. The year before West published this novel the Democratic Party established the House Committee on Un-American Activities to investigate extremist political organizations. Democrats published a report over 400 pages long exposing the Ku Klux Klan and Republicans were calling for an investigation of the influence of the international Communist Party in the government and in Hollywood.

West may have been reacting to the backlash against the Reds when in the church episode he personifies “messianic rage” in the angry Christian speaker from the Midwest. The concerns of such Christians are “economic as well as religious.” West’s venomous contempt for Christians as a “crusading mob” expresses the sense of superiority typical of the Communists toward those who disagreed with them—likewise a characteristic of the politically correct Postmodernists. At the same time, however, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century publication of *The Day of the Locust* would have been unlikely due to its portrayal of a dwarf and its un-Feminist depiction of woman characters.

After the Congressional hearings exposed hundreds of Communist Party members in the movie industry, for the rest of the century liberals denied that the Communist influence was significant. On the contrary, West was there and in this novel he places the red cock on an equal footing with his adversary. The Reds were taking over the unions and guilds. The red cock only loses the battle because his bill is split like the Communist movement in the United States, between the hard core operatives of the international Communist Party bent on violent revolution and taking orders from Moscow and the thousands of their

naïve liberal supporters—the Reds called them “useful idiots”—who thought the Communists were merely idealists trying to help the poor. Although the Reds were defeated in the arena of public opinion, the red cock won in Hollywood and remains alive and well and champion to this day.

22

The tone is set by a dead chicken on the carpet of the garage. The motifs of mechanical behavior and seeing others as vehicles culminates here with humans displacing automobiles. Abe the hustler and Claude the screenwriter join the party in the house. They belong together, as according to West, screenwriting reduces the character of a writer to a mental dwarf. Faye is hostess—“very much the lady”—with the top three buttons of her jacket open, exposing “a good deal of her chest.” Dressed in green—the word is repeated like the motif of green in *Gatsby*—Faye Greener is again seen as greener than Daisy Buchanan in being more ambitious and corrupt: “‘That’s a becoming shade of green,’ Tod said.”

Daisy is upper class and desired by two rich men. The promiscuous lower-class Faye pretends to be a lady “whenever she met a new man, especially if he were someone whose affluence was obvious.” Actually she is more like Myrtle Wilson in *Gatsby*: “‘Charmed to have you,’ she trilled.” As if speaking as a prostitute. “The dwarf laughed at her.” Even the dwarf, a metaphor of all that is stunted and arrested in development, is more savvy than Faye. She orders people around “with stilted condescension”...“in a voice stiff with hauteur,” like Myrtle in her Manhattan flat kept by Tom Buchanan. As hostess of a cock fight in a garage, Faye is lower than Myrtle.

West emphasizes the predictability of the behavior to follow: Abe is such a vehicle of vulgar cliches he “looked like a ventriloquist’s dummy.” Earle and Miguel “took long, wooden steps, as though they weren’t used to being in a house.” Faye’s “running her tongue over her lips...seemed to promise intimacies, yet it was really as simple and automatic as the word thanks.” Her buttocks are “like a heart upside down”—a symbol of seduction by false hopes of fulfilled desire and the upside-down values of the movies, teasing dreamers. “Faye peacocked for them all.” Tod is like the other men staring at her, but he “stood on the outer edge.” Homer irritates him with his self-pity, “resignation, kindness, and humility.” West contrasts Tod with the lovelorn columnist Miss Lonelyhearts in his previous novel: “He had never set himself up as a healer.” Nevertheless, he finally made “an attempt to be kind.”

Homer’s big hands play the traditional child’s game “here’s the church and here the steeple,” and hid in his armpits. “It was the most complicated tic Tod had ever seen.” Tod is so upset by this obsessive compulsive ritual he explodes, “For Christ’s sake!” Homer’s compulsion to form a church and to repeat meaningless rituals is West’s metaphor of religion. “But I can’t help it, Tod. I have to do it three times”—enacting a Trinity. Tod says okay but he turns his back on Homer, as on religion. West reduces religion to a psychological disorder. Religion does not protect Homer from Nature, the siren allure of Faye, who sings the song of a vamp and identifies herself repeatedly as a “viper”—a snake in the Garden of the heart. Homer is the foolish American Adam who falls for a dream.

Tod agrees to help Homer by reporting Miguel’s chickens to the Board of Health, as if that will do any good. Homer’s dream of Faye is like being drunk and Tod resists being an enabler: “Stop calling me Toddie, for Christ sake!” Finally the best thing he can do for Homer is tell him the truth, but like the lines in Faye’s song, Homer is too high on his dream to accept that she is a viper.

23

The atmosphere is the prelude to an orgy, with Tod, Earle, Abe and Claude watching Faye dance a slow tango with Miguel. “All the buttons on her lounging pajamas were open and the arm he had around her waist was inside her clothes.” Earle is next to dance with her and “When the dwarf lowered his head like a goat and tried to push between them, she reached down and tweaked his nose.” In the ensuing fight, Faye’s silk pajamas are torn, she strips to her black lace underwear and Miguel swings the dwarf by his ankles into the wall like “killing a rabbit against a tree.” Yet the goatlike Abe survives everything, tells Claude to go to hell and leaves for a whorehouse. “I’m just getting started.”

What the dwarf and the goddess represent are eternal. Tod finds the vulnerable Homer alone in his cottage, staring at his hands. Faye called him nasty for spying on her and “went on calling him all sorts of dirty things,” but later, left alone, she “was curled up in bed like a little girl. She called him Daddy and kissed him and said she wasn’t angry at him at all.” Then he catches her in bed with Miguel. She leaves without a word or a note as if he never meant a thing to her.

“What a perfect escape the return to the womb was. Better by far than Religion or Art or the South Sea Islands.” Homer tells Tod he is going back home to the Midwest, like Nick at the end of *Gatsby*. The psychic womb is like a “hotel,” such as Homer had worked in all his life. Homer’s reaction is another example of Naturalist determinism, expressed in mechanistic behavior: “He was like a steel spring which has been freed of its function in a machine and allowed to use all its strength centripetally.”

Tod stops at a western goods and saddlery store for information about cowboy Earle and Faye. The degradation of tradition is embodied in an Indian now called Chief Kiss-My-Towkus, wearing a sandwich board advertisement. “‘You gotta live,’ he said.” The effect is like T. S. Eliot’s “Shakespearean Rag” in “The Waste Land.” Tod decides Faye probably would go back to work at the call house. She is like “a very pretty cork, gilt with a glittering fragment of mirror set in its top. The sea in which it danced was beautiful, green in the trough of the waves and silver at their tips. But for all their moon-driven power, they could do no more than net the bright cork for a moment in a spume of intricate lace.” He has been frustrated beyond his endurance trying to grab hold of the cork. At a restaurant he has an extended rape fantasy, then loses his appetite and has to pay the bill. “If only he had the courage to wait for her some night and hit her with a bottle and rape her.” This impulse to violence identifies Tod with the violence of the rioters at the end of the novel. Their madness is his as well.

Violet light is moving across the sky in “crazy sweeps.” Violet light was introduced in Chapter 1 evoking the violet light of decadence in “The Waste Land.” West conveys a pessimistic secular vision in rebuttal to the religious vision of Eliot, a Postmodernist rejection of the spiritual dimension in Modernism. West sees no way out of the wasteland. The light in *Locust* comes not from above but is projected from search lights on the ground, signifying not salvation but the world premiere of a movie. The “search” lights reveal nothing in the Sky. The creator is not in Heaven but in Hollywood.

The famous Grauman’s Chinese Theater with stars on the sidewalks outside is the model for Kahn’s Persian Palace Theatre. The enormous electric sign over the street is an allusion to “Kubla Kahn” by Coleridge, written while the Romantic poet was hallucinating on opium. The poem here is like a testament of dreamy romantic hedonism and Kahn’s Theatre is the temple dome of pleasure. Theaters have now replaced churches and the masses have made a religion of entertainment. “At the sight of their heroes and heroines, the crowd would turn demoniac. Some little gesture, either too pleasing or too offensive would start it moving and then nothing but machine guns would stop it.” Nonsense. In America, old retired people were not forming demoniac mobs and getting machine-gunned in the streets. The narrative exaggeration here expresses paranoia that leads into dissociation and madness: The mob starts insulting and attacking Tod and “he began to get frightened.” After he gets hit on the back of his head, everything that follows may be to some extent an expression of delirium.

The theater crowd of thousands is “made up of the lower middle classes,” but no “working men.” This differentiates the hostile mob from the working class being organized by the Communist Party in Hollywood and elsewhere. We are reminded that the “demoniac” mob is composed of Christians when a reporter’s hysterical voice is compared to “that of a revivalist preacher whipping his congregation toward

the ecstasy of fits.” The mob attacking Tod “were savage and bitter, especially the middle-aged and the old, and had been made so by boredom and disappointment.” The old Christians have become “poor devils” who can only be stirred by the promise of miracles and then only to violence.” Older middle-class Americans were all miserable “slaves” to the system all their lives. “They have slaved and saved for nothing.” West’s characterization of Christians as bored and disappointed is based upon his cynical assumption that they do not really believe in their religion.

As an East Coast urbanite, West projects his own boredom and disappointment in California: “after you’ve seen one wave, you’ve seen them all.” He thinks middle-class people are stupid: “They don’t know what to do with their time. They haven’t the mental equipment for leisure, the money nor the physical equipment for pleasure.” Enjoying leisure is possible only to smart people who read books and all pleasure takes money and sexual potency. The disabled might as well be dead. West is unable to imagine that some older people might enjoy life with very little money, find Nature enjoyable for more than killing birds, attain fulfillment in a marriage or as a parent, or just enjoy playing golf.

Tod worries that he might not be able to “wake” Homer, who then appears walking somewhat like an awakened Frankenstein: “more than ever like a badly made automaton and his features were set in a rigid, mechanical grin”—“moving blindly.” Homer no longer even recognizes Tod and both are going mad—both dissociated within themselves and from reality. The child actor Adore, who thinks he is Frankenstein, acts like a monster by teasing Homer and then hitting him in the face with a rock. “Before he could scramble away, Homer landed on his back with both feet, then jumped again.” He “went on using his heels” like a fighting cock. Homer is last seen merging with the mob, pulled down into it in his symbolic role as the collective unconscious of the masses.

In the riot scene, Tod has physical experiences that enact what he has previously experienced mentally: “He became part of the opposing force”; “He fought to keep his feet on the ground”; “riding the current when it moved toward his objective”; “then gave up and let himself be swept along”; “until he thought he must collapse.” He gets kicked and when a sobbing woman hangs on to him and almost drags him down, he “kicked backward as hard as he could. The woman let go.” Now he is kicking like a fighting cock. In the midst of it all he thinks about his painting, “The Burning of Los Angeles.” By now “his mind had become almost automatic.” Art offers him no transcendence, it is merely an “escape” like the movies. No wonder he sold out.

Going nuts, he escapes from reality into imagination and thinks he is standing on a chair painting flames that are destroying “a nutberger stand.” He fears the police. “Tod had the presence of mind to give Claude’s address.” Actually, he has *lost* his mind. He identifies himself with the corrupt screenwriter Claude, confirming his own corruption, and ends screaming like a siren—a pun on Faye the siren. We may be sure that the police will take him to an appropriate home. The ending is Postmodernist in being (1) Atheist; (2) solipsistic; (3) insane; (4) dehumanizing; (5) pessimistic; and (6) apocalyptic.

For all his pessimistic determinism in *The Day of the Locust*, West’s own life contradicted his vision in the novel: He *attained* his American Dream in Hollywood. He lost it not because he got attacked by a mob of elderly Christians, but because of his own character. He ran a red light.

Michael Hollister (2015)