1954

Theme and Structure in the Novels of Nathanael West

Richard Waldron
Loyola University Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License. Copyright © 1954 Richard Waldron
TITRE AND STRUCTURE IN THE NOVELS
OF NATHANIEL WEST

by

Richard Waldron

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

January
1954
Richard Waldron was born in Oak Park, Illinois, October 24, 1927.

After attending both parochial and public grammar schools in Chicago, he entered Carl Schurz High School, transferring after one year to Lane Technical High School, from which he was graduated in June, 1945. After a period of military service, he entered Wright Junior College, Chicago. After one year at Wright, he transferred to Loyola University of Chicago, from which he received the degree of Bachelor of Philosophy in February, 1951.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I. INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographical sketch of Nathanael West and his works--Aim and method of the present study--Discussion of primary terms theme and structure.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II. THE DREAM LIFE OF DIALO SNELL.</strong></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbols of the meaningless nature of life: circle imagery, the tragic clown, death the only certainty--Grotesque characterization--Trojan horse setting--Frenzied despair of style--Images of hope and chaos--Plot episodic and loose--Point of view and unity in novel--Structural pattern that of a search.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>III. MISS LONELINESS.</strong></td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Futility symbols: letters of suffering, the religious experience, poet as secularized priest--Symbols of escape: sex, art, hedonism--Characters flat, frustrated, violent--Hero's despair counterpointed by setting--Style impressionistic--Poetic quality based on contrast--Relative weakness of causality in plot--Theme in relation to structure: lack of order in world reflected in lack of causality--Shifts in point of view--Concentration on central character--Search for meaning provides structural pattern--Theme and structure embraced in formula the futility of the search for meaning in life.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IV. A COOL MILLION</strong></td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West's least characteristic novel--Plot as only symbol--Comic strip characterization--Naturalism in drawing of character--Reality versus illusion in setting--Style as chief defect--Plot picaresque--Blurring of main story line--Burlesque of older novel in choice of point of view--Pattern in accord with previous novels--Not a &quot;political&quot; or &quot;social purpose&quot; book--Forms continuous connection with other novels in terms of basic theme and structure.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

VI. CONCLUSION

Summary of theme and structure in West's novels—Appropriateness of thought to form—Structure determined by author's view of life—Ramifications of present study—West's importance—Reasons for slightness of reputation—West's relation to the modern Catholic novelist.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

APPENDIX: THREE MODERN MOVEMENTS: THEIR INFLUENCE ON WEST

Surrealism—Naturalism—Existentialism.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The legend that all American writers are men of genius who die young, who are cut off before their talent has fully matured, has particular significance in our time. As one foreign observer remarks:

It is a commonplace, in the United States, to say (in an undeceived tone): 'All American novelists die young.' Certainly not all succumb, in the biological sense of the word, to a premature death—even though such had been the case, for example, of Nathanael West, the author of the remarkable Miss Lonelyhearts—killed at the age of thirty-six in an automobile accident; or of Scott Fitzgerald, the foremost figure of the twenties, dead at forty-five of a nervous breakdown and, one would be tempted to say, of despair...

Rather, the physical and artistic death of so many American writers has become perhaps the most eloquent testimony that can be given to life in twentieth-century America in an age of anxiety, fear, and despair. It has become not only a symbol of promise unfulfilled, but of moral decay and spiritual disintegration.

Part of what was wrong this side of Paradise was caught, if not always interpreted, by Scott Fitzgerald, who blazed into prominence in the 1920's, and who died virtually unknown and completely out of print in 1940. The day after Fitzgerald's death, on December 22, 1940, his friend and comp-

1 Claude-Edmonde Magny, L'Age du roman américain, Paris, 1948, 244.
temporary, the neglected novelist Nathanael West, was killed in an automobile accident. Both had been screen writers in Hollywood at the time of their death. Today Fitzgerald has, thanks to Arthur Mizener, undergone a "revival" and been awarded a secure place in American literary history. But such is not the case with Nathanael West, who has perhaps caught the vision of a world where the promise of Paradise is no longer possible.

Nathanael West was born on October 17, 1904, in New York City, the son of a well-to-do building contractor. His childhood was spent on the Upper West Side in New York, where he attended public schools. After attending De Witt Clinton High School, he entered Tufts, where he stayed for one year, then transferred to Brown University, where he majored in philosophy. There he joined a group of "bright young men" with literary aspirations composed of I. J. Kapstein (who later taught English at Brown), the journalist Quentin

---

3 Ibid.  
7 Ibid.  
8 Ibid.  
Reynolds, and the humorist S. J. Perelman, who became his closest friend and later his brother-in-law. Upon West's graduation from Brown in 1924, the yearbook said of him, "He seems a bit eccentric at times, a characteristic of all geniuses!"

As a young man with literary aspirations, West faced the usual American suspicion of the "artist" on the part of his parents, who would no doubt have preferred to see him undertake a more prosperous and "respectable" profession. However, they did not prevent him from following his chosen course, and even financed his trip to Paris after his graduation from Brown. Thus, late in 1924, West joined the mass exodus of American artists that descended upon Paris like a swarm of locusts, and later, in an autobiographical short story, he wrote:

"In order to be an artist one has to live like one." We know now that this is nonsense, but in Paris in '25 and '26 we didn't know it.

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. Things were a good deal less innocent than they had been, and much more desperate.

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

10 "Neglected Novelist," Newsweek, XXXVI, 77.
11 Ibid.
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.14

West, living in Paris at the height of surrealistic activities, must certainly have come in contact with surrealistic thought and probably some of its leaders and adherents. André Breton issued the first surrealist manifesto in 1924; 1925 saw the rise of Eluard and Aragon as poets, and Max Ernst and André Masson had no trouble selling their paintings.15 Significantly enough, the only movement strong enough to compete with that of the surrealists was the Catholic revival in the examples of such men as Maritain and Cocteau, but this "did not prevent the surrealists from denouncing bitterly and unremittingly any religious solutions to the problems of modern man."16 The aim of surrealism is summed up by Fowle when he says:

Surrealism, during the years which separated the two world wars, seemed particularly concerned with negation, with revolution and the demolishing of ideals and standards. The surrealists were 'anti' everything, but especially anti-literature and anti-poetry. They were asking for not much less than a total transformation of life.17

And Richard McLaughlin states that while West always remained a bit apart from the bohemian movements current at the time in Paris, he was nevertheless affected by the surrealists, "particularly their derisive, destructive nay-

16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 15.
saying, their twenty-four hour preoccupation with decay and degeneracy."16
But West was too much the conscious artist, too much the technician, to be
called a surrealist in the literal sense of the word.19 Rather, he sometimes
employs the distortions and exaggerations of the surrealis1st:s as a technique,
and his work often takes on the nightmarish quality of a Max Ernst painting.20

After two years in Paris, West's parents implored him to return to
the United States, where he could live a more normal and respectable life, but
he refused and remained in Paris, even though his money had run out.21 A
friend of his, the screen writer Wells Root, said that he "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."22

Finally, however, West succumbed to his parents' entreaties and re-
turned home, where he took a job managing Kenmore Hall on East 23rd Street, an
hotel owned by an uncle,23 which called itself the "favored residence of

18 McLaughlin, "West of Hollywood," Theatre Arts, XXXV, 47.

19 West's friend and brother-in-law, S. J. Perelman, "was regarded
by the French Surrealists as a kindred spirit, especially when they discovered
the screen plays he wrote for the Marx Brothers."--Gehman, "Introduction," Day
of Locust, xiv.

20 "[H]e used to show his Max Ernst reproductions proudly to friends,
watching their faces for reactions."--Ibid., x.

21 Ibid., xv.


Artists, Writers and Professional people.\footnote{24} A year later he moved to a more elaborate hotel on East 56th Street, The Sutton,\footnote{25} "A hotel residence of charm and refinement with intelligent service and tastefully furnished rooms at moderate rates."\footnote{26} West was not particularly fond of these jobs, but they "at least offered a steady income, and there wasn't much else he could do at a comparable salary."\footnote{27}

Meanwhile West had completed a first novel that he had begun in Paris. \textit{The Dream Life of Balso Snell} (1931) was published in Paris by a small avant-garde firm.\footnote{28} One critic has called it "the logical result of \ldots [West's surrealist] flirtation with decadence."\footnote{29} For an early effort, however, another critic said:

> It was technically adventurous and deliberately exaggerated emotionally; it was perhaps a little too determined in its evident desire to shock and scandalize the reader. But it also contained passage of extraordinarily vivid and sensitive writing, and it did set forth that curiously acid philosophy, as harsh and sardonic and yet unembittered as that of an exasperated saint, which was to be basic to all West's later work.\footnote{30}

It is over twenty years now since \textit{Balso Snell} was published, and seen in the light of historical perspective that only time can give, one critic was able

\begin{footnotes}
\item[26] Advertisement in \textit{Contact}, I, unnumbered page.
\item[28] Contact Editions, Paris and New York, 1931.
\item[29] McLaughlin, "West of Hollywood," \textit{Theatre Arts}, XXXV, 47.
\item[30] Coates, "Introduction," \textit{Miss Lonelyhearts}, ix-x.
\end{footnotes}
to say in 1951 that "[a]s many youthful faults as it had . . . it was a strikingly vivid, perversely original work of promise."31

But Balso Snell went practically unnoticed at the time it was published, and West set to work on his second novel, Miss Lonelyhearts. At about the same time, he became an associate editor, along with Robert McAlmon, of the second series of William Carlos Williams' magazine, Contact.32 The initial issue of Contact contained parts of the first draft of Miss Lonelyhearts, poems by e. e. cummings, satires by S. J. Perelman and Ben Hecht, and David Moss compiled the first bibliography of little magazines.33 The purpose of Contact, as stated by its editor, was that it would "attempt to cut a trail through the American jungle without the use of a European compass."34 But between working on Contact and his job as hotel manager, West found little time to work on his novel. He had already discarded five different versions of Miss Lonelyhearts and was beginning a sixth when two of his friends, Josephine Herbst and John Herrmann, suggested he move to the country where he could live inexpensively and devote full time to his writing.35 He quit his hotel job, and with the little money he had saved, settled at Warford House, a small hotel in Frenchtown, New Jersey, across the river from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, which later became a favorite haunt of artists and writers fleec-
Within the short space of a few months he finished Miss Lonelyhearts (1933).\(^\text{37}\)

The reviews of Miss Lonelyhearts went from one extreme to the other. One, for example, said: "There is, of course, the value of smart phrasing to commend the book. And a knowledge of its contents will be essential to conversational poise in contemporary literature during the next three months—perhaps."\(^\text{38}\) F. \(\text{H. Britton, on the other hand, was quite enthusiastic when he said:}

> It is easy enough to indicate the materials which Mr. Nathanael West has used in his grotesquely beautiful novel 'Miss Lonelyhearts.' But it is a far more difficult matter to convey some notion of the intensely original incandescence of spirit which fuses these simple elements. Chapter after brilliantly written chapter, moving like a rocket in mid flight, neither falls nor fails. The book itself ends with the sudden, swift delamination of a light going out.\(^\text{39}\)

Another reviewer, though perhaps deceived by the surface simplicity of Miss Lonelyhearts, was at least honest in confessing his bewilderment in saying, it "is a difficult piece of work to put one's finger on, for it scarcely falls into any of the kinds of light reading with which we are familiar."\(^\text{40}\) Robert Coates perhaps indicates what alienated many of the reviewers when he comments:

> There is savagery in 'Miss Lonelyhearts.' ... and in his \([\text{West's]}\) insistence on the unpleasantness of all primary human relations there is something a little unhealthy about it too.

36 Gehman, "Introduction," Day of the Locust, xvi.
37 Ibid.
38 Boston Evening Transcript, July 26, 1933, pt. 4, p. 2.
But it's the savagery that gives bite to his work and the unhealthiness that gives it color, and there is a kind of poetic purity about it besides, at times almost religious in flavor, that lifts it far above the level of the merely decadent.\textsuperscript{41}

Shortly after the appearance of \textit{Miss Lonelyhearts}, West became an associate editor, along with George Grosz and Gilbert Seldes, of \textit{Americana}, a short-lived magazine of satire and humor edited by Alexander King.\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Americana} claimed to be non-partisan: neither republican, democrat, socialist, or communist; rather, it stated that they were "Americans who believe that our civilization exudes a putrid stench and that we had better prepare to give it a decent but rapid burial. We are the laughing morticians of the present."\textsuperscript{43}

By 1933 the worst effects of the depression were being felt, and one of the principal themes of \textit{Americana} is the economic crash, which it satirizes in the tradition of the grim humor of the Thirties. Yet, it is interesting to note that in not one of the pieces which West contributed to the magazine is there any strain of social protest; his contributions consist entirely of excerpts from \textit{Salko Snell} and a satire on Hollywood writers and producers.\textsuperscript{44}

Encouraged by the comparative success of \textit{Miss Lonelyhearts}, West set to work immediately on his third novel, \textit{A Cool Million} (1934), and attempted to support himself by writing short stories, "none of which ever saw print."\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{41} Coates, "Introduction," \textit{Miss Lonelyhearts}, xi-xii.
\textsuperscript{42} Cf. \textit{Americana}, New York, I, August, 1933.
\textsuperscript{43} Editorial statement, \textit{Americana}, I, November, 1932.
\textsuperscript{44} Cf. \textit{Americana}, I, August, 1933, 29; September, 1933, 25; October, 1933, 14-15.
\textsuperscript{45} Gehman, "Introduction," \textit{Day of Locust}, xvi.
When A Cool Million finally appeared, it was greeted by scathing reviews. One critic even declined to review it, merely saying, "I pass by Nathanael West's satire on the United States called 'A Cool Million, or the Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin' (Covici-Friede), which seemed to me a dull book while I was reading it and seems even duller as I look back on it." A more moderate review, while pointing out the book's faults, still thought that "as parody it is almost perfect. And as satire it is a keen, lively and biting little volume, recommended to all and sundry. It is funny, but there's method in its absurdity." The chief defect of this burlesque on the Horatio Alger success story was one of style, as Robert Coates pointed out when he said of A Cool Million:

it was written to a publisher's deadline after the critical success of 'Miss Lonelyhearts,' and it turned out that West just couldn't write that way; the book tells its story and tells it well, but in the telling there is none of the savage poetry and sharpness of phrase which illuminated every other piece of writing he ever turned out.

Robert Coates values the book for extra-literary reasons, believing it would establish for West a mark of prescience that would scarcely be equaled by other contemporary novelists in its description of the process "by which honest Americanism can be twisted into America-Firstism and from there on into Fascism." But, then, one immediately thinks of Sinclair Lewis's It Can't Happen Here (1935).

48 Coates, "Introduction," Miss Lonelyhearts, x.
49 Ibid., xi.
After the failure of *A Cool Million*, West found himself nearly broke, so that when the movies bought *Miss Lonelyhearts*, he accepted a job as a screen writer in Hollywood. West never worked on the screen version of *Miss Lonelyhearts*; when the movie appeared its title had been changed to *Advice to the Lovelorn* and it retained only the bare bones of the novel.

As soon as a writer goes to Hollywood he is inevitably damned by many critics, and from then on his work is in danger of acquiring labels like "slick" or "smooth." Yet when one begins to think of the number of contemporary writers who have "done time" in Hollywood, the list becomes staggering, ranging from Faulkner and Steinbeck on the one hand, to Huxley and Thomas Mann on the other. West, however, also received such criticism; he replied by saying:

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 the total sum 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. . . . I haven't given up, however, by a long shot, and although it may sound strange, am not even discouraged. I have a new book blocked out and have managed to save a little money so that about Christmas time I think I may be able to knock off again and make another attempt. It is for this reason that I am grateful rather than angry at the nice deep mud-lined rut in which I find myself at the moment. The world outside doesn't make it possible for me even to hope to earn a living writing, while here the pay is large (it isn't as large as people think, however) enough for me to have three or

---


51 Ibid.

52 An interesting study of the influence of the film upon the American novelist is Magry, *L'Ago du roman*. 
four months off every year. . . .53

Speaking of West's career as a screen writer,54 a friend of his said:

I think he figured in respect to producers and directors that movies were their business, not his. He was a sort of architectural assistant working on plans for a house. The methods and materials were of their choosing; and they had to live in the house. . . . Whatever happened to him in pictures, good or bad, up to the time of his death, had affected in no way his real work, which was writing novels.55

That West was not deceived by the film colony, that he had pierced its extravagant facade, is shown in a satire he wrote describing the relations between a studio head and a screen writer.56

Between screenplays West ventured into the legitimate theatre. He collaborated on a play, Even Stephen, with S. J. Perelman, but it was never produced; the second attempt, Good Hunting, with Joseph Schrank,57 lasted

53 Letter from West to Edmund Wilson, cited in Gehman, "Introduction," Day of Locust, xviii. The book West refers to as being blocked out was evidently not The Day of the Locust, but plans for a fifth novel which he never completed; cf. Gehman, "Introduction," Day of Locust, xvii.

54 The following is a list of films with which West was directly or indirectly concerned. 1935: screen story (Miss Lonelyhearts) "Advice to the Lovelorn," 20th Century-UA. 1936: collaborated on screenplays "Ticket to Paradise," "Follow Your Heart," "The President's Mystery," Republic. 1937: adaptation "Rhythm in the Clouds," Republic. 1938: original screen play "Born to Be Wild," Republic. 1939: collaborated on screenplay "Five Came Back," RKO; adaptation "I Stole a Million," Universal.—Terry Ramsaye, ed., International Motion Picture Almanac, 1940-41, New York, 1942, 635. West's last movie work was "Men Against the Sky," in 1940.—New York Times, December 23, 1940, p. 23.


exactly two nights, and was reviewed by Brooks Atkinson, who said, "the jokes are faint and tedious; the direction is disastrous."  

After his failure in the theatre, West again found his stride in his fourth and last book, *The Day of the Locust*, which appeared sometime in May, 1940. Robert Coates says that "it has frequently been called the best novel ever to come out of Hollywood and it is surely that; it is also one that was extremely significant in the development of West's talents, for it marked a considerable advance in the integration of his philosophy towards life." It proved, for one thing, that the Hollywood writer need not forever be a lost soul, that it was the man and not his working locale that really counted. Edmund Wilson, speaking of the fear of West's fading out after he went to Hollywood, said: "Mr. West, as this new book happily proves, is still alive out there beyond the mountains, and can still tell what he feels and sees--has still, in short, remained an artist." But most of the reviewers were not enthusiastic; even F. H. Britton, who followed West's career from the beginning, remarked: "Perhaps because of Mr. West's bitter awareness of the futility of his materials--for certainly the locusts have feasted here--he shows none of that intensity of feeling, that idealistic vehemence which marked 'Miss Lonelyhearts,' to my way of thinking, as a great book."  

60 Coates, "Introduction," *Miss Lonelyhearts*, xiii.  
Another reviewer called it "a saturnalia of sadism and mass insanity that may trouble your dreams." 63 Although the critics were sharply divided in their comments on West's books, virtually all had to admit that his novels were, at least, original. Edmund Wilson perhaps indicated the source of this originality when he called The Day of the Locust "another remarkable book--in its peculiar combination of amenity of surface and felicity of form and style with ugly subject and somber feeling, quite unlike--as his [West's] other books have been--the books of anyone else." 64

If The Day of the Locust indicates West's exasperation and dissatisfaction with Hollywood, nevertheless he did have happier moments there. One of these occurred in 1939 when he met Eileen McKenney, who was working in the Walt Disney studios (she was the subject of the play By Sister Eileen by Ruth McKenney). 65 In April, 1940, they were married and took a trip to the Oregon woods, returning to Hollywood around June. 66 While on this trip, West began formulating plans for a fifth novel, which he hoped to begin around Christmas, but apparently they were never written down. 67 Later, in December, West and his wife went on a hunting trip 68 to Mexico; on the 22nd, as they were return-

63 Clifton Fadiman, New Yorker, XV, May 20, 1939, 79-80.
64 New Republic, XCLIX, July 26, 1939, 340.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Hunting was one of his main interests: cf. Gehman, "Introduction," Day of Locust, xiii.
ing to Hollywood, their station wagon collided with another car near El Centro, California, and both West and his wife were killed. Six days later, on December 27, 1940, the play by Sister Eileen opened in New York.

As one critic has said, the "scanty biographical information available on Nathanael West tells us very little about the man, and even less about the writer." His friends thought him something of an enigma, a bundle of contradictions, and as Richard Gelman says:

No one could satisfactorily explain the many clashing elements in his nature and interests. He despised military men, yet was an authority on the armies and strategists from the time of Caesar on . . .; he regarded organized religion as a hoax, but was on intimate terms with the structure, organization and financial condition of the Catholic Church [as well as its dogma and liturgy, one might add, judging from his books]. He was tall, awkward and disarming in appearance, but he dressed with excessive propriety in Brooks Brothers clothes and travelled with an incredible collection of trick luggage. He had an acute feeling for words, but couldn't spell; he hated business and workaday occupations, but was successful as a hotel clerk for several years.

Scott Fitzgerald perhaps touched the center of the problem when he said:

"There never was a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn't be. He's too many people if he's any good." One reason, and perhaps the major one, why West remains an enigma to so many of his critics is that the central interest of his life--his work--has never received the study it deserves and

69 Ibid., xvii.
needs before any total evaluation of his place in American literature can be made (he is notably absent from the literary histories). And to understand West's novels is particularly important, because "[i]f ever an author could say of himself, know my books and you'll know me, it was Nathanael West."74

A word regarding the aim and method of the present study would seem necessary here. Though the novels of Nathanael West are the subject of this study, it would be impossible to consider them in their entirety within the brief scope of this paper; therefore, the discussion has been limited to the two major aspects of theme and structure, aspects which in a larger sense resolve themselves into form and content, thought and technique. Of the four novels West wrote during his short lifetime, only two, Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust, seem likely to survive into the future. But in tracing such aspects as theme and structure, it is also necessary to consider the other two novels, The Dream Life of Balso Snell and A Cool Million, in order to obtain a complete view of our subject, in order to show certain constant tendencies which were more fully realized in West's major works. Thus, Chapters II and IV (Balso Snell and A Cool Million) will receive only limited attention, while Chapters III and V (Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust) will receive more detailed study.

In regard to the method the present study employs, one may keep in mind Henry James' admonition when he says:

A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts. The

74 McLaughlin, "West of Hollywood," Theatre Arts, XXX, 47.
critic who over the close texture of a finished work shall pretend to trace a geography of items will mark some frontiers as artificial, I fear, as any that have been known to history. 75

While not pretending "to trace a geography of items" the present study will maintain "that in each of the parts of a novel there is something of each of the other parts," and must agree with Mark Schorer when he says "that whatever single element in a novel one may select for analysis, a novel in itself is an integration of an attitude which the study of any single element will reveal." 76 Thus, in relation to theme, such diverse elements of the novel as symbolism, characterization, setting, and style will be examined principally for their bearing upon meaning, not for their independent value. In relation to structure such elements as plot, point of view, and "pattern" will be studied for an understanding of how the novel is designed, how the thought or theme is progressively revealed. There is, of course, an overlapping of terms; for example, plot, usually thought of in terms of structure, can also be symbolic and therefore have thematic affinities.

With regard to our two main terms, "theme" and "structure," some clarification is in order. The theme or "meaning" of a novel is nothing less than the total effect of everything in the work. Thus, it is impossible to make a prose statement of the theme and expect it to encompass the total book. But such a statement is not entirely useless: it does help to show the general tendency of the book (and its author's state of mind), enabling us to get


an idea of what the book is "about" and to understand its parts in relation to the whole. This is incomplete, partial, but it is all that the present study can hope for, and as one critic has said, "there are degrees of unsuccess." 77

In regard to structure, one again can arrive at only a general idea of the term. One critic says that structure is "an arrangement of materials that gives meaningful continuity to a work. It is, then, made up of parts which have a relationship to one another." 78 It is a good definition, and may be accepted for the purposes of this study, even though it comes perilously close to considering structure in terms of plot alone. If the word "causal" were inserted before "relationship to one another" it would be a definition of plot, not structure: for example, Robinson Crusoe may lack a plot--causal relationship of incidents--but possesses a structure that is episodic or "picaresque."

Edwin Muir encountered the difficulty of controversial terminology and lack of precise definition of structure in his book The Structure of the Novel, where he says, "the purpose of this book is to trace the general and given structure of the novel rather than the many interesting varieties of form [Flaubert and James] which have evolved from it. Many of these forms are controversial still, and I wish to remain as far as is possible outside controversy." 79 Thus, Muir remains outside controversy by accepting plot as his only principle of structure: "The term 'plot' stands outside these dangers

It is a definite term, it is a literary term, and it is universally applicable. It can be used in the widest popular sense, it designates for everyone . . . the chain of events in a story and the principle which knits it together."80 Fluir was able to form his theory of structure around plot because he confines himself to the older, traditional novel where plot was undoubtedly the most important structural element—hence his elimination of James and Flaubert, where point of view becomes increasingly important. But, as one critic has stated it, the novel "has lost much of its nineteenth-century character through attempts to serve twentieth-century needs."81 Thus, the present study will not treat plot as the only structural element, but will also take into account such elements as point of view and "pattern."82 Even so, our attempt will be incomplete and only partially successful, for as Percy Lubbock says, "[e]ven if a critic's memory were infallible, as it can never be, still it would be impossible for him to give a really scientific account of the structure of the simplest book, since in the last resort he cannot lay his finger upon a single one of the effects to which he refers."83 Or, at any rate, only a few.

The relation between theme and structure is a relation between form

80 Ibid., 16.
82 I am indebted for the use of this term to E. M. Forster's Aspects of the Novel, New York, 1927, 215: "whereas the story appeals to our curiosity and the plot to our intelligence, the pattern appeals to our aesthetic sense, it causes us to see the book as a whole."
83 Lubbock, Craft of Fiction, 11.
and content, technique and subject matter, art and its materials; but it would be impossible to pursue all of these ramifications in the present study. In chapter VI, however, at least some attempt will be made to discover whether there is any relation between theme and structure in West's novels, and if so, where that relation exists. It will attempt to show that theme and structure are really inseparable, as John Peale Bishop noted when he claimed that the meaning of a novel exists in its structure, not in the words alone. And, finally, an attempt, though it will necessarily be tentative, will be made to show where West stands in relation to his contemporaries, his place in the literary world of his day.

64 Bishop, cited in Schorer, Foreword, Critiques and Essays, xiii.
CHAPTER II

THE DREAM LIFE OF BALSO SNELL

West's first book, The Dream Life of Balso Snell (1931), is a difficult work to assimilate for two main reasons. For one thing, the reader is unable to place it in a frame of reference, to compare it with a similar work by another author, because it is totally unlike any other work which he is likely to be familiar with. For another, the reader is likely to wonder just what the author's purpose was, what the book is attempting to say. The critics were puzzled by the book, and a friend of West's, Julian Shapiro, attempted to explain it to them by saying:

'It's a good sort of literary fooling, a nonsense both above and below what the critics sweat for, what to go after with tongues hanging out, solutions and answers; Ah, saviour, you've given me the why of it at last. This book doesn't try to explain anything; all the way it's fooling and funny, but with plenty under the nonsense to offend those who always have the high seriousness.'

Shapiro, however, fails to say what the "plenty under the nonsense" is. Another critic, in 1948, said of West's novel that it is "the clue to all his latter books; yet, despite its moments of brilliant writing, its poetic economy, it is the one book West wrote that has nothing to say." The thing that


2 Ross, "Novelist-Philosophers," Horizon, XVIII, 269.
is likely to blind one to what West had to say is the pyrotechnics he employs in his method. As West says in the guise of a character in Balso Snell:

Soon, however, in order to interest my listeners I found it necessary to shorten my long out-pourings; to make them, by straining my imagination, spectacular. Oh, how much work goes into the search for the odd, the escape from the same! . . . I now convert everything into fantastic entertainment and the extraordinary has become an obsession.3

Before beginning our examination of these, it may be helpful to refresh the reader's memory by giving a summary of the story. In Chapter I, the poet Balso Snell, while wandering outside the gates of Troy, discovers and enters the wooden horse of the Greeks. Inside he meets a guide who shows him about while they discuss the merits of modern and ancient civilizations and the problem of monism versus dualism. Bored by the guide, Balso flees. Chapter II concerns Balso's encounter with Maloney the Areopagite, "a man naked except for a derby in which thorns were sticking, who was attempting to crucify himself with thumb tacks."4 Maloney is a Catholic mystic who spends his time marveling at the love shown by all the great saints for even the lowliest of God's creatures. He relates the story of Saint Puce, a flea who was born, lived, and died beneath the arm of Our Lord. Balso believes Maloney is morbid, and prescribes cold showers, more meat, and less reading, then continues on his way.

In Chapter III, seeing a boy hiding something in a tree, Balso waits until he leaves, and then removes the object, finding it to be a diary by one John Gilson, class 3B, Public School 186, Miss McGeeney, teacher. The themes of the

3 Nathanael West, The Dream Life of Balso Snell, Paris and New York, 1931, 46.

4 Ibid., 22.
entries in the diary are concerned with the problems of reality versus illusion, guilt, insanity, and finally, in a sub-entry labeled "Crime Journal," the story of the murder of an idiot, which becomes a parody of Crime and Punishment.

In Chapter IV Balso is confronted by John Gilson, who sells the poet a pamphlet outlining his troubles. The pamphlet tells how the death of John Gilson's mistress, Saniette, is received without emotion, even with satisfaction, because his pessimism defeats her optimism and because their relation was one of performer and audience. John Gilson, like all true artists, has only contempt for the audience; he describes a play he would like to write which would ridicule and insult his listeners. Chapter V concerns Balso's encounter with Miss McGeeney (John Gilson's teacher), who is writing a biography of Samuel Perkins, who wrote the biography of the man who wrote the biography of Boswell. After listening to Miss McGeeney on Perkins, Balso suddenly finds himself free (he had been strangely frozen on meeting her), and lunges at McGeeney, heaving her into a fountain. In Chapter VI Balso dreams that he meets a cripple-girl, Jenny Davenport, at Carnegie Hall, and attempts to seduce her; but Jenny puts him off by saying he must first prove his love for her (like knights of old) by killing Beagle Darwin, who got her with child after promising to take her to Paris with him. Jenny shows Balso two of Beagle's letters to her. In the first Beagle claims he refused to take her to Paris because she would have committed suicide. The second letter shows how Beagle would receive the news of her death with cynical humor in order to cover his true feelings. In Chapter VII Balso awakes from his dream and
finds Miss McGeeney by his side. She explains that the letters he had read are part of a novel she is writing in the manner of Richardson. Suddenly Balso perceives that Miss McGeeney is really Mary, an old sweetheart. Balso seduces her, and the book ends with Balso the poet defeated by Balso the animal, who triumphs in one grand physical and spiritual orgasm.

In attempting to determine the theme or meaning of a novel, one of the most significant (and most overlooked) clues may be the title of the book itself. The Dream Life of Balso Snell, as a title, indicates that the book is a plunge into the psyche; it indicates a search for meaning within the depths of one's own being. Perhaps the one literary movement that exclusively dwelt on the exploration of the self in dream states was surrealism, for as Fowlie says:

The need for sincerity in literary expression, felt strongly in France during the first twenty years of the century, is really the belief that the conscious states of man's being are not sufficient to explain him to himself and to others. His subconscious contains a larger and especially a more authentic or accurate part of his being. . . . This discovery or conviction that we are more sincerely revealed in our dreams and in our purely instinctive actions than in our daily exterior habits of behavior . . . is of course basic to surrealism.5

Thus the approach cannot be that of the realistic method we are commonly used to, but must partake of the weird illogicality of dreams themselves. The method which can perhaps best accomplish this (with the exception of the stream-of-consciousness technique) is fantasy, where the strictures of the real world can be discarded.

How the search into oneself takes place and what happens there may

5 Fowlie, Age of Surrealism, 16-17.
be symbolic of the book as a whole; and in Balso Snell the plot itself is perhaps the clearest symbol of meaning. The frontispiece motto in the book indicates the direction the story is to take: "After all, my dear fellow, life, Anaxagoras has said, is a journey." It is an unpleasant journey to be sure, filled with frustration, despair, and chaos. The senseless, self-inflicted pain of Maloney the Areopagite and his ridiculous story of Saint Fuce; John Gilson's diary of murder, guilt, and insanity; Miss McGeeney's useless biography of Samuel Perkins, who wrote the biography of the man who wrote the biography of Boswell—all testify to the meaningless nature of life itself. Wherever Balso seeks to learn the meaning of life and of himself, he is confronted by futility in the form of frustration, despair, or chaos. It is inevitable that the book should end the way it does, for after constantly facing the uselessness of it all, only some kind of escape, a drugging of the soul, can be sought. Thus, the spirit facing defeat and disillusionment yields to the flesh; the militant, primary biological impulses take over and drown the intellect in the surging, pulsating beat of sexual orgasm. The very method used in introducing the incidents, the dream-like fading in and out of people and places and things, testifies to the horror and chaos one is confronted with in attempting to understand oneself and the world in which we are doomed to live.

The plot, of course, is not the only symbol in the book, even though

6 We are concerned here with plot in its thematic affinity; plot in terms of structure will be treated later.

7 West, Balso Snell, Frontispiece motto.
it is an important one; in addition, there is a definite circle symbolism.
Balso Snell, feeling depressed after hearing the sad tales of various people
he encounters, attempts to keep his hopes high by composing a song:

On the Wheels of His Car
Ringed Round with Brass
Glamour the Seraphim
Tongues of our Lord

Ringing Round,
As the Belly of Silemus
Giotto Painter of Perfect Circles
Goes — — One Motion Round

Round and Full
Round and Full as
A Brimming Goblet
The Dew-Loaded Navel
Of Mary
Of Mary our Mother

Round and Ringing Full
As the Mouth of a Brimming Goblet
The Rust-Laden Holes
In Our Lord's Feet
Entertain the Jew-Driven Nails. 8

And again the circle symbolism appears when, in discussing Picasso, Balso's
guide says:

If the world is one then nothing either begins or ends. Only when things
take the shapes of eaches, every, anys, eithers have ends do they have
feet. Moreover, if everything is one, and has neither ends or beginnings,
then everything is a circle. A circle has neither a beginning nor an
end. A circle has no feet. If we believe that nature is a circle, then
we must also believe that there are no feet in nature. 9

Once more we have the reference to circles: "Rather than a tread-mill I
should call the senses a circle. A step forward along the circumference of a

8 Ibid., 14-15.
9 Ibid., 20-21.
circle is a step nearer the starting place."\textsuperscript{10} Although these circle symbols vary in each case (the first proceeds from sexual to religious significance, the second concerns monism versus dualism, and the third sensory experience), yet we do have a common denominator in the choice of the circle itself, for what is the circle in terms of value but a zero. Thus, the present writer believes even in this little touch West's theme shows itself: all is a zero, a circle without beginning or end, signifying nothingness and futility. In short it is a profound pessimism, a nihilism of the most absolute sort.\textsuperscript{11} Yet, there is something more, for the song Balas also composes is a kind of "prayer."

The religious imagery symbolizes a hope or longing for meaning, but the circle symbol testifies to its futility. Thus, Christianity for West becomes a philosophy of hope which he would perhaps like to believe in, but cannot because his own sense of futility cancels hope out; frustrated hope becomes blasphemy.

Another important symbol, which concerns West's idea of the comic, is that of the clown. Beagle Darwin, in a letter, philosophizes:

\begin{quote}
After all, aren't we all . . . Aren't we all clowns? Of course, I know it's old stuff but what difference does that make? Life is a stage; and we are clowns. What is more tragic than the role of clown? What is more filled with all the essentials of great art?--pity and irony. Get it? The thousands of sweating, laughing, grimacing, jeering animals out front --you have just set them in the aisles, when in comes a messenger. Your wife has run away with the boarder, your son has killed a man, the baby has cancer. . . . How get the picture. Outside, after your turn, the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Ibid.}, 58.

\textsuperscript{11} Since this theory was formulated, the present writer ran across a statement by Van Wyck Brooks which claimed that the Medieval Christian also regarded the wheel (a circle) as "a symbol of the futility of living."--Van Wyck Brooks, \textit{The Writer in America}, New York, 1953, 130.
customers are hollering and screaming: 'Do your stuff, kid! We want Beagle! Let's have Beagle! He's a wow!' The clowns down front are laughing, whistling, belching, crying, sweating, and eating peanuts. And you—you are backstage, hiding in the shadow of an old prop. Clutching your bursting head with both hands, you hear nothing but the dull roar of your misfortunes. Slowly there filters through your clenched fingers the cries of your brother clowns. Your first thought is to rush out there and cut your throat before their faces with a last terrific laugh. But soon you are out front again doing your stuff. . . . Finally, the curtain comes down, and, in your dressing room before the mirror, you make faces that won't come off with the grease paint—the faces you will never make down front. 12

And again, John Gilson says, "[t]hough I exhibited myself as a clown, I wanted no mistakes to be made: I was a tragic clown." 13 We are, then, as West says, merely clowns engaged in the comedy, or rather farce, that is life. We must attempt to divert ourselves and others from the fact that life is useless and meaningless by amusement, by laughter, by escape from the reality. But the laughter does not deceive us, for as West says:

People say that it is terrible to hear a man cry. I think it is even worse to hear a man laugh.

One night at the movies, I heard a basso from the Chicago Opera Company sing the devil's serenade from Faust. A portion of this song calls for a long laugh. When the singer came to the laugh he was unable to get started. At last he managed to start laughing. Once started, he was unable to stop. The orchestra repeated the transition that led from the laugh to the next bars of the song, but he was unable to stop laughing. 14

It is a horrible laughter, indeed, and one that reveals the basic hysteria and madness of man, caught in a meaningless trap called life. It also shows West's use of the comic to reveal the tragic: that behind the ridiculous

12 West, Balso Snell, 70-79.
13 Ibid., 14.
14 Ibid., 34.
comedy of life there lurks something tragic and horrible, but that if we for
an instant recognize the tragedy, if we abandon the illusion and cease laugh-
ing, we will be driven mad. There is, at last, only one certainty, only one
escape from the drama: "Life is but the span from womb to womb; a sigh, a
smile, a chill, a fever; a throe of pain, a spasm of volupt; then a gasping
for breath, and the comedy is over, the song is ended, ring down the curtain,
the clown is dead."15

Another symbol occurs in the contrast between reality and illusion.
Does life possess a meaning and order, or is it without plan, purpose, or de-
sign? How are we to tell the illusion from the reality? Balso Snell, reading
the diary of John Gilson, encounters a passage that begins by saying:

Reality troubles me as it must all honest men.

Reality! Reality! If I could only discover the Real. A Real that
I could know with my senses. A Real that would wait for me to inspect it
as a dog inspects a dead rabbit. But, alas! when searching for the Real
I throw a stone into a pool whose ripples become of advancing less im-
portance until they are too large for connection with, or even memory of,
the stone agent.16

Again, though no solution is ever reached, John Gilson is obsessed with the
problem:

I can know nothing; I can have nothing; I must devote my whole life
to the pursuit of a shadow. It is as if I were attempting to trace with
the point of a pencil the shadow of the tracing pencil. I am enchanted
with the shadow's shape and want very much to outline it; but the shadow
is attached to the pencil and moves with it, never allowing me to trace
its tempting form. Because of some great need, I am continually forced
to make the attempt.17

15 Ibid., 78.
16 Ibid., 28.
17 Ibid., 31.
There is, however, one reality of which we can be sure, and that is death. After a search for meaning in life, and finding that search futile, one can turn with a kind of relief to death; it at least puts an end to the futile circle of life; we can stop acting as clowns and quiet our bitter laughter; we can finally touch the Real with our senses. John Gilson entertains himself by picturing the death of his mistress Saniette, who had once entertained thoughts of suicide.

I pictured the death of Saniette. Hiding under the blankets of her hospital bed and invoking the aid of Mother Didy and Doctor Cuaé: 'I won't die! I am getting better and better. I won't die! The will is master o'er the flesh. I won't die!' Only to have Death answer: 'Oh, yes, you will!' And she had. I made Death's triumph my own.18

Thus, it is possible for Fowlie to speak of "the attraction toward death and self-destruction which is apparent in much of surrealist art."19

Turning to a brief examination of characterization as a source of theme, we may keep in mind Fowlie's statement that the new hero for the surrealists is the unadaptable man, the wanderer or the dreamer or the perpetrator of illogical action. He represents what psychologists would define as the schizoid temperament. His method, and even his way of life, is introspection.20

It must be taken into account, however, that in Balso Snell, each of the main characters is only an extension of one aspect of Balso the poet's personality, revealed only in a dream state, unknown to him the rest of the time. John Gilson perhaps best illustrates the split-personality, the divided ego, when

18 Ibid., 43.
19 Fowlie, Age of Surrealism, 24.
20 Ibid., 18.
he says: "Sometimes my name is Raskolnikov, sometimes it is Iago. I never
was, and never shall be, plain John Gilson. . . ." 21 There is a need for him
to be someone else, to deceive the other half of his personality. Then, too,
he suffers from an anxiety neurosis, an irritation of the spirit: "If I could
only turn irritation into pain; could push the whole thing into insanity and so
escape." 22 Later, knowing that he must take interest in something outside him-
self, he plans and carries out the murder of an idiot: "I killed the idiot
Adolph because he disturbed my sense of balance." 23

Beagle Darwin also suffers from a defeat of the spirit, a contempo-
rary Hamletism. On hearing the news of Janey Davenport's death (whom he had
seduced) Beagle says, "I will feign madness; for if they discover what lies in
my heart, they will lynch me." 24 He goes on to explain "a tragedy that is not
alone Janey's, but one that is the tragedy of all of us." 25 It is our very
humanity that defeats us, because "it is necessary for us to compete . . . with
Dionysius the thrice born, Christ son of God. . . ." 26 On perceiving the truth
of his observations:

Up into his giant heart there welled a profound feeling of love for hu-
manity. He choked with emotion as he realized the truth of his observa-
tions. Terrible indeed was the competition in which his hearers spent

21 West, Balso Snell, 29.
22 Ibid., 46.
23 Ibid., 36.
24 Ibid., 80.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 81.
their lives; a competition that demanded their being more than animals.\textsuperscript{27} And as Janey Davenport says of Beagle, "[h]e is sad, but with a nasty sadness ... all jeers for his own sadness. 'It's the war. Everybody is sad nowadays. Great stuff, pessimism.'\textsuperscript{28}

But even Janey Davenport, a parody of the conventional "wronged" woman, suffers a malaise of the soul (as well as of the body), though she is no intellectual, as are John Gilson and Beagle Darwin: "I want to retain some portion of myself unlaughed at. There is something in me that I won't laugh at. I won't. I'll laugh at the outside world all he [Beagle] wants me to, but I won't, I don't want to laugh at my inner world."\textsuperscript{29} The other characters in the novel appear only briefly, and then are gone, such as the guide (unnamed), Malony the Areopagite, and Miss McGeeney, who embodies the futility of scholarship.

West's conception of his characters may be termed grotesque. They are never fully drawn, nor do we ever come to know a great deal about them; yet neither are they types in the conventional sense, because it is unlikely that we have met them anywhere else. Rather, they serve to illustrate a humanity that is trapped in a world without meaning or hope, and they take on all the qualities of diseased animals. For example, West describes a crowd at Carnegie Hall:

The lobby was crowded with the many beautiful girl-cripples who congregate

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 85.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 65.
there because Art is their only solace, most men looking upon their strange forms with distaste. But it was otherwise with Balse Snell. He likened their disarranged hips, their short legs, their humps, their splay feet, their wall eyes, to ornament. Their strange foreshortenings, hanging heads, bulging spinesacks, were a delight, for he had ever preferred the imperfect, knowing well the plainness, the niceness of perfection. 30

Or, again, take West's description of the idiot, Adolph:

He was a fat, pink and grey pig of a man, and stank of stale tobacco, dry perspiration, clothing mold, and oatmeal soap. He did not have a skull on the top of his neck, only a face; his head was all face—a face without side, back or top like a monk. . . . His neck was smooth, fat, and covered all over with tiny blue veins like a piece of cheap marble. His Adam's apple was very large and looked as though it might be a soft tumor in his throat. When he swallowed, his neck bulged out and he made a sound like a miniature toilet being flushed. 31

The key to West's conception of his characters lies in the statement that the competition in which men spend their lives, competition with Dionysius the thrice born, Christ, or any ideal "demanded their being more than animals." 32 Thus, the tragedy lies in man's own humanity, in the fact that his ideals and aspirations force him toward goals which can never be realized. These ideals and aspirations are only illusions, which fade away before man can touch them, while the real world is meaningless and devoid of hope. Hence a frustration so great and deep sets in that these characters take on all the symptoms of a dog that is systematically being driven insane by electrical shocks. They are indeed sick, for they have suffered a profound dislocation of the spirit, and realization of their humanity is forever denied them. Life has played a bitter trick in giving them the ideals of gods and the humanity of men.

30 Ibid., 60-61.
31 Ibid., 33-34.
32 Ibid., 85.
The setting of a novel may also help us to arrive at an understanding of the theme. Perhaps Julian Shapiro was correct in claiming that Balso Snell was a trick on the critics, for what is the meaning of the Trojan Horse, within which the action of the novel takes place, if it is not that of a deceitful device to gain entrance into that which by other means one cannot do? But it goes a little deeper than that. Such a setting is particularly appropriate for a fantasy in which the dream life is to be explored. It lends the novel a nightmarish quality that could have come directly out of a Max Ernst painting. And this horse is not just one of the common variety, but is derived from one of the most powerful legends in Western history. To modern man, with his acute sense of the futility of war, the Trojan debacle must, aside from its literary associations, seem indeed meaningless: two mighty nations engaged in an endless struggle over a mere woman! West is indicating that life without meaning is not merely confined to the modern world, our world has not suddenly overnight lost something that it once possessed, but that life itself, in all ages of history, is chaotic, futile, absurd. And it is significant that Balso never finds his way out of the horse, for there is really no escape from a meaningless universe. Thus, West made subtle and ingenious use of an ageless symbol to point his theme.

Although some idea of West's style has already been seen in the previous passages that have been quoted, we may briefly examine style here to see if it can shed any light on the theme of Balso Snell. Perhaps more than any other single element, style determines the tone, the feeling, the mood of a

novel. And if Balso Snell the dominant tone is one of frenzied despair, of nervous desperation; this tone or mood parallels that of the story—the search for meaning in a life that is devoid of meaning. The closing lines of the book may serve to illustrate this nervousness and sense of hasty desperation:

An army moved in his [Balso's] body, an eager Army of hurrying sensations. These sensations marched at first methodically and then hysterically, but always with precision. The army of his body commenced a long intricate drill, a long involved ceremony. A ceremony whose ritual unwound and maneuvered itself with the confidence and training of chemicals acting under the stimulus of a catalytic agent.

His body screamed and shouted as it marched and uncoiled; then, with one heaving shout of triumph, it fell back quiet.

The army that a moment before had been thundering in his body retreated slowly—victorious, relieved.34

Another aspect of West's style is the heightened poetic quality it achieves through the odd juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory images: "The hot sun of Calvary burnt the flesh beneath Christ's upturned arm, making the petal-like skin shrivel until it looked like the much-shaven armpit of an old actress."35 The fundamental horror of the crucifixion comes through to us all the more because of the sharp contrast between the two images. Or, again, to the cripple Jancy Davenport, Balso says: "For me, your sores are like flowers: the new, pink, bud-like ones, the full, rose-ripe ones, the sweet, seed-bearing ones. I shall cherish them all."36 And death is "like putting on a wet bathing suit—shivery."37 These striking images and poetic flashes are characteristic and

34 West, Balso Snell, 95.
36 Ibid., 61.
37 Ibid., 69.
frequent. But there is a reason for the apparent contradictory images. The close juxtaposition of incongruous things may enable us to perceive their true dimensions, may give us a deeper insight into something that we have begun to take for granted, to accept unquestioningly. It may, in other words, help us to perceive reality from illusion, to make us realize that while the world may seem to possess meaning, order, and hope, it is really meaningless and futile. Thus all religious images, which symbolize hope and meaning, must be contrasted with images that represent the world as it is, chaotic, futile, and grotesque.

It may be advantageous, at this point, to attempt a summary of the theme of Balso Snell. To the present writer’s knowledge, no critic has directly attempted to state the theme of the book. Alan Ross said, “Balso Snell is a smear in the bathroom mirror at art--cocksure, contemptuous, well-informed and rejecting openly the very thing that it was straining for.” But Ross never tells us what that something was the book “was straining for.” Again, while admitting that the book was the clue to all West’s later work, Ross claims that “it is the one book West wrote that has nothing to say.” This kind of hedging and avoidance of the problem is characteristic. From the previous examination of symbolism, characterization, setting, and style, the theme of the novel can be stated in this way: man’s search for meaning in life, and his place in relation to that life, is bound to prove futile, for

38 Cf. the song on page 26, which juxtaposed religious imagery with circle imagery symbolizing futility.


40 Ibid., 289.
life itself is devoid of meaning. Meaning, order, intelligibility are at best illusions, foisted on man by that part of his nature which strives for the ideal; but man's own humanity, his human condition, defeats his higher aspirations, forcing him to accept the harsh and sordid aspects of finite reality. He cannot rise above himself, and in that lies his tragedy, a tragedy so deep and terrible that he can only laugh the bitter laugh. This is indeed a pessimistic view of man and life, but, then, even Shakespeare had his darker moments:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.  

Turning to the structure of the novel, we may consider it first in terms of plot. The book is designed in the following way: Chapter I concerns Balso and his guide; Chapter II introduces Maloney the Areopagite to Balso; Chapters III and IV bring in John Gilson and his Crine Journal; Chapter V concerns Balso's meeting with Miss McGeeney; Chapter VI concerns Balso's dream of Jenny Davenport and Beagle Darwin; Chapter VII relates Balso's awakening from his dream and finding McGeeney, who turns out to be Mary, Balso's old sweetheart, whom Balso then seduces.

If we conceive of plot as being a narrative of events in which the

---


42 To avoid repetition, the reader may refer to page 22 for a complete summary of the plot.
emphasis is upon causality rather than upon mere time sequence. Then Balso Snell does not possess a plot in the usual sense. Instead, the book is built around the fantastic wanderings of the poet in the insides of the Trojan horse. Thus, we have here a central character who undergoes a series of adventures, unrelated to each other, which consist of meeting a variety of odd people who relate their stories to him. It becomes, in nightmarish terms, a modern odyssey, a journey through the ego (which is the poet's "world") that provides the author with opportunities to examine himself and his world. Thus, it is episodic and loose, consisting of a series of intensely focused scenes bound together solely by the fact that a single person in the story undergoes them all. There is a close affinity here to the older, picaresque novel, where we also have a single hero who undergoes a series of adventures. The result there, as here, is not so much a study of character as such, but rather a panoramic view of society and life at many various stages and levels. But in Balso Snell such a form is not imposed externally, as in many of the picaresque novels, but stems from the nature of the material itself. Since the novel is a fantasy in the form of a dream, we cannot ask that it follow the cause-and-effect method which we demand in the more realistic novel. Thus, the very nature of the material makes a virtue rather than a fault of the looseness and episodic tendency of the incidents. And the story does not end in the sense of the ordinary novel, but breaks off, like a dream, after a particularly significant moment.

The point of view, or angle from which the story is told, also helps to determine the structure and to point the theme. In this story the point of

43 Forster, Aspects of the Novel, 130.
view is that of Balso Snell, who undergoes the various adventures. Yet, he does not pretend to interpret these adventures for us, but rather, acts as a unifying factor for them. Though the author tells the story in the third person, he sees the story from the point of view of Balso Snell, and we, in turn, see the story as though we were perched slightly above and to one side of Balso. We see him meet the various characters he encounters, overhear their conversations, and peer over their shoulders to read various letters they have written. These letters and documents, such as John Gilson's diary, and Crime Journal, and Janey Davenport's letters from Beagle Darwin, which Balso Snell reads to himself enable the author to refrain from breaking his point of view and entering the minds of the other characters. Although a third person point of view is used, the effect of these letters and documents on the reader is that of the first person, as though John Gilson, for example, were telling his own story; we do not immediately realize that it is Balso Snell reading these things to himself and to us. Thus, the author is able to shift his limited omniscience, at certain points in the story, from one character to another without our being aware of it. To clarify the method, we can perhaps compare it to the point of view of a camera located behind and above Balso Snell. We see what he sees, we hear what he hears (and occasionally his own thoughts), we read the letters and documents as he reads them. The method is dramatic and intensely visual.

In terms of structure, then, Balso Snell must figure in every incident; no character can appear unless he is present in one way or another; everything must be in terms of its relation to him (the exception, of course,
is the letters and diary, which contain stories of John Gilson or Jancy and Beagle, but since Balso reads them he is in effect on the scene in terms of their significance to him. Thus, the structural significance of the point of view in the novel is that it determines the character upon which the various incidents are to have their impact and meaning. Balso Snell must be present in every stage of the action, because it is only upon him that the action can have any meaningful effect. The effect of the various frustrated characters and their pitiful stories on Balso Snell illustrates the fact that his search for meaning in life is bound to prove futile. The characters and their stories are life, and it is indeed hopeless.

Pattern, our final aspect of structure, enables us to get a complete view of the design of the novel by stepping away from it, by getting a bird's-eye view of the whole from beginning to end. While the idea of pattern implies repetition, it does not mean that an actual incident must be repeated over and over. Rather, although various different incidents are employed, each in its own way contributes to the meaning of the book as a whole. The motto of the book, "After all, my dear fellow, life, Anaxagoras has said, is a journey," indicates the pattern of the story. In his search for the meaning of life, Balso Snell undertakes a journey filled with various adventures. Each character that he meets, each story he hears, illustrates the fact that life is useless, whether it is Haloney the Areopagite, John Gilson, Jenny Davenport, or Miss McGeeney and her useless biography of Perkins, who wrote the biography of

\[44\] Cf. Chapter I, n. 82.

\[45\] West, Balso Snell, Frontispiece motto.
the man who wrote the biography of Boswell. Thus, we can say that the overall pattern of the book is that of a search or journey through life (in the form of a dream) on the part of a central hero who encounters various characters and their stories illustrating aspects of the fact that life is a chaos, without meaning, and devoid of hope. It is a journey that is indeed through the dark night of the soul.
CHAPTER III

MISS LONELYHEARTS

Two years after The Dream Life of Balso Snell was published, West's second novel, Miss Lonelyhearts (1933), appeared. Although Balso Snell had alienated many of the reviewers, Miss Lonelyhearts was greeted with considerable enthusiasm. One critic said:

the really unusual novel of the recent past is a thin little book called 'Miss Lonelyhearts,' by Nathanael West, . . . superficially a picture of the psychological torments of a reporter who conducts a column of advice to the distressed, actually a kind of modernized, faithless 'Pilgrim's Progress.' . . . It is a picture of a man suffering the torments of Hell, surrounded by demons he doesn't recognize as demons. 1

Then, too, the quality of West's unique humor was beginning to make its mark on the minds of the reviewers:

The novel is ostensibly a piece of humorous fiction. But do not class it with the clever wisecracking little volumes that emerge seasonally from the presses to carry on the tradition of bald American exaggeration. It is ostensibly satiric. But its irony has roots to it. The wit is hard, brilliant and very funny. 2

The book was not distinctly American, in its humor or in other aspects, as Edmund Wilson has pointed out in saying of West:

Beginning with The Dream Life of Balso Snell, a not very successful exercise in this vein of phantasmagoria [the fantasy of writers derived from

1 T. S. Matthews, New Outlook, CIXII, July, 1933, 58.
Hir;ibaud and Lautréamont, he produced, after many revisions, an excellent short novel called *Miss Lonelyhearts*. This story... had a poetic-philosophic point of view and a polish and feeling for phrase which made it seem rather European than American. Thus, if Balso Snell showed evidence of a talent that had not yet realized itself, *Miss Lonelyhearts* was to prove that the talent had matured, that West could produce a solid as well as a brilliant work. As Alan Ross said fifteen years after the book appeared:

*Miss Lonelyhearts*... is the formalizing and objectifying of the rebellious vision of Balso Snell. West has accepted the fact that an audience exists, and that Art is Communication. Preoccupation with the self has given way to an identification with society, and the stone that Balso Snell dropped into the middle of the pond has now reached the outer bank.

Before beginning our examination of symbolism for the light it may shed upon theme, a summary of the plot of *Miss Lonelyhearts* may be given. Miss Lonelyhearts, a young reporter who conducts an agony column, begins to fear that the advice he gives in answer to the desperate letters he receives is compounded of lies and false hopes. In order to forget his futile replies to the pitiful letters he receives, he flees to Delehanty's, a speakeasy, where he meets his editor, Shrike, who constantly ridicules his role as Miss Lonelyhearts, the secular priest of the modern world. Miss Farkes, a friend of Shrike's, arrives and a discussion centering around religion ensues; while lecturing on the soul Shrike attempts to seduce his companion. Upon leaving

---

3 Wilson, *Boys in Back Room*, 67-68.


5 The length of the present summary is necessary; it contains all the essential elements of the plot so that it can be referred to when the reader comes upon the discussion of the structure of the novel.
the bar Miss Lonelyhearts returns home, where he reads Father Zossima's plea for universal love in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Falling asleep, the reporter dreams of an incident at college which involved the slaughtering of a lamb.

Feeling distraught upon awakening from his dream, Miss Lonelyhearts flees to his girl's apartment for solace, but, nervous and irritable, he only succeeds in insulting her; he realizes his proposed marriage with her will solve none of his troubles. Returning to Delehanty's, he overhears his friends imitate Shrike by ridiculing his Christ complex. Half-drunk, Miss Lonelyhearts and a friend, Ned Gates, walk in the park, where they encounter an old man. After baiting the old man they retire to a bar to buy him a drink, but there Miss Lonelyhearts' pity turns to violence, and in twisting the old man's arm he is getting revenge on all his wretched readers with their miserable letters. Awakening the next day with a hangover, Miss Lonelyhearts decides to turn to sex for relief of his troubles, as he has tried other remedies, all of which had failed. At odds with Betty, he calls upon Mrs. Shrike, his editor's wife. After dining and dancing, the reporter attempts to seduce her, but she is afraid her husband will find them out and resists. The next day Miss Lonelyhearts receives a letter from Fay Doyle, a reader who wishes to tell him her troubles in person. Meeting her in the park, Miss Lonelyhearts goes with Fay to her apartment, where she tells him of her disgust at being married to a cripple. Returning home, Miss Lonelyhearts becomes ill and is visited by Betty, who urges him to give up his job, the source of all his troubles. Shrike enters and proceeds to show how all paths of escape are cut off for Miss Lonelyhearts—all, that is, except the escape to Christ. Recuperating
somewhat, the reporter and Betty flee to the country for a rest, where Miss Lonelyhearts makes love to her for the first time. Returning home, he realizes his plan to marry Betty is no solution to his problem, and, fearing his Christ obsession is vanity, he can no longer even summon false hopes to give to his readers. One day, meeting Peter Doyle (Fay's husband) in Delehanty's, Miss Lonelyhearts is invited to supper by the cripple. Fay, flirting with the reporter over the supper table, causes a fight between the cripple and Miss Lonelyhearts; after Peter Doyle leaves the house, his wife attempts to seduce Miss Lonelyhearts, who fights her off savagely.

The next day Miss Lonelyhearts becomes ill again, only to have his rest broken by Shrike, who forces him to attend a party for which Shrike has made up a game: "Everyman His Own Miss Lonelyhearts." The game concerns each guest's attempts to answer one of the letters Miss Lonelyhearts receives daily; from their replies the reporter is supposed to diagnose the guests' ills and offer advice. Given a letter by Shrike, Miss Lonelyhearts unconcernedly drops it when he sees Betty leaving the party and attempts to follow her; Shrike discovers the letter and reads it to his guests. The letter is a threat from Peter Doyle, whose wife claims Miss Lonelyhearts attacked her. After leaving the party Miss Lonelyhearts talks to Betty, promising he will quit his job; she says that she is pregnant, and so the reporter pleads with her to marry him, even though he knows such a solution to their problems is only illusory.

The next day Miss Lonelyhearts again takes to his bed, this time achieving his identification with Christ; but his contemplation is broken by the sound of the bell, and, opening the door, he perceives Peter Doyle, the cripple, coming up
the stairs with a package under his arm. Believing the cripple to be a sign
sent by Christ so he can work a miracle and make him whole, Miss Lonelyhearts
rushes to greet Doyle with outspread arms; but Doyle, fearful of being at-
tacked, tries to flee, only to see his escape cut off by Betty coming up the
stairs. While grappling with Miss Lonelyhearts, Doyle attempts to get rid of
the package he is carrying, but the gun inside the package goes off, and Miss
Lonelyhearts falls, dragging the cripple with him the rest of the way down
the stairs.

Turning to an examination of symbolism as a source of theme, the
reader may keep in mind Graham Greene's injunction when he says:

Every creative writer worth our consideration, every writer who can
be called in the wide eighteenth-century use of the term a poet, is a
victim: a man given over to an obsession.
The obsession is perhaps most easily detected in the symbols an
author uses, . . . 6

And in Miss Lonelyhearts, as well as in West's other novels, the plot itself
is certainly one of the major symbols. Each of the incidents, from Miss
Lonelyhearts' initial fear that the advice he gives is merely sugar coating
for a bitter pill, to his final ironic death at the hands of the cripple,
testifies to the futility of human endeavor in a meaningless universe. In
Chapter III, 7 "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Lamb," for example, after reading
Father Zossina's plea for universal love of all creatures, Miss Lonelyhearts
dreams of an incident at college when, with his friends, he attempted to

6 Graham Greene, The Lost Childhood and Other Essays, New York,
1952, 79.

7 I have numbered the chapters for the sake of convenience; they
are not numbered in the novel.
sacrifice a lamb, only to have the ceremony turned into a bloody orgy, inflicting untold misery on the poor animal. Even in Chapter IX, "Miss Lonelyhearts in the Country," which is perhaps the most quiet and relaxed chapter in the book, a kind of idyllic pastoral, only a false hope exists. The chapter's function is to serve as a contrast for the other chapters in presenting a normal, hopeful life of peace in prospect for Betty and the young reporter; their love-making is not sordid, as in Miss Lonelyhearts' affairs with Fay Doyle and Mrs. Shrike, but more like the innocent play of amoral primitives. No sooner does Miss Lonelyhearts return to his job in Chapter X, however, than he realizes that his affair with Betty and the plans they have made for the future offer no real solution to his problem. And it is the same with Miss Lonelyhearts' passion for Christ, which can only prove equally futile in the long run. Perhaps the final scene in Chapter XV, "Miss Lonelyhearts Has a Religious Experience," will serve best as an example of the futility which awaits man in his search for meaning in life. As Doyle ascends the stairs, Miss Lonelyhearts believes:

God had sent him so that Miss Lonelyhearts could perform a miracle and be certain of his conversion. It was a sign. He would embrace the cripple and the cripple would be made whole.

He rushed down the stairs to meet Doyle with his arms spread for the miracle.

Doyle was carrying something wrapped in a newspaper. When he saw Miss Lonelyhearts, he put his hand inside the package and stopped. He shouted some kind of warning, but Miss Lonelyhearts continued his charge. He did not understand the cripple's shout and heard it as a cry for help from Desperate, Harold S., Catholic-mother, Broken-hearted, Broad-shoulders, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband. He was running to succor them with love.

The cripple turned to escape, but he was too slow and Miss Lonelyhearts caught him.

While they were struggling, Betty came in through the street door. She called to them to stop and started up the stairs. The cripple saw
her cutting off his escape and tried to get rid of the package. He pulled
his hand out. The gun inside the package exploded and Miss Lonelyhearts
fell, dragging the cripple with him. They both rolled part of the way
down the stairs.

As Alan Ross commented, the "Final scene . . . culminates in a tragedy of mis-
comprehension which symbolizes terrifyingly and finally the unreality of the
Christian myth."9 Thus, even the religious experience, for West, is no way
out of life's terrible chaos: Miss Lonelyhearts' love for the cripple is in-
terpreted as an attempt to do injury to him; the gun the cripple is carrying
goes off when Doyle attempts to throw it away; Betty's attempts to stop the
right only lead to further disaster. Man is somehow involved in a gigantic
irony of fate, for in the very event that seems to fulfill Miss Lonelyhearts'
desire for identification with Christ there lies only dark, potential defeat;
man's actions, no matter what their motives, are bound to prove futile and
hopeless, for he is doomed to live in a meaningless universe which is governed
by blind chance and devoid of order. As Wallace Fowlie has said:

In the 19th century the romantic hero was always judging the order of his
heart, but in the 20th century the surrealist hero judges the order of
his adventures. The word adventure . . . explains a valid aspect of sur-
realism. It is experience without design, a hazardous enterprise of un-
certain issue, a peril or a jeopardizing of oneself.10

Thus, man's search for meaning in his journey through life, begun in the an-
cient Trojan horse of Baldo Snell, has continued into the world of twentieth-
century America without hope or promise of an intelligible goal.

8 Nathanael West, Miss Lonelyhearts, The New Classics, New York,
[1946] 141-142.
9 Ross, "Novelist-Philosophers," Horizon, XVIII, 290-291.
10 Fowlie, Age of Surrealism, 100.
The letters which Miss Lonelyhearts receives daily concretely symbolize the futility of his readers' lives, and, in a larger sense, the life of all mankind. For one reviewer "the tragic letters seeking help and advice are human documents and will sustain the burdens of the underlying meaning." It is true that the letters contain a kind of savage humor, but they are also missives of suffering and anguish, as, for example, when Sick-of-it-all writes:

"I was operated on twice and my husband promised no more children on the doctors advice as he said I might die . . . and now I am going to have a baby and I don't think I can stand it my kidneys hurt so much. I am so sick and scared because I can't have an abortion on account of being a catholic and my husband so religious. I cry all the time it hurts so much and I don't know what to do."

Then there is Desperate, who

"I would like to have boy friends like the other girls and go out on Saturday nights, but no boy will take me because I was born without a nose. . . .

What did I do to deserve such a terrible bad fate? Even if I did do some bad things I didn't do any before I was a year old and I was born this way. I asked Papa and he says he doesn't know, but that maybe I did something in the other world before I was born or that maybe I was being punished for his sins. I don't believe that because he is a very nice man. Ought I commit suicide?"

There can be no specific answer to these problems that will help to give meaning to the personal existence of the sufferers, for the purpose of suffering is unfathomable on a human level. But it is perhaps Peter Doyle's letter that best expresses the problem of the meaning of suffering in life. It reads in part:

12. Ibid., Miss Lonelyhearts, 3.
13. Ibid., 4.
I am a cripple 44 years of age which I have been all my life and I have never let myself get blue until lately when I have been feeling lousy all the time on account of not getting anywhere and asking myself what it is all for. . . . What I want to no is what is it all for my pulling my god damned leg along the streets and down in stinking cellars [he reads gas meters] with it all the time hurting fit to burst so that near quitting time I am crazy with pain and when I get home all I hear is money which ain't no home for a man like me. What I want to no is what in hell is the use day after day with a foot like mine when you have to go around pulling and scrambling for a lousy three squares with a toothache in it that comes from using the foot so much. . . . It aint the job that I am complaining about but what I want to no is what is the whole stinking business for.

In the Western world there is no answer to these inarticulate pleas for help and guidance, for man moves in inscrutable darkness. But some answer, some way out of the dilemma, must be sought, and so, for Miss Lonelyhearts "Christ was the answer, but, if he did not want to get sick, he had to stay away from the Christ business."\(^\text{15}\)

The fact that life, and all it may contain, is futile is no answer to man's innate desire for meaning and order. He must, is driven, to search for something to guide him through to his human destiny. In the medieval world it was the Church and her representatives that provided man with guidance and directed his human destiny toward a supernatural, everlasting goal. But in the modern world, while retaining the terrible need for direction towards a goal that will give his life meaning, man, at least subjectively, has abolished his supernatural goal and all that it entails; for modern man the priest has become the psychiatrist, or in one form or another, the poet. In connection with the surrealist mind and the role it creates for itself, Foulie speaks of the need

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 111-112.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 6.
to consider the modern artist the secularized priest, the one who, forced by his vocation to live apart from the world, is nevertheless the profoundest conscience of the world, the most accurate recorder and interpreter of the world's problems. Thus, Miss Lonelyhearts, a young reporter who attempts to give guidance through his column and is eventually destroyed by his obsession for Christ, symbolizes the futility of religious experience as a way out of the chaos of modern life.

Miss Lonelyhearts' first experience of what was to become his obsession for Christ occurred quite early, for as "a boy in his father's church, he had discovered that something stirred in him when he shouted the name of Christ, something secret and enormously powerful. He had played with this thing, but had never allowed it to come alive." Later, in his attempts to give guidance to his wretched readers, Miss Lonelyhearts comes to realize that for them, as well as for himself, there is only one answer—Christ. "Christ is a name which has subconscious magic for him: which expresses somehow his love and pity for humanity which he can't get hold of and grip and which slips off continually into futility and oblivion." Even Shrike, though constantly ridiculing him, realizes Miss Lonelyhearts' role, saying: "The Susan Chesters, the Beatrice Fairfaxes and the Miss Lonelyhearts are the priests of twentieth-century America." And it is Shrike who composes the "prayers" which Miss

17 West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 20.
Lonelyhearts finds on his desk every morning, which only serve to deepen his sense of failure:

'Soul of Miss L, glorify me.
Body of Miss L, nourish me.
Blood of Miss L, intoxicate me.
Tears of Miss L, wash me.
Oh good Miss L, excuse my plea,
And hide me in your heart,
And defend me from mine enemies.
Help me, Miss L, help me, help me.
In saecula saeculorum. Amen.'20

In this connection Fowle, speaking of the surrealists, comments:

Blasphemy, which is a combination of the serious and the comic, is their mode. When art is somewhat dominated by the grotesque (which is always allied with blasphemy) the spirit of modern man is more at ease in considering the serious, the tragic, the religious.21

But Shrike's blasphemy and disbelief have little impact on the young reporter, for the "familiar jokes no longer had any effect on Miss Lonelyhearts. He smiled at Shrike as the saints are supposed to have smiled at those about to martyr them."22

Throughout his career Miss Lonelyhearts attempts to practice the outstanding trait of Christianity—love. The chapter in The Brothers Karamazov devoted to Father Zossima's speech becomes his guide:

'Love a man even in his sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the

20 Ibid., l.
21 Fowle, Age of Surrealism, 47.
22 West, Miss Lonelyhearts, 106.
whole world with an all embracing love.'

ultimately, of course, Miss Lonelyhearts does have his religious experience:

He was conscious of two rhythms that were slowly becoming one. When they became one, his identification with God was complete. His heart was the one heart, the heart of God. And his brain was likewise God's.

God said, 'Will you accept it, now?'

And he replied, 'I accept, I accept.'

He immediately began to plan a new life and his future conduct as Miss Lonelyhearts. He submitted drafts of his column to God and God approved them. God approved his every thought.

But the achieving of his goal, his identification with Christ, proves futile, for the next moment Miss Lonelyhearts is killed in attempting to act on his new found belief. The poet, or secularized priest, helps no one, not even himself. Thus, only death can end man's frustration, and frustration there is because man must love; the tragedy is that what he loves doesn't exist—he dies embracing a void, a nothingness. To be sure, a world without meaning, devoid of hope, is not a pleasant prospect, and Miss Lonelyhearts attempts to allay his own despair, and that of his readers, with a promise of hope:

'Life, for most of us, seems a terrible struggle of pain and heartbreak, without hope or joy. Oh, my dear readers, it only seems so. Every man, no matter how poor and humble, can teach himself to use his senses. See the cloud-flecked sky, the foam decked sea...'

But gradually he begins to see the futility of such promises:

He had gone as far as: 'Life is worth while, for it is full of dreams and peace, gentleness and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar.' But he found it impossible to continue. He could not go on finding the same joke funny thirty times a day for months

23 Ibid., 19-20.
24 Ibid., 140-141.
25 Ibid., 60-61.
with the absence of hope, despair takes over and lies like a stone in his stomach:

Suddenly tired, he sat down on a bench. If he could only throw the stone, he searched the sky for a target. But the gray sky looked as if it had been rubbed with a soiled eraser. It held no angels, flaming crosses, olive-bearing doves, wheels within wheels. Only a newspaper struggled in the air like a kite with a broken spine.

The passion for hope, even though it is eventually overcome by despair, is not the only thing that keeps Miss Lonelyhearts going in his search for meaning in the world, for he also has a rage for order. According to one critic the despair so often symbolized by the sleepless man in Hemingway's work "is the despair felt by a man who hungered for the sense of order and assurance that men seem to find in religious faith, but who cannot find grounds for his faith." Miss Lonelyhearts, too, hungers for a sense of order to relieve the despair he feels in facing a chaotic world; but in this case, it is also necessary to prevent the approaching insanity that is involved in his Christ-complex:

Miss Lonelyhearts found himself developing an almost insane sensitiveness to order. Everything had to form a pattern: the shoes under the bed, the ties in the holder, the pencils on the table. When he looked out of a window, he composed the skyline by balancing one building against another. If a bird flew across the arrangement, he closed his eyes angrily until it was gone.

26 Ibid., 2.
27 Ibid., 11.
29 West, Miss Lonelyhearts, 25.
but gradually chaos overcomes Miss Lonelyhearts, and he fled to the street, but there chaos was multiple. Broken groups of people hurried past, forming neither stars nor squares. The lamp-posts were badly spaced and the flagging was of different sizes. Nor could he do anything with the harsh clanging sound of street cars and the raw shouts of hucksters. No repeated groups of words would fit their rhythm and no scale could give them meaning.30

Upon becoming ill for a second time, the young reporter develops nightmares. Believing himself in a pawnshop, he sat in the window thinking. Man has a tropism for order. Keys in one pocket, change in another. Mandolins are tuned G D A E. The physical world has a tropism for disorder, entropy. Man against Nature ... the battle of the centuries. Keys yearn to mix with change. Mandolins strive to get out of tune. Every order has within it the germ of destruction. All order is doomed, yet the battle is worth while.31

All order is indeed doomed, for Miss Lonelyhearts sees not an orderly and rational world but a world of unmitigated suffering, death, and chaos. A state of inner tranquillity or peace cannot be achieved because he is too deeply involved in the sufferings of others. And after trying all forms of escape, and finding them useless, Miss Lonelyhearts turns, almost as much in despair as in hope, to Christ as a way out of his dilemma, only to find that the religious experience is for him the most futile escape of all.

Certainly Miss Lonelyhearts tries all other forms of escape before surrendering to the escape through Christ. For example, there is the escape offered by sex: "Although he had tried hot water, whiskey, coffee, exercise, he had completely forgotten sex. What he really needed was a woman."32 Only

30 Ibid., 26.
31 Ibid., 73-74.
32 Ibid., 45.
two women can tolerate him, however, and he had already spoiled his chances
with Betty, so Mary Shrike is his only alternative. "But the excitement re-
sumed to come. If anything he felt colder than before he had started to think
of women. It was not his line. Nevertheless, he persisted in it, out of des-
peration. . . ."33 But Miss Lonelyhearts is also troubled by the moral rami-
fications of his proposed escape, for he "sat trying to discover a moral rea-
son for not calling Mrs. Doyle. If he could only believe in Christ, then
adultery would be a sin, then everything would be simple and the letters ex-
tremely easy to answer."34 At one point, however, the sex drive begins to
curve towards the normal; he had once proposed to Betty, and

she had accepted him and they had planned their life after marriage, his
job and her gingham apron, his slippers beside the fireplace and her
ability to cook. He had avoided her since. He did not feel guilty; he
was merely annoyed at having been fooled into thinking that such a solu-
tion was possible.35

Thus, if there is no center to life, no meaning, then gratification of the
senses is all we can hope for and cherish; since sex is perhaps the most in-
tense physical pleasure man can know, it can serve as a kind of drug to pre-
vent our contemplation of a meaningless existence. But when sex begins to
transform itself into love, we have a process that begins to take on meaning
and affirmation. Such is a well known aspect of Hemingway's work,36 and the
same holds true for West, except that Miss Lonelyhearts realizes all too well

33 Ibid., 47.
34 Ibid., 63.
that love, even legitimate love, can offer no solution to his problem. The ascent towards affirmation is begun, to be sure, but only to heighten the sense of futility when the final collapse occurs.

Speaking of the theme of escape which found expression not only in novels, poems, and essays of the Twenties, but also in the personal acts of the artists themselves (everyone became an "Exile"), Malcolm Cowley describes two main tendencies, saying: "Some of the methods of escape falling under the . . . categories of Art and the Primitive were described by Nathanael West in a tender and recklessly imaginative novel that had few readers."37 The passage where Shrike bursts into Miss Lonelyhearts' room and proceeds to destroy all paths of escape may be quoted in part, since it forcefully symbolizes the futility of any solution for Miss Lonelyhearts' problem. Shrike begins by describing the escape to the soil, escape to the South Seas ("The South Seas are played out and there's little use in imitating Gauguin."38). Next he describes the escape to Hedonism:

'You dedicate your life to the pursuit of pleasure. No over-indulgence, mind you, but knowing that your body is a pleasure machine, you treat it carefully in order to get the most out of it. . . . Nor do you neglect the pleasures of the mind. You fornicate under pictures by Matisse and Picasso, you drink from Renaissance glassware, and often you spend an evening beside the fireplace with Proust and an apple.'39

However, Shrike realizes this type of escape is expensive and Miss Lonelyhearts too poor to afford it; an escape that should suit him better is Art:

38 West, Miss Lonelyhearts, 80.
39 Ibid., 80-81.
Tell them that you know that your shoes are broken and that there are pimples on your face, yes, and that you have buck teeth and a club foot, but that you don't care, for to-morrow they are playing Beethoven's last quartets in Carnegie Hall and at home you have Shakespeare's plays in one volume. 40

Shrike concludes his destruction of forms of escape by saying, "my friend, I know of course that neither the soil, nor the South Seas, nor Hedonism, nor Art, nor suicide, nor drugs, can mean anything to us .... God alone is our escape." 41 Shrike then proceeds to dictate a letter from Miss Lonelyhearts to Christ:

"Life for me is a desert empty of comfort. I cannot find pleasure in food, drink, or women—nor do the arts give me joy any longer. The Leopard of Discontent walks the streets of my city; the Lion of Discouragement crouches outside the walls of my citadel. All is desolation and a vexation of the spirit. I feel like hell. How can I believe, how can I have faith in this day and age? Is it true that the greatest scientists believe again in you?" 42

As Cowley says, however, while the word escape may carry connotations of evasion, moral disapproval, and even cowardice, in reality there can be no shame attached to fleeing from an impossible adversary. 43 And for West, as well as for Miss Lonelyhearts, life is too powerful an enemy to fight with and conquer; it is futile to grapple with the problem because there is simply no answer. Yet, paradoxically enough, man must continue his search for an intelligible goal because it is in his nature to do so, even though he is doomed to failure in the end.

40 Ibid., 82.
41 Ibid., 82-83.
42 Ibid., 83.
43 Cowley, Exiles Return, 236.
Thus we see that the symbols West uses (and we have by no means covered all of them), such as the direction of the plot, the letters as futility symbols, the uselessness of escape through religious experience, or the lack of any escape at all, are designed to point up a single fact—that the search for meaning in life is bound to prove futile, that the world itself is composed of suffering and death and chaos. This need not mean that no other life beyond the present one of suffering and death exists, but rather that man walks in darkness towards a goal he can never fully comprehend. Only man's efforts to achieve that goal are shown to be futile; the goal itself is not denied, for as one critic says, "the utilization of the symbol is an admission that the fact is more than the fact, that behind it lie other planes of meaning and reality. In a strictly logical system of materialistic monism there could be no symbolism." 144

In examining characterization for its bearing upon theme, we may note that, although André Breton showed scorn for the novel in his first surrealistic manifesto of 1924, twenty years later in a lecture at Yale he opened up the possibility of a surrealistic novel in which the characters would be endowed with exceptional powers of freedom, in which the hero would not be fixed in a formula of a given sociological setting and well-defined motivations, but in which he would illustrate the equivocal, contradictory and disturbing elements of human nature. 145

And the figure of Miss Lonelyhearts certainly illustrates disturbed human nature.


145 Fowle, Age of Surrealism, 132.
In a chapter of one of the first drafts of Miss Lonelyhearts that West published in Contact, the young reporter was named Thomas Matlock; but when the story appeared in novel form, West had depersonalized his hero by dropping his name and referring to him only as Miss Lonelyhearts. The purpose is clear, for West was not attempting to draw a fully rounded character who would be minutely analyzed for a complete understanding of him as an individual, but rather, Miss Lonelyhearts was to serve as a symbol, as representative of the problem West was attempting to illustrate. His individuality, then, is that of the "flat" character—vivid, unforgettable, but showing only limited development; and it is necessary to remember that the type of story has a great deal to do with whether the characters develop or not. Tragedy (or at least "pure" tragedy) demands fully drawn, well-developed characters; so do stories, of course, in which character is the prime aspect; on the other hand, stories in which the interest depends more upon plot, upon the significance of what happens, have less need for fully drawn characters. Comedy (and the book possesses its own peculiar brand) fits into this last category.

Although West never spends much time or space upon physical description of his characters, he does give us a visual picture of his people with a few broad strokes, such as for the figure of Miss Lonelyhearts:

Although his cheap clothes had too much style, he still looked like

46 Nathanael West, "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Lamb," Contact, I, February, 1932, 30-35.

47 The preceding discussion of Miss Lonelyhearts as a symbol of the futility of religious experience concerns this representative function. Here we are concerned with how he is drawn by West, how, paradoxically enough, his individuality relates to the theme.
the son of a Baptist minister. A beard would have become him, would ac-
cent his Old-Testament look. But even without a beard no one could fail

Throughout the book touches such as these give the background for Miss Lonely-

hearts' ascent towards Christ. His biblical aspect, the monk-like austerity

of his room, his almost puritanical attitude towards sex— all do much to en-

rich and round out his approaching Christ-obsession. Then, too, the hints of

approaching illness and instability interweave the threads of insanity and

his pseudo-mysticism, providing the necessary psychological depth and plausi-

bility for his "conversion."

According to Fowlie, from the surrealists' tendency to see man as a

sacrificial victim, a martyr, they often depicted bloody scenes and episodes

which became a kind of desperate caricature; this tendency is linked with the

loss of belief, in the modern world, in man's free will and his chances for

ultimate victory. To be sure, there are bloody scenes in Miss Lonelyhearts,
such as where he and his friends attempt to slaughter the lamb, for example:

When they had worked themselves into a frenzy, he brought the knife
down hard. The blow was inaccurate and made a flesh wound. He raised
the knife again and this time the lamb's violent struggles made him miss
altogether. The knife broke on the altar. Steve and Jud pulled the
animal's head back for him to saw at its throat, but only a small piece
of blade remained in the handle and he was unable to cut through the mat-
ted wool.

And, of course, there is the episode of Miss Lonelyhearts' death at the hands

48 West, Miss Lonelyhearts, 6-7.
49 Fowlie, Age of Surrealism, 188-189.
50 West, Miss Lonelyhearts, 23-24.
of the cripple, previously quoted. West's characters are not deprived of free will, but, rather, do not have the ability to direct their will in a way that will ensure their victory over chance and circumstance; they move in darkness, never clearly catching sight of their true destiny and are unable to pursue a course of action which will give their lives significance.

The character of Shrike, Miss Lonelyhearts' editor, is important, serving as a kind of foil to the young reporter. The name itself is indicative of many of his traits (according to any standard dictionary a shrike is a bird with a shrill cry, short wings, a long tail, and a strong hooked beak, which feeds chiefly on insects and smaller animals). His physical description is only given in a few lines:

Although his gestures were elaborate, his face was blank. He practiced a trick used much by moving-picture comedians—the dead pan. No matter how fantastic or excited his speech, he never changed his expression. Under the shining white globe of his brow, his features huddled together in a dead gray triangle.\(^{51}\)

While ridiculing Miss Lonelyhearts, Shrike nevertheless understands his problem more than any of the other characters, explaining to his guests at the party that they

1are plunging into a world of misery and suffering, peopled by creatures who are strangers to everything but disease and policemen. Harried by one, they are hurried by the other. . . .

1Pain, pain, pain, the dull sordid, gnawing chronic pain of heart and brain. The pain that only a great spiritual liniment can relieve. . . .\(^{52}\)

But Shrike, too, is frustrated and suffers from a warping and vexation of the

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 12.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 129.
spirit; however, he attempts to relieve his own distress by increasing that of 

Miss Lonelyhearts. Unable to find a means of escape for himself, he delights in puncturing the fantasies and dreams that men drag themselves with, and his own sickness forces him to view any escape as futile, for he "cannot allow others the self-deception he is deprived of."53 Shrike is perhaps the perfect embodiment of the modern intellectual—urbane, sophisticated, yet caught up in the tragedy of modern life, realizing its emptiness and futility, yet unable to believe in any alternative; desiring escape, he realizes there is no escape and can only laugh the bitter laugh.

Peter Doyle, the cripple who accidentally kills Miss Lonelyhearts, is indeed a typical Western grotesque:

The cripple had a very strange face. His eyes failed to balance; his mouth was not under his nose; his forehead was square and bony; and his round chin was like a forehead in miniature. He looked like one of those composite photographs used by screen magazines in guessing contests.54

In addition, of course, Doyle is a cripple, and "he used a cane and dragged one of his feet behind him in a box-shaped shoe with a four-inch sole. As he hob­bled along, he made many waste motions, like those of a partially destroyed insect."55 And Miss Lonelyhearts notices that Doyle's frustration is shown in the lack of his ability to control his hands:

He watched the play of the cripple's hands. At first they conveyed nothing but excitement, then gradually they became pictorial. They lagged behind to illustrate a matter with which he was already finished, or ran

53 Ross, "Novelist-Philosophers," Horizon, XVIII, 290.
54 West, Miss Lonelyhearts, 109.
55 Ibid., 107.
ahead to illustrate something he had not yet begun to talk about. As he grew more articulate, his hands stopped trying to aid his speech and began to dart in and out of his clothing.56

Doyle, frustrated by both his natural deformity and by his wife's coldness, is representative of all the sick and broken-hearted who inhabit the Westian world.

Doyle's wife, Fay, provides the pivot around which the incidents leading up to Miss Lonelyhearts' death at the hands of the cripple revolve. She is described as having "legs like Indian clubs, breasts like balloons and a brow like a pigeon."57 Frustrated at having to marry a cripple, she only increases Miss Lonelyhearts' sense of chaos by her attempts to seduce him, by her attempts to drag him down by the same means by which she herself was ruined.

The character of Betty is a refreshing contrast to all the frustrated and broken human beings which inhabit the novel. She is the one person who, at least temporarily, can hold Miss Lonelyhearts' world together. In a fit of despair the young reporter thinks of how she had often made him feel that when she straightened his tie, she straightened much more. And he had once thought that if her world were larger, were the world, she might order it as finally as the objects on her dressing table.58

But, then, Betty represents a way out, an escape, which Miss Lonelyhearts, though painfully desiring it, cannot really accept; she is, like Art and the

56 Ibid., 110-111.
57 Ibid., 65.
58 Ibid., 26.
South Seas, merely a temporary relief from a pressing problem. And Betty, too, is eventually dragged down into the nether world of West's grotesques, for when Miss Lonelyhearts is killed her hope of a normal life and a legitimate child are also destroyed; in the distance one can see her writing the same sort of pitiful letters which the young reporter received daily.

The crowds of nameless people lurking in the background of the novel like a dark cloud remind one of a glimpse into Dante's inferno. Returning from the idyllic countryside, while traveling through the Bronx slums, Miss Lonelyhearts sees groups of people moving through the streets with a dream-like violence. As he looked at their broken hands and torn mouths he was overwhelmed by the desire to help them.

He saw a man who appeared to be on the verge of death stagger into a theater that was showing a picture called Blonde Beauty. He saw a ragged woman with an enormous goiter pick a love story magazine out of a garbage can and seem very excited by her find.59

Thus not only individuals, such as Doyle, Fay, or Betty, are doomed to a meaningless existence, but all humanity is hopelessly trapped in a chaotic universe.

One of the most disturbing aspects of West's treatment of his characters is the violence which they display at the slightest provocation, or even without provocation. And West himself, while working for Contact, once commented on the violence permeating so much of modern literature by asking,

Is there any meaning in the fact that almost every manuscript we receive has violence for its core? They come to us from every state in the Union, from every type of environment, yet their highest common denominator is violence. . . .

In America violence is idiomatic. Read our newspapers. To make the

59 Ibid., 93-94.
front page a murderer has to use his imagination, he also has to use a particularly hideous instrument! ... 
And how must the American writer handle violence? 

What is melodramatic in European writing is not necessarily so in American writing. For a European writer to make violence real, he has to do a great deal of careful psychology and sociology. He often needs three hundred pages to motivate one little murder. But not so the American writer. His audience has been prepared and is neither surprised nor shocked if he omits artistic excuses for familiar events. When he reads a little book with eight or ten murders in it, he does not necessarily condemn the book as melodramatic. He is far from the Ancient Greeks, and still further from those people who need the naturalism of Zola or the realism of Flaubert to make writing seem 'artistically true'.

For West, however, there is unmotivated violence because of the misunderstanding which exists in this world. With frayed nerves and anguished souls, his characters can only resort to violence to ease their pain and frustration. For example, while in Delehanty's, Miss Lonelyhearts "stepped away from the bar and accidentally collided with a man holding a glass of beer. When he turned to beg the man's pardon, he received a punch in the mouth." As Prohock says in speaking of the novel of violence: "Time and again the hero finds himself in a predicament from which the only possible exit is the infliction of physical harm upon some other human being." And in Miss Lonelyhearts' encounter with the "clean old man" we have an attempt on the reporter's part to escape his problem by destroying the cause of it. His initial pity turning to rage at the old man's silence, Miss Lonelyhearts

60 Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Violence," Contact, I, October, 1932, 132-133.
61 West, Miss Lonelyhearts, 37-38.
took his arm and twisted it. Gates tried to turn him away, but he refused to let go. He was twisting the arm of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent. He was twisting the arm of Desperate, Broken-hearted, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband.

The old man began to scream. Somebody hit Miss Lonelyhearts from behind with a chair. 63

Throughout the novel the violence is ever present. Trying to avoid Fay Doyle's advances, Miss Lonelyhearts "struck out blindly and hit her in the face. She screamed and he hit her again and again. He kept hitting her until she stopped trying to hold him, then he ran out of the house." 64 Significantly enough, according to Frohock, one "does not look in the novel of violence for 'rounded' or 'three-dimensional' figures...." 65 And Alan Ross was correct when he commented:

already in this book certain Westisms that remain constant in all four books, begin to emerge. Perhaps most important is West's view of character and his treatment of it. For none of his people are seen 'in the round,' as individuals created for their own distinctiveness; nor yet are they exactly 'types' or vehicles for ideas in the Aldous Huxley sense. West uses characters as an architect uses windows—to let in light on a central character and to show him, but not offer him, escape. They exemplify modes of living that are never developed beyond the point where they become absurd; and at one point or another they all become absurd. 66

But the absurdity does not eliminate the fact that the lives which these characters lead are, if not tragic, at least pitiful, for, as one critic pointed out:

The tragic lives of his [West's] characters impress us even more power-

---

63 West, Miss Lonelyhearts, 42.
64 Ibid., 122.
65 Frohock, Novel of Violence, 9.
fully because they are made to seem stupid and comic. We may laugh with
the author at these people, but we recognize the essential seriousness
which has given his writing its impetus.67

Yet, somehow, West's work cannot really be called satire, for it is impossible
to satirize innocent weakness and suffering; and the physical violence which
these characters resort to becomes symbolic of an underlying moral violence
lurking in the heart of man when no escape from a meaningless universe is of-
tered to him. Frustration, neuroses, insanity, despair, and meaningless death
—all imply that man is somehow out of harmony with the conditions under which
he lives. Finite man's struggle towards an infinite goal, symbolized by Miss
Lonelyhearts' obsession with Christ, is doomed to failure, for the true sig-
nificance of his actions is hidden from him in impenetrable darkness.

Turning to a consideration of setting as a source of theme, we may
note that unlike the fantastic setting of Balseo Snell (the Trojan Horse), in
Miss Lonelyhearts we are immersed in American contemporary life. While the
story takes place in New York City, that fact is not too important, only repre-
sentative of modern city life in general. The signs of imminent collapse are
to be found everywhere; while examining the New York skyscrapers from a park
bench, Miss Lonelyhearts believes:

In their tons of forced rock and tortured steel, he discovered what
he thought was a clue.

Americans have dissipated their racial energy in an orgy of stone
breaking. In their few years they have broken more stones than did cen-
turies of Egyptians. And they have done their work hysterically, des-
perately, almost as if they knew that the stones would some day break
them.68

67 T. C. Wilson, Saturday Review of Literature, IX, May 13, 1933, 589.
68 West, Miss Lonelyhearts, 65.
Several of the scenes in the novel take place in that symptomatic refuge of the modern city dweller—the American bar. Since prohibition was in force when West was writing the novel, Delehanty's is a speakeasy, perhaps proving that not even the law can prevent these people from indulging in their favorite form of escape. There Miss Lonelyhearts and others can forget for a short time their sordid lives; the frustrations of the characters are here allowed to be soothed by talk and drink, giving free rein to pent-up grief. They grow loud-mouthed and violent, and afterwards remember the night before wistfully.

When Miss Lonelyhearts leaves Delehanty's he flees to his room in hope of finding peace and quiet for his raw nerves. His room is barren, almost a monk-like cell:

He lived by himself in a room that was as full of shadows as an old steel engraving. It held a bed, a table and two chairs. The walls were bare except for an ivory Christ that hung opposite the foot of the bed. He had removed the figure from the cross to which it had been fastened and had nailed it to the wall with large spikes. But the desired effect had not been obtained. Instead of writhing, the Christ remained calmly decorative.  

The sense of gloom and despair is everywhere. It is not merely city life that is tainted with the futility of life, for even in the idyllic countryside the despair breaks through: "It was very sad under the trees. Although spring was well advanced, in the deep shade there was nothing but death—rotten leaves, gray and white fungi, and over everything a funereal hush." Thus, even the setting testifies to the fact that life, wherever found, is indeed devoid of hope and joy, and it serves to counterpoint Miss Lonelyhearts' own

69 Ibid., 19.
70 Ibid., 90.
One critic, commenting on style in fiction, maintains that if the author intends to depict emotion, he must use the language of emotion, must find means to depict such deeps as flatly measured words can never plumb. In brief his work must have the heart of poetry without the mechanical form, the feeling without the figures of speech.

And Allen Tate, speaking of the Flaubertian tradition of impressionism, believes that when reading an impressionistic work we come to see that it must be read with the care that we give to reading poetry, for it is perhaps the only kind of work that can approach poetry in its completeness, in its specific and definite use of language to create an emotion within the reader. And in West's work it is the style which informs us of the tone, the mood, and the feeling of the novel and gives his books their outstanding success. Alan Ross recognized this stylistic excellence when, in speaking of the incidents in Miss Lonelyhearts, he said they were "contrived and painted with a superb poetic economy and detail that charges the whole book with a hallucinatory fever."

Some representative examples of West's style may be given in order to show how he could successfully pin-point the general mood and meaning of the novel. For example, Miss Lonelyhearts, fearing his Christ complex is mere vanity, can no longer even reply to his readers' letters:

After staring at the pile of letters on his desk for a long time, he looked out the window. A slow spring rain was changing the dusty tar roofs below him to shiny patent leather. The water made everything slip-

---


73 Ross, "Novelist-Philosophers," *Horizon*, XVIII, 290.
pory and he could find no support for either his eyes or his feelings. It is at once a moral comment, illustrating the instability of Miss Lonelyhearts' world, and a perfect rendering of actuality—a direct impression of life in the Flaubertian fashion. Then, too, the letters Miss Lonelyhearts receives daily are "all of them alike, stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife." And again the unusual, almost incongruous, imagery comes through in this passage:

He [Miss Lonelyhearts] fastened his eyes on the Christ that hung on the wall opposite his bed. As he stared at it, it became a bright fly, spinning with quick grace on a background of blood velvet sprinkled with tiny nerve stars.

Everything else in the room was dead—chairs, tables, pencils, clothes, books. He thought of this black world of things as a fish. And he was right, for it suddenly rose to the bright bait on the wall. It rose with a splash of music and he saw its shining silver belly.

Such an image, symbolizing a dead world without promise until it leaps towards the bait on the wall, showing hope (its shining silver belly) only when it strives towards Christ, helps to illuminate Miss Lonelyhearts' problem in a particularly vivid and striking way.

Most of the images West employs testify to the meaningless pain and suffering which rule this world, as, for example, when after becoming ill and retiring to his bed Miss Lonelyhearts dreamed he found himself in the window of a pawnshop full of fur coats, diamond rings, watches, shotguns, fishing tackle, mandolins. All these things were the paraphernalia of suffering. A tortured high light twisted on the blade of

74 West, Miss Lonelyhearts, 94.
75 Ibid., 2.
76 Ibid., 139.
a battered horn grunted with pain. 77

But there are also a few times when the novel is considerably lighter, if only for a brief moment. In Delehanty’s, where Miss Lonelyhearts finds relief from the world in drink, things are once more appealing:

Through the light-blue tobacco smoke, the mahogany bar shone like wet gold. The glasses and bottles, their high lights exploding, rang like a battery of little bells when the bartender touched them together. 78

And, again, believing his identification with Christ is now complete, Miss Lonelyhearts sees that his room was full of grace. A sweet, clean grace, not washed clean, but clean as the insides of the inner petals of a newly forced rosebud. Delight was also in the room. It was like a gentle wind, and his nerves rippled under it like small blue flowers in a pasture. 79

The poetic quality which West’s style possesses is achieved through the juxtaposition of odd, unusual, or even contradictory images. It is, then, based upon contrast, which enables us to see more clearly the true nature of a particular thing or idea or person, the contrast between what is real and what is illusory. Thus, in West’s world all chance of achieving peace, tranquillity, and a sense of the order of things is doomed; they are merely illusions, and only disorder and chaos are real. And the very size of West’s sentences, short and brief, rarely long and involved, give a sense of urgency, of almost frantic haste and nervous desperation, to the story. Rarely dwelling long on a particular action or scene, but rather, crowding action upon action, West

77 Ibid., 73.
78 Ibid., 37.
79 Ibid., 140.
increases the pace of the story to breakneck speed, as if testifying to fear of failure in the search for meaning in the world. And, as one critic has said of West:

He was a master of the portmanteau: with a few active phrases, and the Flaubertian addition of a color-word, he constructed scenes that were not only miraculous in their descriptive accuracy but also by their unashamed intensity were so far above realism as to embarrass, or frighten, the reader into acknowledging, almost against his will, the shameful and terrifying reality of reality. 60

Thus, from our preceding examination of symbolism, characterization, setting, and style, we may attempt to state the theme of Miss Lonelyhearts in the following way: man's search for meaning in life, no matter where he seeks it, whether in art, hedonism or religious experience, is bound to prove futile, for life itself is essentially devoid of all meaning. It is, of course, the same theme that prevailed in Benso Snell, but it is worked out in terms of new characters and situations; whereas the latter book conducted the search for meaning within the ego of the poet, Miss Lonelyhearts brings it into the modern world of society in the form of a young reporter who hopes that his identification with Christ will provide him with a way out of the blind alley of life. That West was here concerned with man rather than with an individual's personal problem is attested to by the fact that, while naming the young reporter Thomas Matlock in an early version of the story, 61 the author saw fit to leave him nameless in the final, published version of the novel, merely calling him Miss Lonelyhearts in order to signify the representative nature of

---

60 Gehman, "Introduction," Day of Locust, x-xi.
61 West, "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Lamb," Contact, 1, 50-85.
his plight and problem. This fact is also attested to by West's characterization, which does not attempt to portray a portrait of an individual, but only tries to make his characters specific enough for purposes of credibility. The outcome of man's search for meaning in this chaotic world is made clear by the symbols, characters, setting, and style West employs. But, as one critic has said of Miss Lonelyhearts, "if at times it skirts the bottom depths of pessimism . . . the whole book is conceived and written on a level of passionate, sustained intensity that gives it rare dignity and importance."82

Turning to a consideration of plot as one of the main elements of the structure of the novel, it is to be noted that whereas the plot of Balsom Shell consisted of a narrative of events bound together by mere time sequence, partaking of the illogic of dreams, in Miss Lonelyhearts a closer approach towards a plot unified by causality is at least begun, though never fully achieved. Though still consisting of a series of intensely focused scenes, the scenes are here somewhat more closely connected to one another. Thus each chapter may be briefly examined to determine its particular function in the story as a whole. Chapter I establishes Miss Lonelyhearts at his job at a point of crisis—he realizes his advice to his readers consists of false hopes. Chapter II develops the young reporter's relations with Shrike, contrasting Miss Lonelyhearts' belief with Shrike's scepticism. The function of Chapter III is to sketch in the background for Miss Lonelyhearts' Christ-complex, and, by juxtaposing Father Zossima's sermon on universal love and the episode of the slaughtering of the lamb, to intimate the futility of Miss Lonelyhearts'
conversion. Chapter IV deepens Miss Lonelyhearts' sense of chaos and futility and shows that his proposed marriage with Betty is no solution to his problem. With Chapter V the reporter's anxiety and frustration turns to open violence, indicating the progressive nature of his hopeless complex; and Chapter VI points up his inability to find relief by way of sense stimulation.

The first signs of complication begin with Miss Lonelyhearts' meeting with Fay Doyle in Chapter VII, a development which begins to faintly foreshadow his death at the hands of the cripple. Chapter VIII sums up Miss Lonelyhearts' problem, and the impossibility of any solution is shown in Shrike's destruction of all avenues of escape. Chapter IX serves as a contrast for the other chapters in presenting the idyllic country life which seems to offer promise of a life of peace in prospect for Betty and the young reporter; but the hope is only illusory, a trick, for in Chapter X Miss Lonelyhearts realizes his affair with Betty is just another form of escape which he cannot accept; though fearing his Christ-complex is mere vanity, he cannot forget the letters, Broad-Shoulders! in particular, which serve as tangible evidence for a trapped and forlorn humanity he is powerless to help. In Chapter XI preparation for the final catastrophe occurs with Peter Doyle's introduction to Miss Lonelyhearts and the latter's determination to love the repulsive cripple. Chapter XII provides further complication by introducing the decisive event for which Doyle will later seek revenge; Fay's flirting with Miss Lonelyhearts, and his fight with the cripple, provide Doyle with evidence for his suspicion that his wife is carrying on an affair. Chapter XIII, Shrike's party, brings the plot to trigger pitch in introducing the letter which contains Doyle's threat.
Chapter XIV shows the complication of Miss Lonelyhearts' relations with Betty, who announces she is pregnant; though disbelieving in the possibility himself, Miss Lonelyhearts attempts to console Betty by offering her marriage and a normal home; for her sake the illusion must be maintained. With Chapter XV the climax and denouement occur in one sweep, showing Miss Lonelyhearts realizing his identification with Christ, only to have the illusion shattered by Doyle's visit. Ironically enough, though Doyle intended revenge (his previous warning and the fact he was carrying the gun), he attempts to flee, and Miss Lonelyhearts is killed by accident. The fact that life is meaningless, ruled by blind chance and chaos, is symbolically confirmed. Thus, Miss Lonelyhearts finally achieves his escape, the only escape possible since he and his illusion have become one; in destroying one the other must perish also, for man and his dreams are inseparable.

In the beginning of our examination of structure we noted that the plot of Miss Lonelyhearts began the approach towards unification through causality rather than by mere time sequence, as in Balso Snell. But it is to be noted that the process is a relative one. It is true that causality partially binds the events together in Miss Lonelyhearts, but it is a mild, diluted form of causality, and it does not rule the entire novel. For example, the chapters of the novel are scenic in form, linked together by transitions such as "after leaving Delehanty's Miss Lonelyhearts returned to his room." Each scene, each incident, it is true, contributes to the overall theme of the novel in its own way, but the scenes themselves are not always causally linked. For example, it would be possible to switch the order of Chapters II and III
without seriously injuring the story; again, it would be possible to eliminate entirely Chapter VI, "Miss Lonelyhearts and Mrs. Shrike," because though pointing up the young reporter's attempt to escape through sex, this is done sufficiently in Chapter IX, "Miss Lonelyhearts in the Country." Thus, some of the chapters are not dependent upon the preceding and following ones, but can stand by themselves, relating only to the story as a whole. To be sure, those chapters occur early, since once the complication has begun it would be difficult to disturb the sequence.

In order that this point be made clear, and as an aid in viewing the action as a whole, we may briefly summarize the organization of the chapters in the following way. In the main, Chapters I-VI are concerned with exposition and development of Miss Lonelyhearts' problem; with Chapter VII, the first evidence of complication begins. Chapter VIII reverts to development, while in Chapter IX contrast, in the form of hope, is given, for a moment suspending the entire preceding action. But in Chapter X the story resumes its pessimistic direction and develops Miss Lonelyhearts' sense of despair and futility. Chapter XI further complicates the action in Miss Lonelyhearts' first meeting with Doyle, and in Chapter XII concrete evidence is given for Doyle's suspicions. Chapter XIII is the turning point for the story, preparing us for what is shortly about to happen. Chapter XIV provides a slight suspension of the approaching catastrophe so that the ending will have the impact of the unexpected. Chapter XV, of course, contains the climax and denouement in two almost inseparable events: Miss Lonelyhearts' pseudo-mystical experience and his accidental death at the hands of the cripple.
Thus, the element of causality in the novel, though certainly stronger than in Belso Snell (or in any of West's other novels, for that matter), is still relatively weak. For example, Chapter XIII is an essential scene, providing the turning point in the form of Doyle's threatening letter, yet it is probably the weakest chapter in the novel (in terms of causality), depending as it does upon the chance that Miss Lonelyhearts does not read the letter but merely drops it on the floor as he follows Betty, whose leaving the party is only a device to divert Miss Lonelyhearts' attention from the crucial letter. In a like manner the circumstances of Miss Lonelyhearts' death are only seemingly linked by causality, for though it was Doyle's intention to kill, or at least to frighten, Miss Lonelyhearts, he abandons all thoughts except those of escape when confronted by the young reporter on the stairway. By chance, Betty calls and seems to block Doyle's escape; by chance, the gun Doyle is attempting to get rid of goes off; by sheer chance the bullet finds Miss Lonelyhearts.

It is at this point that West's theme must be taken into account in any discussion of the structure of the novel. Man's search for meaning in life is futile; that life is essentially without meaning is West's theme, and it must be embodied in an appropriate and meaningful structure. The search for meaning is presented by a series of incidents in the first half of the novel; all the various roads of escape are shown to be futile. The one escape that Miss Lonelyhearts believes is possible is that of "religious experience"; but it is not until the latter half of the book that he becomes convinced of his ability to achieve it. When he does finally experience this last escape,
it, too, is shown to be meaningless. Whereas he could abandon the other forms of escape, his illusion of his identity with Christ is so complete that he must be destroyed along with it. Since blind chance and chaos are central to West's theme, the structure, the working out of the story in terms of a form, must also evidence this idea. Miss Lonelyhearts' death must not occur in an orderly and rational way, because this might in itself seem to imply a meaningful purpose to life; rather, his death must be as chaotic and purposeless and blind as life itself. A plot which depended exclusively on causality would have been out of harmony with West's theme, for causality implies purpose, order, meaning, and in Miss Lonelyhearts' world none of these things were to be found.

If the emphasis upon causality in Miss Lonelyhearts is relatively weak, we would expect the novel to be diffuse and lacking in unity of effect. Such is not the case, however, for though in reality the structure of the novel consists of a series of episodic scenes, causality entering only for purposes of plausibility, these scenes are nevertheless given a unity that is more psychological and subjective than logical and external. This unity stems from the fact that the point of view used in the novel serves as the main cohesive factor. Speaking of the hero in the novel of violence, Frohock says:

In any case, he will figure in a plot organized in such a way as first to reveal the nature of the hero's plight, then to permit his predicament to enforce upon him the necessity of some conclusive action, and finally to make the action he takes lead him to foreseen catastrophe. 83

And such, certainly, is the plot of Miss Lonelyhearts. The important aspect of the above quotation, however, is its emphasis upon the hero--"the hero's

83 Frohock, Novel of Violence, 9.
plight," "his predicament," "the action he takes." A thorough reading of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and a careful glance at its table of contents, will reveal the emphasis on the main character and his problem, for each chapter focuses exclusively on him: "Miss Lonelyhearts, Help Me, Help Me," "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Dead Pan," "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Lamb," and so on, each chapter heading beginning with "Miss Lonelyhearts" prefacing the particular incident. Every scene, every incident, every action exists only in its relation to the central figure, and when he is killed and leaves the stage, the novel abruptly ends, for there is simply nothing more to tell.

When West first published several chapters of *Miss Lonelyhearts* in *Contact*, the story was told in the first person; later, when the story appeared in the final, published version, a switch had been made from the first to the third person. It was a significant major change which did much to improve the general mood and feeling of the novel, enabling West to achieve more successfully the clarity which the story demanded. The material West was dealing with had to be given objectivity and detachment in order to make it credible. The first-person point of view, though certainly providing vividness and immediacy, contained the inherent difficulty of characterizing the narrator and enabling him to tell and explain events and mental states that were so personal as to be beyond his powers of self-analysis. For instance, you simply cannot say: "Back ing away from the bar, I collided with a man holding a glass of whiskey. I turned to beg his pardon and received a blow in the mouth. Later I found myself at a table in the back room, playing with a loose tooth."\[84\] And in

---

84 Nathanael West, "Two Chapters from *Miss Lonelyhearts,*" *Contact*, I, May, 1932, 24.
being the perpetrator instead of the victim of violence, it is more difficult
than ever to make the implications of the violence significant when it becomes
too personal. For instance, speaking of the old man, the narrator says:

When he still refused to speak, I took his arm and twisted it. Gates
tried to tear me away, but I refused to let go. I was twisting the arm of
all the sick and miserable, the broken and betrayed, the inarticulate and
impotent. The old man began to scream. Somebody hit me from behind with
a chair. 85

Then, too, the very organization of the book, a series of scenes in which the
hero would stand in and above the action, militated against the use of the
first person "I," for as Lubbock points out: 86

In the tale that is quite openly and nakedly somebody's narrative there is
this inherent weakness, that a scene of true drama is impossible. In true
drama nobody reports the scene; it appears, it is constituted by the
aspect of the occasion and the talk and the conduct of the people. When
one of the people who took part in it sets out to report the scene, there
is at once a mixture and a confusion of effects... 86

The dramatic form of Miss Lonelyhearts, the unfolding, development, and resolu-
tion of the young reporter's plight, and the significance of the story as a
whole, would have been badly blurred had the first-person-narrator point of
view been retained.

West's final choice of a third-person point of view with limited
omniscience proved to be the correct choice for the story he wanted to tell.
Though telling the story in the third person, the author sees the story from
the point of view of Miss Lonelyhearts; he can enter into Miss Lonelyhearts' mind and portray his thoughts and feelings, or he can describe his hero from

85 Ibid., 27.
86 Lubbock, Craft of Fiction, 262.
the outside. With the minor characters, of course, the author limits his knowledge to what the central character knows about them and his view of their speech and actions. In addition, much of the vividness of the first-person-narrator is retained, for we are privy to the hero's thoughts and we can see what he sees and hear what he hears. The method in this novel is similar to that used in Balso Snell, but more comprehensive and infinitely richer in its presentation of the thoughts and feelings of the central figure. Such a process as Miss Lonelyhearts' gradual obsession with Christ, viewed from the outside only, could be nothing but mere insanity; but when we are able to understand the process as he undergoes it, the texture of the whole experience is given added depth and intensity. Since Miss Lonelyhearts must figure in every incident, and since the incidents are meaningful only in relation to him, there is little chance that the significance of the story will be missed. Then, too, each of the characters only exists in relation to his bearing upon Miss Lonelyhearts and his problem, and the characters' significance in relation to the story as a whole cannot be mistaken. The reader does not worry over what will happen to Betty after Miss Lonelyhearts' death, for her problem is only significant in terms of its effects upon him. Similarly, the cripple's fate after Miss Lonelyhearts' death—will he be arrested and accused of murder?—is unimportant, because the hero's problem, which is the center of the book, has been resolved, and no further evidence of West's theme is necessary. By focusing throughout the story on Miss Lonelyhearts as point of view, the unity which the plot itself does not provide is nevertheless successfully achieved.
A final aspect of structure, that of pattern, will, of course, touch upon certain ideas previously discussed under plot and point of view; but whereas our study of plot and point of view is necessarily what might be called a "close-up" of certain aspects of structure, the pattern of the book can but be observed by viewing the story from a distance, by seeing it as a whole from start to finish. We are not here concerned with the words and phrases West employs as part of the thematic pattern of the book, but, rather, our concern is with the pattern formed by the various scenes and incidents that taken together represent the book as a whole. We have said that the overall pattern of Balso Snell took the form of a search or journey through life, in the form of a dream, on the part of a central hero who encounters various characters and their stories illustrating aspects of the fact that life is meaningless.

Basically, Miss Lonelyhearts follows the same pattern—that of a search—with the difference that hero the dream-like illogicality and looseness of Balso Snell is abandoned in favor of a form which is psychologically very tight. Instead of the fantastic world of Balso Snell, Miss Lonelyhearts deals with the modern world in all its grim reality, and the events must at least be partially bound together by causality for purposes of credibility, although the novel is internally unified through the use of a point of view which centers on a single character and his problem. Thus, the individual scenes or incidents need not be causally related to one another as long as they relate in some way to the central character and his problem. Thus each incident in which Miss Lonely-

---

37 Cf. Chapter I, n. 82.

hearts figures (and he figures in all of them), whether it be his encounter with the "Fat Thumb," the "Clean Old Man," or with the "Party Dress," illustrates an aspect of the problem of the futility of life. Wherever Miss Lonelyhearts turns in expectation of receiving a satisfactory solution to his problem, whether it be to art, sex, or religion, he finds only chaos, confusion, or death. Each character Miss Lonelyhearts meets, whether it be Shrike, Fay Doyle, Betty, or the cripple, is a living symbol of anxiety, frustration, or despair; every letter sent by his readers—Broad-shoulders, Sick-of-it-all, Desperate—testifies to a warped and wretched humanity whose pain and suffering are without meaning in a universe ruled by chaos and blind chance.

The overall pattern of the novel emerges in the form of a search, an adventure, on the part of Miss Lonelyhearts; like any search in life the process is episodic, tinged with haste and hysteria, for man lives in constant fear of being unable to find the object of his quest.

Thus it is that in speaking of Miss Lonelyhearts Robert Coates said: "In its form, and in the economy of its structure, the book is just about perfect." But by this he did not mean that the novel conformed to some abstract concept of form which demanded a tight or "well-made" plot in which the emphasis is upon causality, but rather that the structure perfectly developed and answered the problem raised by the theme, that the design of the book was not arbitrary but imposed by the material itself, that theme and structure had at last become one, for in reality the formula the futility of the search for meaning in life embraces them both.

---

39 Coates, "Introduction," Miss Lonelyhearts, xii.
CHAPTER IV

A COOL MILLION

If A Cool Million failed on the level of serious literature that will continue to survive into the future, it was nevertheless a good deal better than most of the books run off every year by the presses. As one reviewer said, "'A Cool Million' is not so successful a caricature as his [West's] earlier 'Miss Lonelyhearts,' and it can be taken in at a glance, but the glance is worth it."¹ Whatever one may think of the work as a novel, few would not enjoy its comedy, for "'A Cool Million' is a delightful parody, with satire which hits uncomfortably near the truth. It is not a profound book, but it is a funny one."² One aspect of the book was noticed by at least four different reviewers. Edmund Wilson said that it followed the pattern of Candide in its parody of Horatio Alger by reversing the American success story;³ and F. T. Marsh commented that "like 'Candide' it strikes a good many notes that sound a little too close to truth to make you altogether comfortable."⁴ But Matthews

² Review of Reviews and World's Work, XC, August, 1934, 7.
³ Wilson, Boys in Back Room, 68.
It is true that 'Candide' is an etching whose lines are both more subtle and biting than the broad strokes of 'A Cool Million,' but Mr. Nathaniel [sic] West has the heart of the matter in him. Though his satire is laid on with a thicker-than-Gallic pencil, and the drawing is more violent than firm, though his manner is more mock-Algerian than Voltairean, his picture as a whole makes the same kind of impression.5

Although the book was perhaps too broad, at least one reviewer thought that "since we have no Voltaire and would be unlikely to appreciate one, present day satire can only be written in a wisecracking style. Mr. West is heavy-handed but his book is stimulating and at times bitterly hilarious."6

In spite of its failure A Cool Million must nevertheless be taken into account in the present study, if only briefly. Our main concern here is whether or not the book shows any constant tendencies which are realized more perfectly in West's other novels. Since it is his most uncharacteristic work, it will be all the more interesting to discover its place in relation to the theme and structure of the author's other novels.

Only a brief summary of the story will be given, as detailed analysis of the novel is unnecessary for our present purposes. Lemuel Pitkin, in order to prevent foreclosure of the mortgage on his widowed mother's home, sets out into the world to make his fortune upon the advice of Shagpoke Whipple, ex-President of the United States. After being beaten while attempting to save Betty Prail from the embraces of the town bully, Lemuel proceeds to New York; while on the train he becomes involved in a confidence game which lands him in

6 Nation, CXXXIX, July 25, 1934, 112.
jail, where he loses his teeth. Released from jail, Lem meets Shagpoko Whipple, who informs him his house has been sold and his mother has disappeared. In New York, while attempting to stop a runaway team of horses, Lem loses an eye. He again encounters Shagpoko Whipple, who enlists him as a member of the National Revolutionary Party (the Leather-Shirts), which Whipple has organized. A meeting of the Leather-Shirts is attacked by the International Jewish Bankers and the communists (working together), but Lem escapes. While becoming innocently involved in a confidence game run by Elmer Hainey, Lem visits Chinatown and is kidnapped by Wu Fong, who runs a laundry as a "front" for a house of ill fame. In Wu Fong's "House of All Nations" Lem finds Betty Prail, who had been kidnapped by white slavers. Escaping from Wu Fong's, Lem is jailed for his part in the confidence game run by Elmer Hainey. Released from jail, Lem encounters Betty, who had also escaped Wu Fong's. While passing the night in Grand Central Station they meet Shagpoko Whipple, who invites them to go to California, where he plans to dig gold to finance his Leather-Shirts. After being kidnapped in Chicago, Lem and his party reach California and Whipple's gold mine. At the mine, a cowboy shoots Jake Raven, a friendly Indian; but through a misunderstanding Lem is scalped by Raven's tribe and left for dead. Lem, however, is found by Shagpoko who rushes him to a hospital, where Lem loses a leg. After various adventures with a road show, Lem and Shagpoko are separated, and Lem makes his way back to New York, where he takes a job as a stooge in a vaudeville act. While reading a paper one day, Lem finds that Whipple's Leather-Shirts have taken the South and West and are marching East. Lem is visited by an agent of the Leather-Shirts who informs him of Whipple's
proposed march on New York; as part of the revolutionary plan, Len is to make a speech in the theatre at the right moment. Donning his leather shirt, Len appears on the stage, but before he can deliver his speech he is shot by an agent of the I. J. B.'s and communists. Whipple's revolution is successful, however, and Len's birthday is made a national holiday with a parade in his honor at which the Lemuel Pitkin song is sung. Len's mother, found by Whipple, weeps; Betty Frail, now Whipple's secretary, stands by while Chappoke traces Len's life and hails his martyrdom.

Although the incidents in the story are merely farcical, taken together in the form of a plot they represent the only symbol in the book. Lemuel Pitkin's painfully ludicrous attempts to achieve fame and fortune in the tradition of Horatio Alger's heroes, Henry Ford, and John D. Rockefeller may seem on the surface to betray a "social purpose" on West's part, and many critics also accused West of attempting to satirize an economic ideal that had ceased to be taken seriously long ago. Undoubtedly, when the novel is taken alone, read independently of West's other books, such a view is inevitable, for in 1931 the shadow of the depression hovered over most of the writing of the period; and it is true that there are enough hints in A Cool Million to warrant the assumption that its author was not blind to the state of society in which he lived. But when the book is placed in its proper frame of reference alongside West's other novels, a clearer understanding of its nature can be grasped.

As in Balso Snell and Miss Lonelyhearts the plot symbolizes man's inability to arrive at any meaningful solution to life's problems; all of Len
Fitzim's idealistic and naive attempts to win success are doomed. When he tries to save Betty Prall from the lecherous embraces of the town bully, Lem is beaten and Betty is raped. In trying to stop a runaway team of horses from trampling people underfoot, Lem loses an eye and lands in jail. After attempting to prevent Jake Raven's murder at the hands of the cowboy, Lem himself is scalped by the tribe and left for dead. Each of the incidents, no matter how humorous or absurd on the surface, testifies to the fact that Lem's world is ruled by chaos and chance, that man is doomed to live in a meaningless universe. One critic commented on Lem's adventures as resembling the perils of Pauline, but if the perils of Pauline or of Fitzim symbolize anything, it is that man is at every moment in life subject to the forces of disaster and misfortune, that around every corner lurks something that seems bent upon the destruction of any hope, peace, or significance that man's life may possess.

Whereas Pauline overcomes her perils and emerges victorious, West's characters are inevitably doomed; man is no longer the victor, and no spoils remain. In reality West's satire on the American Horatio Alger success story was not primarily aimed at the economic fallacy of the capitalistic system in itself, but rather the disputable fallacy of that system coincided with West's major obsession that man's life is hopeless because of the nature of the world in which he lives. Even if West had told his story in terms of a different society with a different economic ideal, the result would have been the same, for in reality, as West saw it, man is doomed to failure, condemned to unsuccess, and there is no way out of the trap called life.

West's characters in A Cool Million are just as flat, frustrated, and violent as in his previous novels. Their purpose here, however, is strictly comic; they lack the comparative depth and richness that West was able to throw around the characters in Miss Lonelyhearts. Their names are very funny indeed, being comic strip names which somehow sum up traits and qualities of America herself: Lemuel Pitkin, Betty Frail, Tom Baxter, Wellington Mape, Ezekiel Purty, Levi Underdown, Jake Raven, Sylvanus Snodgrass, Elmer Rainey, Elisha Barnes, and Israel Satirpenny. These are names that reflect an earlier America, a more naive and innocent land in which the people are hard at work, too busy to contemplate the doom which awaits them.

Lemuel Pitkin, like West's other heroes, is doomed to defeat in spite of his innocence and good intentions. Though he resembles the heroes of Horatio Alger more than a Balsom Snell or a Miss Lonelyhearts, there are nevertheless enough hints in his characterization to make us realize that West has not completely forgotten his earlier heroes. At one point, upon being thrown into jail, Len cries out that he is innocent: "So was Christ," said Mr. Barnes with a sigh, 'and they nailed Him.' Though Len Pitkin is no Miss Lonelyhearts, he does possess the same child-like innocence of that character, though with less self-awareness. Again, echoes of Balsom Snell occur when Len prepares to give his speech on the eve of the revolution; dressed in his Leather-Shirts' uniform he appears on the stage and says, "I am a clown . . . but there are

8 Nathanael West, A Cool Million; or the Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin, Sovici-Friede, New York, 1934, 115.
times when even a clown must grow serious." Though a poor imitation of West's other heroes, Lemuel Pitkin shares with them the author's predilection for the defeat of his characters, for the doom of man.

The other characters in the novel are merely humorous mouthpieces for West's satire. Shagpoge Whipple, the self-made man, voices all the platitudes associated with American ideals:

"America," he said with great seriousness, 'is the land of opportunity. She takes care of the honest and industrious and never fails them as long as they are both. This is not a matter of opinion, it is one of faith. On the day that Americans stop believing it, on that day will America be lost."10

But in 1934 something was indeed wrong with America, and in commenting upon Wu Pong and his business, West seems to be voicing the song sung by most writers of the period. Seeing that the trend is toward home products, Wu Pong decides to turn his "House of All Nations" into a one-hundred percent American establishment:

Although in 1928 it would have been exceedingly difficult for him to have obtained the necessary girls, by 1934 things were different. Many respectable families of genuine native stock had been reduced to extreme poverty and had thrown their female children on the open market.11

But it is perhaps Chief Israel Satinpenny who best voices West's own dissatisfaction with the state of society, for after discussing the beauty of life before the advent of the white man, Chief Satinpenny says:

"In return for the loss of these things [hunting lands, etc.] we accepted the white man's civilization, syphilis and the radio, tuberculosis

---

9 Ibid., 225.
10 Ibid., 21-22.
11 Ibid., 126.
and the cinema. He accepted his civilization because he himself believed in it. But now that he has begun to doubt, why should we continue to accept. His final gift to us is doubt, a soul-corroding doubt. He rotted this land in the name of progress, and now it is he himself who is rotting. 12

Though less evident here, because of the comic-strip level on which the book is written, as in West's previous novels the characters illustrate a humanity that being trapped in a meaningless world and robbed of their illusions, take on the qualities of rabid animals. Their grotesqueness, since the book is conceived on a light and humorous level, lacks the horror of the earlier novels. Tom Baxter, for example, has "a face in which the animal seemed to predominate." 13 After crushing Len, he turns to Betty Prail: "His little pig-like eyes shone with bestiality." 14 These examples of what might be called West's "naturalism" in the drawing of character appear throughout most of his work, appearing in the description of the crowd at Carnegie Hall in Balsom Snell and in the description of Doyle in Miss Lonelyhearts, for example. 15

The physical violence displayed by the characters in Miss Lonelyhearts is also present in A Cool Million. For example, after being urged by Whipple, the crowd in a Southern town becomes a mindless mob and runs wild: "As time went on, the riot grew more general in character. Barricades were thrown up in the street. The heads of negroes were paraded on poles. A Jewish

12 Ibid., 187.
13 Ibid., 26.
14 Ibid., 30.
15 Cf. Chapter II, p. 32-33, and Chapter III, p. 63, of the present study.
The violence done to Lem Pitkin, the losing of his eye, teeth, scalp, and leg, is also indicative of the moral violence which has been done to those characters' souls. Though lacking the symbolic force present in West's earlier books, the violence in *A Cool Million* helps to indicate the warped nature of West's characters. While the merely comic aspect reigns over the characters in *A Cool Million*, their connection with West's previous people should be clear. In rather unambitious terms West has once again illustrated the fact that man is trapped in a meaningless universe, that Lemuel Pitkin's search for success could only meet with disaster and death.

Like *Tom Jones*, Lemuel Pitkin has many adventures, visits many locales and experiences life at various levels; and while one cannot properly speak of a setting for *A Cool Million*, as numerous settings ranging from Lem's home in Vermont to the theatre in which he is killed are used, the setting itself is of little significance, its importance deriving rather from its representative function. West's books, like all satire, attempt to distinguish the real from the unreal, fact from illusion; Miss Lonelyhearts must find that no escape—not even identification with Christ—is possible; Balse Snell must encounter futility to realize his place in a world of chaos. Thus, deceit and artificiality, anything that militates against a true view of things, must be rooted out. In *A Cool Million* part of the war against the unreal is carried out only by means of the plot, of Lem's failure in his attempt to follow a course of action which never had much truth in it. But certain comments,

16 West, *Cool Million*, 211.
revolving chiefly around setting, also help to carry out the war against deception and sham. The sense of the artificiality of the modern world is present in the description of the "Chamber of Horrors" show which Lam joins:

Along the walls were tables on which were displayed collections of objects whose distinction lay in the great skill with which their materials had been disguised. Paper had been made to look like wood, wood like rubber, rubber like steel, steel like cheese, cheese like glass, and finally, glass like paper.17

Again, a typical Westian touch occurs in the description of the inmates of Wu Fong's bordello and their appropriate rooms:

Mary Judkins from Jughill, Arkansas. Her walls were lined with oak puncheons chinked with mud. Her mattress was stuffed with field corn and covered by a buffalo robe. There was real dirt on her floors. She was dressed in homespun, butternut stained and wore a pair of men's boots.

Patricia Van Rus from Gramercy Park, Manhattan, New York City. Her suite was done in the style known as Biedermeier. The windows were draped with thirty yards of white velvet apiece and the chandelier in her sitting room had over eight hundred crystal pendants attached to it. She was dressed like an early 'Gibson Girl.'18

What these regional interiors signify is, of course, a kind of deceit, an illusion of what is not, just as the occupation of the inmates themselves makes for a pretense, an illusion, of love for sale. But the greatest illusion for West, the one that is likely to lead to the believer's destruction, is that of the existence of a meaningful and orderly world in which man's actions can sometimes achieve significance.

Perhaps more than any other reason, A Cool Million fails because West here abandoned one of his greatest talents--his gift for style. Alan Ross spoke for the more perceptive critics of West's work when he said of the novel:

17 Ibid., 199.

18 Ibid., 127-128.
Unfortunately it fails just where West's particularly acid and sharp talent was usually most recognizable, in its writing. For having decided on a mock-melodramatic style . . . , West sacrificed the stylistic hallmark that makes a writer's work compact and homogeneous. As it is, A Cool Million might have been written by anyone, and there is not a phrase in it with the poetic terseness of description that characterize all the other books.19

In his parody West perhaps carried the process too far, too perfectly imitated the flat, undistinguished style of Horatio Alger and the creator of the Harriwell boys. A representative passage reads as follows:

'It is with reluctance that I leave Miss Frail in the lecherous embrace of Tom Baxter to begin a new chapter, but I cannot with propriety continue my narrative beyond the point at which the bully undressed that unfortunate lady.20

Occasionally a more typically Westian touch is present, such as when Lam is approached by Elmer Hainey, who asks him,

'Can you wear this eye? If so, I'll hire you.' At this the bundle gave a few spasmodic quivers and a faint whimper. From somewhere below its peak a face appeared, then a greenish hand moved out and took the glittering eye, raising it to an empty socket in the upper part of the face.21

But this is infrequent and uncharacteristic of the novel as a whole; in the matter of style, A Cool Million is a clear departure from West's previous work. Abandoning his unusual talent for combining rare but penetrating images so that when viewed as a whole they could convey more than their parts, could add a symbolic depth to the material, West produced a novel in which the style is a parody of the kind of tale he was telling, resulting in a flat, slight story

19 Ross, "Novelist-Philosophers," Horizon, XVIII, 292.
20 West, Cool Million, 31.
21 Ibid., 105.
which never attempts to pierce beneath the surface of its materials.

In spite of its failures, however, *A Cool Million* shows certain constant tendencies which were more perfectly realized in West's other novels. The theme of *A Cool Million* is fundamentally the same as that of West's previous books—the meaningless nature of life. *Balso Snell* treated the theme in terms of the ego; *Miss Lonelyhearts* brought it into the modern social world in the form of a young reporter with a Christ complex; *A Cool Million* embodied it in the adventures of a modern Tom Jones seeking success according to the American economic ideal. But the outcome of Lemuel Pitkin's search for meaning is no more successful than that of West's other heroes, for he too has embraced an illusion.

Turning to the structure of the novel, the plot of *A Cool Million* is like that of West's previous novels in that it is built around the adventures of the central figure. As in the case of *Balso Snell*, there is a close affinity here in terms of organization with the older, picaresque novel. Lem Pitkin undergoes a series of adventures designed to demonstrate the futility of all his endeavors. The result is in reality a loose, episodic narrative of events bound together only by Lem's participation in each and every incident. To be sure, an attempt to unify the incidents through a causal relationship is attempted, as, for instance, in the interweaving of Betty Prail's adventures with those of Lem Pitkin, and in the Shagpoke revolutionary plan in which Lem becomes involved, where the latter serves as a kind of sub-plot; but the only real effect of such an attempt is a blurring of the main story line to the extent that some reviewers were not sure what the author was aiming at. F. H.
britten betrayed his uncertainty by commenting:

If he [West] means to explode our cherished native American illusions about a number of things, it's too late for that. . . . If on the other hand nascent American Fascism is the target for his satire, then his shots are much too oblique to reach their mark. 22

Lem's search for success in the American tradition is, of course, the main story line. The interweaving of the Shagpoke Whipple revolutionary scheme begins with Chapter XIII, is immediately dropped, only to occur again in Chapters XXII and XXIII, is again dropped, only to be once more picked up in Chapter XXVIII and carried to the end in Chapter XXXI. But even in these chapters the important thing is the effect of the action upon Lem Fitkin—his gradual and everlasting defeat.

One may block out the major parts of the story in the following way: the first third of the book is devoted to Lem's adventures on his way to New York; the middle portion mainly centers around Lem's futile efforts to achieve success and his encounter with Betty Frail in Wu Fong's; the last third of the novel is about equally divided between Lem's adventures in California and the Shagpoke Whipple revolutionary plan. In reality the events of the story are not bound by causality, for the various incidents could be reshuffled in a variety of ways. In its effect upon the reader, however, the story seems tightly knit together, for the same characters reappear time and time again, establishing superficial links with past and present actions and events. It is only upon reflection that the events are seen to be linked almost haphazardly, mainly through chance occurrences and accidental meetings between the

various characters. Such a minor detail as the disappearance of Lom's mother early in the novel, only to have her found by Whipple in the end (we know not how, where, or why) gives the book at least psychological unity. As in West's other novels, the plot here is built around a central character in search of some kind of success or order in the world; the events must be designed to show persistent and utter failure on the part of the hero to realize his ambition. It matters little that the plot is loose or episodic, for such a structure perhaps best illustrates the chaotic nature of the universe itself.

In Basso Snell and Miss Lonelyhearts West was content to use a limited-omniscient point of view; in A Cool Million all the stops have been pulled, and the author has shifted to a completely omniscient point of view—a technique, it may be noted, that is generally scorned by the modern writer because it is perhaps too far removed from the subject to give "a direct impression of life." One should not, according to impressionist doctrine, be aware that one is reading a book in which characters and events are contrived by an author. And in Miss Lonelyhearts it will be observed that West was an impressionist of the strictest sort. The question must be raised then as to why West uses the point of view that he does in A Cool Million, why he intrudes as author to comment on some aspect of the story, as, for example, in the beginning of Chapter IV where he says:

It is with reluctance that I leave Miss Frail in the lecherous embrace of Tom Baxter to begin a new chapter, but I cannot with propriety continue my narrative beyond the point at which the bully undressed that unfortunate lady.

However, as Miss Frail is the heroine of this romance, I would like
to use this opportunity to acquaint you with a little of her past history. 23

The reason for such a choice lies in the fact that the story is a parody, a satire of a concept which deserves ridicule by reason of its shallowness and unreality. In a sense the story is concerned with an outmoded idea (the American formula for success) and requires an outmoded way of telling it. Thus, the style is a parody of the "old fashioned" novel, with its use of such words as reluctance, lecherous, and propriety. And what we may call the story's moral point of view or limit is also that of the older novel—West had no inhibitions about undressing a woman in Balso Snell or Miss Lonelyhearts. Again, Miss Prail is referred to as "the heroine of this romance," a phrase that implies the technique and attitude of the older novel. When we consider the episodic nature of the book, a series of adventures on the part of the central hero, we are superficially reminded once more of an eighteenth-century novel, a Joseph Andrews, rather than a modern novel. Thus, the point of view, as well as other aspects of the novel, is aimed at burlesquing an idea which is in itself outmoded.

Although the point of view still concentrates on the central figure, and in this way helps to give an impression of psychological unity, the immediacy, vividness, and credulity of the limited-omniscient point of view West employed in his previous novels is lost. If Miss Lonelyhearts was at times comic, his problem was at least made real to the reader, enabling him to perceive the tragic awareness that lurked beneath the comedy. But in the case of

23 West, Cool Million, 31.
Lemuel Pitkin, despite the horrible experiences he undergoes, the absurdity remains sheer absurdity, for the reader is never given the opportunity to plunge beneath the surface of the story. He remains detached and credulous, perhaps amused but never moved by the adventures of Lemuel Pitkin.

The pattern\(^\text{24}\) of *A Cool Million* is fundamentally the same as that of *Balso Snell* and *Miss Lonelyhearts*. As in those books we have here a central hero embarking on a search for some kind of meaning in life. But in this book the incidents which go to make up the pattern as a whole are slight, flaccid, and unconvincing. In attempting to save Betty Frail, Lem is beaten by Tom Baxter; while trying to save Jake Raven, Lem himself is shot and scalped. In themselves these incidents are perhaps amusing, at least on a slapstick-comic-strip level of humor; but they lack the underlying significance of the incidents in *Miss Lonelyhearts* (which are on the surface no less absurd). Then, too, whereas each incident in *Miss Lonelyhearts* contributed to the book as a whole, in *A Cool Million* some of the incidents are exhibited for their own farcical effect, such as the numerous episodes concerning Wu Pong’s house of ill fame, which contribute only very slightly to the overall pattern of the book. The important thing about *A Cool Million*, however, is that in spite of its fundamental deficiencies, the overall pattern of the book is quite in accord with the pattern of West’s other novels. The search, the adventure, the journey through life on the part of a central hero who encounters aspects of the fact that life is meaningless, ruled by chaos and chance, is present in *A Cool Million* no less certainly than it is in *Balso Snell* or *Miss Lonelyhearts*.

\(^\text{24}\) Cf. Chapter I, n. 82.
In conclusion we may note that when placed in a frame of reference with West's other novels, it may be seen that *A Cool Million* is not in reality the "social message" or "political" book which some critics have made it out to be. Alan Ross, for example, said, "West's political satire is concerned with the way the sheeplike dependence of the mob, their malleableness, is made use of for ulterior political ends." He had in mind, of course, the Whipple-Revolution episodes, which are only a secondary thread in the narrative. And other critics and reviewers have stressed the fact that West's satire is principally concerned with ridiculing the American economic system of free enterprise. But, as we have seen, in the two main aspects of theme and structure *A Cool Million* forms a continuous connection with West's other novels. Lem's adventures merely illustrate in new terms the fact that life is futile, devoid of any chance for man's eventual victory. And this idea is worked out within the basic structural framework that prevailed in the other novels—a search on the part of a central hero. Like the other novels, the structure here is loose and episodic, knit together not through causality, but by concentration on the central figure, giving psychological rather than logical unity to the novel. If the book is West's most uncharacteristic novel, it is so by reason of its stylistic deficiencies and its lack of depth and penetration beneath the surface of its materials.

CHAPTER V

THE DAY OF THE LOCUST

In the pages of Miss Lonelyhearts West perhaps unconsciously paved the way for his fourth and final novel, The Day of the Locust (1939), by saying: "Men have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio and newspapers. Among many betrayals, this one is the worst."1 Whether or not West's residence in Hollywood as a screen writer provided the initial impetus for the writing of his last book is unimportant, for in any event "he would sooner or later have had to declare war on those fabulous, vulgar dream factories."2

Clifton Fadiman greeted The Day of the Locust by commenting: "Nathanael West, who is about the ablest of our surrealist authors, has written a book about Hollywood that has all the fascination of a nice bit of phosphorescent decay."3 In reality, however, West's novel is not about Hollywood at all, as Richard Gehman pointed out in saying, "The Day of the Locust has been called 'the best book to come out of Hollywood,' but while it certainly is that, it is not primarily a novel about that studio haven of the queer and

1 West, Miss Lonelyhearts, 94.


3 Fadiman, New Yorker, XV, 79.
It is not, then, a "Hollywood novel" in the sense that such a work as Fitzgerald's unfinished The Last Tycoon is, for example. Though Hollywood is unmistakably the setting for The Day of the Locust, it is "a different sort of Hollywood from the glamour spot Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper effusively sell to us in their gossip columns. Here we meet the human derelicts, the failures, the misfits, the tragicomic sleepwalkers in what Henry Miller calls our 'air-conditioned nightmare.'" In West's choice of Hollywood as a background for his novel there was no intention of dissecting the movie industry in itself, for the book has an essentially larger and more meaningful purpose than that. Rather, as Gehman has pointed out,

West used Hollywood as a microcosm. It was peculiarly fitted to his needs because, as other writers have since discovered, everything that is wrong with life in the United States is to be found there in rare purity, and because the unreality of the business of making pictures seemed a most proper setting for his 'half-world.'

And if West's 'half-world' gives us a glimpse into a modern inferno, a twentieth-century hell in which soulless creatures dwell without even a memory of innocence, it will perhaps provide us with a prophetic picture of a world that has at last gone beyond good and evil.

Following the procedure in the foregoing chapters, we may give a summary of the plot of The Day of the Locust before beginning our examination of symbolism. Tod Hackett, a graduate of the Yale School of Fine Arts, finishes work at the studio where he is employed as a set and costume designer. While

Walking home he carefully observes the groups of people loitering on street corners, intending to use them in a picture he plans to paint called "The Burning of Los Angeles." Arriving at his apartment Tod notices a card left in his door by Abe Musich, a truculent dwarf, and he reviews the events leading to their friendship. The next evening Tod hurries off to a party given by his friend, Claude Estee, a successful screen writer. Arriving at the party, Tod becomes disgusted with the expensive but sordid amusements in which Hollywood's successful people indulge. Too tired to protest, Tod allows himself to be carried along by the party-goers in their visit to Audrey Jennings, a former star who runs a high-class bordello.

Because of his interest in Faye Greener, a bit actress who refuses his advances because he is neither rich nor handsome, Tod often visits the Greeners, where Harry, Faye's father, relates his tragic fall from the status of an actor who aspired to play Shakespeare to that of a broken-down member of a vaudeville act. On one of these visits Tod meets Homer Simpson, Faye's latest suitor. Homer, a former bookkeeper from Iowa who has come to California for his health, became acquainted with Faye when her father had a heart attack in Homer's house while selling silver polish from door to door. Hearing Harry is ill, Tod visits the Greeners, where he is forced to listen to Faye's childish dreams for a movie career and her plans to sell stories to the studios. One day Faye introduces Tod to Earle Shoop, a drugstore cowboy, and they all go out into the country to have supper with Earle's Mexican friend, Miguel, who runs cockfights; but after supper the party is broken up by a fight between Earle and Miguel over Faye.

Visiting the Greeners one day, Tod learns of Harry's death from a
heart attack. At Harry's wake Tod notices that the "mourners" are the people who come to California to die, who figure in his painting "The Burning of Los Angeles." At work one day Tod sees Faye from his window and rushes down to talk to her; attempting to follow Faye, Tod becomes nightmarishly lost in a sea of studio props and sets. Encountering a crew filming "The Battle of Waterloo," he watches in horrified amazement as the set collapses and the workers are killed or injured. Thereafter Tod avoids Faye for several months and concentrates on his painting, observing and sketching the crowds of people who loiter on street corners waiting for something to happen. One night Faye and Homer drag Tod off to a nightclub, where Faye repeatedly insults Homer. Tod learns that Earle and Miguel have moved into Homer's garage, and is invited to a cockfight scheduled for the next evening. Tod and Claude Estee go to Homer's garage for the fight; after the spectacle is over, a party is held in Homer's house; but the party turns into a riot when Abe Kusich attacks Earle, who had been dancing with Faye; Abe is in turn attacked by Miguel, who slams him against a wall. Reviving Abe, Tod and Claude take the dwarf with them and leave.

The next day Tod visits Homer and learns that he has decided to return to Iowa. Homer relates how he discovered an affair between Faye and Miguel. Exhausted and sick, Homer falls asleep, and seeing Homer is ill, Tod decides to let him sleep while he goes out to eat. After thinking of Faye's ability to come through anything unharmed, Tod leaves the restaurant without finishing his dinner. While watching a crowd gathering for a premiere in front of Kahn's Persian Palace, Tod sees Homer dazedly staggering along on the fringe of the mob and attempts to get him home; but they are separated when a riot
begins, and they are swallowed up in the seething mob. Bruised and injured, Tod is finally rescued by police and bundled into a squad car; but because of his cumulative ordeal Tod has been driven mad and insanely attempts to imitate the scream of the police siren as they speed down the street.

One can only repeat what has been stated in previous chapters—that the plot of a West novel is one of the major symbols. The Day of the Locust is no exception to this rule. This does not mean, however, that the author consciously went about devising a "symbolic" plot, but that in telling the kind of story he did, West not only embraced its theme in certain incidents, but unconsciously revealed one of the major obsessions of his life. None of West's novels has an optimistic or "happy" ending; Balso Snell, Lemuel Pitkin, Miss Lonelyhearts—all of these found only futility in their search for the meaning of life. And so does Tod Hackett, who is in many ways the most sensitive and intelligent of West's heroes. In the beginning there was the ambitious, talented artist bent upon discovering his gifts so that his visions of life could be adequately expressed; in the end there is the physical and spiritual wreck of a man who has been ensnared in the hopeless lives of those around him and has been driven insane. And between the two there are only failure, frustration, and horror.

Almost any character or incident illustrates West's preoccupation with futility and failure. Harry Greener, the tragi-comic vaudevillian, acted in Shakespeare's plays at the Cambridge Latin School and later starved in garrets in order to fulfill his ambition of becoming a great actor, only to have his dreams abolished and his ambitions destroyed by an impossible marriage. Even Claude Estee, on the surface the most successful person in the book, must
find release in such perverse amusements as pornographic movies and cockfights. Homer Simpson, idiotically innocent as he is, only destroys himself in his attempts to win Faye's love, and in one particularly Jekyll-and-Hydeish episode, turns from a timid, fearful mouse of a man into a beast that tramples a child to death underfoot. Incidents dealing with illicit love affairs, open and unabashed violence, pretense, hypocrisy, and sham forcefully ram home the hopelessness of the characters' lives. The reader can, if he likes, object to the plot on grounds that it may offend his taste or outrage his moral sensibilities, but he cannot charge that it is inappropriate to the development of the author's theme, for the incidents which form the plot graphically illustrate the fact that meaning, order, and intelligibility are all absent from the essentially meaningless universe which the Westian man inhabits. In this sense West's plot in *The Day of the Locust* has symbolic significance and thematic affinity to the story as a whole.

The title of the novel also has symbolic significance. It is interesting to note that the original title of the story was *The Cheated*, referring to the miserable condition of the characters, their inability to find any meaningful solution to the riddle of life, their boredom and disappointment in finding California to be no promised land. It is an appropriate title, summing up as it does the note of cosmic despair which pervades the novel. Whether or not West himself decided to change the title, or whether it was the result of editorial advice is unknown; but in either case the change is for the better. In terms of imagery and sound alone, *The Day of the Locust* is a far better title.

---

7 *Ibid.,* xxi.
than The Cheated; and it is also relevant to the meaning of the book as a whole, for it vividly symbolizes the devouring, destructive force that is at work in modern civilization, which, like fields of wheat, will be mercilessly wiped out by spiritual famine sweeping the land in its wake.

A more important symbol occurs in the counterpointing of Tod’s picture, "The Burning of Los Angeles," throughout the book; it becomes a "fundamental image" which helps to give unity and clarity to the book as a whole. Called a "phantasmagoria of purgation" by one critic,9 Tod’s picture is not to be painted in typical American fashion, for he knows "that, despite his race, training and heritage, neither Winslow Homer nor Thomas Ryder could be his masters and he turned to Goya and Daumier."10 The most detailed description of the painting occurs in the final chapter, where Tod, even though trapped in the mob, continues to paint in his imagination:

he could see all the rough charcoal strokes with which he had blacked it out on the big canvas. Across the top, parallel with the frame, he had drawn the burning city, a great bonfire of architectural styles, ranging from Egyptian to Cape Cod colonial. Through the center, winding from left to right, was a long hill street and down it, spilling into the middle foreground, came the mob carrying baseball bats and torches. . . .

In the lower foreground, men and women fled wildly before the vanguard of the crusading mob. Among them were Faye, Harry, Homer, Claude and himself. Faye ran proudly, throwing her knees high, Harry stumbled along behind her, holding on to his beloved derby hat with both hands. Homer seemed to be falling out of the canvas, his face half-asleep, his big hands clawing the air in anguished pantomime. Claude turned his head

---


as he ran to thumb his nose at his pursuers. Tod himself picked up a small stone to throw before continuing his flight.\textsuperscript{11}

Tod's picture, then, represents the last despairing act of "the cheated," who, failing to find any meaning for their own lives, can only turn to violence and bloodshed in their blind fury at being tricked by life. But this cannot be done in truly tragic terms, for West's people have no distance to fall—they are at the bottom from the beginning. Thus, it must occur in terms of comic distortion, and that is why Tod "wanted the city to have quite a gala air as it burned, to appear almost gay. And the people who set it on fire would be a holiday crowd."\textsuperscript{12} Occurring as it does from the very beginning of the story, appearing from time to time in the course of the action, and receiving its fullest and most vivid description in the closing pages of the novel, "The Burning of Los Angeles" forcefully emphasizes the inferno-like nature of modern civilization and prophesies its eventual destruction.

The people represented by the mob in Tod's picture also have an independent existence outside the frame of "The Burning of Los Angeles." One critic\textsuperscript{13} called them "a tragic chorus," and though they never speak their mere presence in the background of the novel is an eloquent comment on the futility which surrounds them. They are, for the most part, the middle-aged who have retired to California in hope of finding the promised land, but boredom, disappointment, and idleness set in with the result that they only "inhabit an

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 165-166.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 76.
appalling spiritual wasteland." And at one point in describing them, West gives us an insight into his own method and attitude regarding them. While sketching these people Tod thought of how well Alessandro Magnasco would dramatize the contrast between their drained-out feeble bodies and their wild, disordered minds. He would not satirize them as Hogarth or Daumier might, nor would he pity them. He would paint their fury with respect, appreciating its awful, anarchic power and aware that they had it in them to destroy civilization.

And this shock of recognition is supplemented as Tod finds out more and more about them until he realizes it "was a mistake to think them harmless curiosity seekers. They were savage and bitter . . . and had been made so by boredom and disappointment." And, finally, they "realize that they've been tricked and burned with resentment. . . . They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing." Working at dull and meaningless jobs all their lives, they look forward to the day when they will be able to enjoy a meaningful life; but the nature of their life-long environment has made their activities incapable of significance, and in their search for meaning in life they find only futility, and lash out blindly at the unknown forces which have destroyed them.

The symbolic nature of the clown, which West first explored in Balso Snell and briefly mentioned in A Cool Million, perhaps receives its fullest

14 L. B. Solomon, Nation, CXIX, July 15, 1939, 79.
15 West, Day of Locust, 109-110.
16 Ibid., 156.
17 Ibid., 157.
development in the figure of Harry Greener in *The Day of the Locust*. The critic who has most fully explored the nature of this symbol in modern literature, Wallace Fowlie, has identified it with the surrealist movement:

the clown became the most sensitive of the modern heroes, the living receptacle for all dramas, the hero who refused to see them as tragedies. The surrealist hero is visibly the clown: whether he be Chaplin or Donald Duck, the sad saltimbanks of Picasso and Apollinaire, or the voyou who temporarily has forgotten the meaning of his heart...

Fowlie would no doubt understand West's use of the comic, for he knows "that the comic is one aspect of the tragic, so closely akin to one another that the emotion they elicit may be expressed by tears or laughter." Thus, the "punished clown is the symbolic character of modern man. Painters recognized and glorified him as representative of humanity: Cézanne, Picasso, Rouault." And in *The Day of the Locust* we are overtly told that the clown, in the figure of Harry Greener, has symbolic importance: "The old man was a clown and Tod had all the painter's usual love of clowns. But what was more important, he felt that his clownship was a clue to the people who stared (a painter's clue, that is—a clue in the form of a symbol). . . ." At one point the tragic nature of the clown comes through to us most forcefully. In attempting to sell Homer silver polish, Harry Greener overdoes his bag of tricks and loses control:

Suddenly, like a mechanical toy that had been overwound, something snapped

18 Fowlie, *Age of Surrealism*, 99-100.
inside of him and he began to spin through his entire repertoire. The effort was purely muscular, like the dance of a paralytic. He jigged, jugged his hat, made believe he had been kicked, tripped, and shook hands with himself. He went through it all in one dizzy spasm, then reeled to the couch and collapsed.22

The dark laughter of the soul also finds expression, as it did in Balse Snell, when the clown gives audible expression to the forces of defeat and futility which dwell within him:

It began with a sharp, metallic cackle, like burning sticks, then gradually increased in violence until it became a rapid bark, then fell away again to an obscene chuckle. After a slight pause, it climbed until it was the nicker of a horse, then still higher to become a machinelike screech.23

Thus, the figure of Harry Greener, the man with noble dreams and aspirations who found only failure and futility, becomes an ironic comment on the meaningless nature of the Westian world. And perhaps West, like Wallace Fowlie, could say that it was in

the clowns I first saw man unashamedly awkward, exalted by the noblest dreams and always tricked in some low way before touching the reality of his dreams, ... I comprehended through the circus the drama and the paradox of man: his greatness and his perpetual weakness, the permanency of his dreams and the fragmentariness of his actions. The tumblers, in the completed pyramids of their bodies which lasted only a second, and the clowns, in the constantly dissolving designs of their antics, represented man's desire for perfection and his incapacity to achieve it.24

Edwin Muir says that when we think of the character novel, we think of the crowded frontispieces that adorn collected editions of Dickens, where we see characters crowded together, side by side, behind one another, filling

22 Ibid., 44.
23 Ibid., 50.
24 Fowlie, Pantomime, 14.
the page, crowding it with faces smiling, frowning, weeping, laughing; thus, we have a tendency to think of the figures in a character novel as co-existing in a crowd, while we think of the figures in a dramatic novel as existing singly, appearing to our mind's eye one by one.\(^{25}\) And in *The Day of the Locust* we surely get this "crowded" effect; for one thing, there are more characters here than in West's previous novels; for another, the mobs of unnamed people that lurked in the background of *Balse Snell* and *Miss Lonelyhearts* are here brought into the foreground and are made an integral part of the story as "the people who came to California to die."

While we are reading the book, however, certain characters, by reason of their function in the story, stand out from the rest. One of these is Tod Hackett, whose

large, sprawling body, his slow blue eyes and sloppy grin made him seem completely without talent, almost doltish in fact.

Yet, despite his appearance, he was really a very complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside the other like a nest of Chinese boxes. And *The Burning of Los Angeles*, a picture he was soon to paint, definitely proved he had talent.\(^{26}\)

Unlike most of those around him, Tod sees through the artificiality and pretense of the Hollywood world. As he walks along examining the evening crowd, he notices that the "fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office; and the girl in slacks and sneakers with a bandana around her head had just left a switchboard, not a tennis court."\(^{27}\) Again, at


\(^{26}\) West, *Day of Locust*, 2.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.
Claude Estee's party, Mrs. Schwartzzen's delight with the dead horse in the swimming pool is being spoiled by a guest who points out that it is only made of rubber; she replies by saying, "You're just like that mean Mr. Hackett. You won't let me cherish my illusions." But Tod's ability to see through the pretensions and petty deceits of people does not lessen his desire to see them successful, and at one point West's attitude toward his people is implicit in Tod's insight into Faye's character:

Being with her was like being backstage during an amateurish, ridiculous play. From in front, the stupid lines and grotesque situations would have made him squirm with annoyance, but because he saw the perspiring stagehands and the wires that held up the tawdry summerhouse with its tangle of paper flowers, he accepted everything and was anxious for it to succeed.

In spite of the fact that Tod is far more intelligent, perceptive, and talented than those around him—and actually represents a normal and healthy point of view—he, like Miss Lonelyhearts, is caught up in the sordid and futile lives of those he tries to help and is eventually destroyed by them. At one point, while reflecting on the implications of his picture—the burning of Los Angeles and the following riot and bloodshed—Tod "was amused by the strong feeling of satisfaction this dire conclusion gave him. Were all prophets of doom and destruction such happy men?" The statement not only reveals Tod Hackett's bent of mind, but also most explicitly reveals West's own philosophy. Again, as he is gradually being drawn into the lives of those around him, Tod begins

28 Ibid., 16.
29 Ibid., 59.
30 Ibid., 79.
"to wonder if he himself didn't suffer from the ingrained, morbid apathy he liked to draw in others."  Finally, in spite of his intelligence, education, and self-awareness Tod himself is physically and spiritually battered while attempting to save Homer, who is swallowed up in the riot outside Kahn's Persian Palace Theatre. After being buffeted about and injured by the rioting mob, Tod is rescued by police:

He was carried through the exit to the back street and lifted into a police car. The siren began to scream and at first he thought he was making the noise himself. He felt his lips with his hands. They were clamped tight. He knew then it was the siren. For some reason this made him laugh and he began to imitate the siren as loud as he could. And that last agonizing cry terrifyingly symbolizes the final and utter defeat of the human spirit as it comes face to face with reality.

There would seem to be some confusion as to who is really the central character in the book. Richard Gehman has commented: "Much of the story is seen through Tod's eyes, but Homer is unquestionably the central character, for it is he who illustrates West's principal theme." Another critic, L. B. Solomon, however, maintains that Tod Hackett is the central character. In spite of the rather strong "unquestionably" in Gehman's statement, the present writer must side with Solomon's position that Tod is the main character. For one thing, out of the twenty-seven short chapters comprising the book, only five are exclusively devoted to Homer; these are concerned with sketching in

31 Ibid., 109.
32 Ibid., 166-167.
34 L. B. Solomon, Nation, CXLIX, 79.
his background, his present dull life in California, and his relations with Faye Greener—we never see him in action until he shares the stage with Tod Hackett. Again, West’s principal theme is the utter futility and meaningless nature of life itself, and it is precisely one of the main points of the story that normal, intelligent, and perceptive people are not immune to this futility, but in spite of themselves are engulfed and destroyed by it. The story can only be told in terms of a character who has some realization of the meaning of his final defeat—and West usually chooses as his hero an artist: Balso Snell is a poet; Miss Lonelyhearts is a newspaperman (symbolic of the contemporary writer); Tod Hackett, and the name itself is indicative of what the modern artist has become in order to survive, is a painter; the sole exception is Len Pitkin, and A Cool Million is West’s least characteristic book. It is true that Tod Hackett is the point of view from which the story is told, but he is the main character as well, just as Strether is both point of view and main character in The Ambassadors. Homer Simpson is simply not equipped to serve as the character whose fate is to have meaningful significance in terms of the book as a whole. Rather, he serves as a foil to Tod—as a rival suitor for Faye and as the specific instrument of Tod’s destruction, as an example of the hopeless and forlorn who come to California to die. And it is to be remembered that it is Tod who occupies the stage in the last disturbing pages which end the book and provide a significant conclusion for the novel.

Homer Simpson, like the “good” people in The Great Gatsby, is from the Middle West, “a little town near Des Moines, Iowa, called Wayneville, where
he had worked for twenty years in a hotel." He is described as being "like one of Picasso's great sterile athletes, who brood hopelessly on pink sand, staring at veined marble waves." There is little specifically human in Homer's make-up, for he gets "out of bed in sections, like a poorly made automaton" and shakes his head "like a dog with a foxtail in its ear." After he has become psychotic and retreated within himself, "Homer walked more than ever like a badly made automaton and his features were set in a rigid mechanical grin." Thus, Homer undergoes little development; since he is already at the bottom, he has no great distance to fall; by the time the final tragedy occurs, Homer is literally out of this world (it is evident why he cannot be the central character by now). Homer is different from the rest of the characters mainly by virtue of his almost idiotic innocence, resignation, kindliness, and humility; but these are not specifically human virtues in his case, and at one point West says, "His servility was like that of a cringing, clumsy dog, who is always anticipating a blow, welcoming it even, and in a way that makes overwhelming the desire to strike him." In his absurd attempts to win Faye's love, which is the only thing that can give meaning and direction to his aimless life, Homer is a failure. Indeed, no matter what Homer attempts, he only meets with failure and futility. As a representative of the people who come to

35 West, Day of Locust, 28.
36 Ibid., 32.
37 Ibid., 31, 112.
38 Ibid., 157.
39 Ibid., 111.
California to die, Homer is "perfect in every detail down to fever eyes and unruly hands," with the exception, Tod thinks, that he is too shy, too incapable of violence; but as events prove, Homer is not too shy to trample a child underfoot. At one point the hopeless nature of Homer and the people he represents is given explicit reference by West; when Homer begins to cry out of loneliness and anguish, the author says: "Only those who still have hope can benefit from tears. When they finish, they feel better. But to those without hope, like Homer, whose anguish is basic and permanent, no good comes from crying. Nothing changes for them. They usually know this, but still can't help crying."

Faye Greener is "a tall girl with wide, straight shoulders and long, swordlike legs." While seeming much older, she is really seventeen and dresses like a child of twelve. Like most of the other characters, Faye has a need for illusion and lives in a dream world of her own making. Without real ability, she believes she will be a great actress some day; and the story she hopes to sell to the movies (with Tod's aid) is a typical Hollywood script: a rich girl engaged to marry a Russian count becomes interested in a young sailor while vacationing on her father's yacht in the South Seas; the sailor spurns her, the yacht sinks, and all perish except the girl and the sailor, who swim to an island; they are eventually rescued and are married; the sailor turns out to be a rich boy, and the story ends happily. Combining the essential Holly-

40 Ibid., 27.
41 Ibid., 58.
42 Ibid., 12.
wood ingredients for success—love without sex, adventure, a happy, sentimental ending—the story reflects the illusions upon which Faye, and millions like her, must depend for spiritual nourishment. But Faye has more complexity than one would expect, for in spite of her affectations, "she often recognized the falseness of an attitude" and possesses some critical insight, "almost enough to recognize the ridiculous." By any objective standards, however, Faye is as complete a failure, leads as futile a life, as any of the other characters. The only thing that saves her (physically, for her spirit is already dead) is her complete lack of conscience and her constant immersion in day dreams. Unlike Homer, whose despair is so great he can only retreat from it into insanity, and unlike Tod, who is conscious of his own destruction, Faye is "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." Her fate is no less horrible than that of the other characters, in spite of her refusal to recognize it as such, for the cork is "set down on a strange shore where a savage with pork sausage fingers ... picked it up and hugged it to his sagging belly. Tod recognized the man; he was one of Mrs. Jennings' customers."

Around the main characters a host of minor figures, the "extras," are grouped. One critic has said a "certain kind of great literary work is like a side show where human weakness and even human greatness are illumined and

---

43 Ibid., 59.
44 Ibid., 151.
45 Ibid., 151-152.
demonstrated in comic distortion and travesty."46 While the statement applies to all of West's books, with some modifications, it is particularly applicable to the minor figures in The Day of the Locust. Harry Greener has already been commented on in connection with the clown symbolism, and it is interesting to note that Harry's physical appearance also is that of the tragic clown: "Harry, like many actors, had very little back or top to his head. It was almost all face, like a mask, with deep furrows between the eyes, across the forehead and on either side of the nose and mouth, plowed there by years of broad grinning and heavy frowning."47 Then there is Abe Kusich, a pugnacious dwarf who looks "like a ventriloquist's dummy" and has a "slightly hydrocephalic head."48 He wears a green Tyrolean hat, "a blue, double-breasted suit and a black shirt with a yellow tie."49 Abe is a typical Westian grotesque; his physical deformity is an outward sign of the warped nature of not only his own soul but that of the world he inhabits—a world without hope or promise. Even Claude Estee, who has acquired that significant symbol of American success—a swimming pool, is basically as unhappy and frustrated as the visible failures. His inane amusements—the dead horse in his pool, the pornographic movies, the cockfights—all testify to the futility of his life.

Earle Shoop might well be an extension of the cowboy who shot Jake Raven in A Cool Million; though never possessing a conscious awareness of it,

---

46 Fowlie, Clown's Grail, 145.
47 West, Day of Locust, 80.
48 Ibid., 128, 6.
49 Ibid., 7.
his life is as empty as the big Stetson hat he wears on his head. His friend, Miguel the Mexican, is a true primitive, and his relations with Faye are amoral rather than immoral, for he is as much a part of the natural world as are the canyons in which he lives. Audrey Jennings, the former silent-star turned Madam, "makes vice attractive by skillful packaging." Her services, however, are restricted to the frustrated rich such as Claude Estee. She, too, lacks consciousness of the moral implications of her establishment: "She ran her business just as other women run lending libraries, shrewdly and with taste." Mrs. Schwartzzen, a female tennis champion, "was a big girl with large hands and feet and square bony shoulders." Her need for illusion is just as strong as Faye Greener's, but she lacks Faye's saving sense of the unreality of her dreams, preferring to ignore the futility which lurks behind them. In addition there is Adore, a child actor "with a pale peaked face and a large, troubled forehead." At his adoring mother's insistence he sings his ribald songs with such childish innocence that his very unconsciousness of the evil appears all the more horrible.

One critic, commenting on West's characters, said that they "have been painted as precisely and polished as brightly as the figures in Persian miniatures." It is the kind of perception that does much to sum up the exact

---

50 Ibid., 17.
51 Ibid., 19.
52 Ibid., 11.
53 Ibid., 106.
54 Edmund Wilson, New Republic, XCIX, 339.
impression the characters give, for West's characters are "flat," to be sure, but their flatness comes off precisely because they are not meant to be serious or tragic in themselves, though their lives or what happens to them may have tragic, or at least ironic, overtones. The essential frustration and futility, the nothingness which surrounds these characters' lives, is perhaps best seen in the violent acts in which they indulge. At one point in the story, Miguel and Faye are dancing a Mexican dance while Tod and Earle pound out the rhythm on cans and frying pans. Suddenly, without warning, the happy scene is turned into one replete with horror and violence: "Tod saw the blow before it fell. He saw Earle raise his stick and bring it down on the Mexican's head. He heard the crack and saw the Mexican go to his knees still dancing, his body unwilling or unable to acknowledge the interruption."55 Again, when Earle is dancing with Faye at a party, Abe Kusich tries to cut in and attacks Earle, effectively disabling him. But then, "Miguel grabbed Abe by the throat. The dwarf let go his hold and Earle sank to the floor. Lifting the little man free, Miguel shifted his grip to his ankle and dashed him against the wall, like a man killing a rabbit against a tree."56 In reality the fight has little point except that physical violence is the only outlet for exasperation and raw nerves. It is violence without meaning, and indicates that West's characters are not meant to be tragic in themselves. And it is not only the primitives, such as Miguel, Abe, and Earle, who behave in this way; even the mild-tempered, pathologically shy and fearful Homer is subject to it. Adore Loomis, the child actor, teases

55 West, Day of Locust, 77.
56 Ibid., 138-139.
Homer while the latter is resting on a bench in the park; but in throwing a
stone at him, Adore goes too far: "The stone hit Homer in the face. The boy
turned to flee, but tripped and fell. Before he could scramble away, Homer
landed on his back with both feet, then jumped again."® The police, who are
supposed to be controlling the mob at the premiere, are also given an outlet
for their own pent-up anguish and frustration: "If they had to arrest someone,
they joked good-naturedly with the culprit, making light of it until they got
him around the corner, then they whaled him with their clubs. Only so long as
the man was actually a part of the crowd did they have to be gentle."® Even
Tod—intelligent, sensitive, civilized—is caught up in the whirlwind of may-
hem which closes the book. Clinging to a fence to keep from being dragged
along with the mob, Tod "held on desperately, fighting to keep from being
sucked back. A woman caught him around the waist and tried to hang on. She
was sobbing rhythmically. Tod felt his fingers slipping from the rail and
kicked backwards as hard as he could. The woman let go."®

Speaking of Erskine Caldwell, one critic has said that his characters
"are frequently violent only because violence is the one available satisfaction
of their depraved emotions...; their compulsive frenzy must be assuaged
through a sort of blood letting before they are able to bear the wretchedness
of their lives."® The statement applies equally well to West's characters

57 Ibid., 160.
58 Ibid., 154.
59 Ibid., 165.
60 Frohock, Novel of Violence, 132.
even though, unlike Caldwell, West does not blame environment for his people's acts—is not, in other words, a naturalistic determinist as Caldwell is. Thus, as in all of West's novels, the physical violence is only a visible sign of the moral violence which exists in his characters' souls; constant frustration and futility in all they attempt can only result in a blind fury, a lashing out at the unknown forces which seem to take malevolent delight in their destruction. These characters only come to know one thing: "that life is nothing but a cheap Mardi Gras devised by the Devil, and that they are pitiful amateurs—supermenmeraries in fact—in an unfunny comic opera. They can find solace, justification, even ecstasy, in the kind of mob violence that ends this upsetting book."

And what of God? Does he ever attempt to relieve the cosmic despair which prevails in these characters' souls; or, in theological terms, is grace wholly lost? In Chapter X of the novel there is one suggestive scene which perhaps symbolically embraces West's conception of God's relation to His creatures. One of Homer's pastimes consists of sitting in his garden and watching a pet lizard stalk flies; though Homer is on the side of the flies, "no matter how much he wanted the fly to escape, he never thought of interfering, and was careful not to budge or make the slightest noise. Occasionally the lizard would miscalculate. When that happened Homer would laugh happily." This is perhaps the clearest indication, from the novels at any rate, of West's view of God's relation to Man. Homer (God), though he is on the side of the flies

62 West, Day of Locust, 140.
(man), cannot or will not interfere if they happen to be destroyed by the lizard (the blind natural forces which act independently of man's welfare). But the game is fixed from the beginning, and the only card that man can draw is the Ace of Spades, for only death (or the death of the mind—insanity) can provide release from the meaningless and futile world in which man is doomed to live.

Speaking of the strange physical and mental effect California seems to have on writers ("a dream-like aura in which all seems insubstantial and shifting"), Khund Wilson sums up Robinson Jeffers' attitude, which perhaps applies to West, by saying that "it is a good deal too easy to be a nihilist on the coast at Carmel: your very negation is a negation of nothing."

In reality, of course, West's view of life was formed long before he ever reached California; yet he must have seen that the land of eternal sunshine and orange juice would provide a particularly appropriate setting for his de-Christianized Divine Comedy. And in the pages of The Day of the Locust the California of Hollywood and vicinity certainly becomes a lost paradise, a negation of all values, a modern hell. While wandering through the jungle of sets on a movie lot, Tod observes the

 compositions that might have actually been arranged from the Calabrian work of [Salvator] Rosa. There were partially demolished buildings and broken monuments, half-hidden by great tortured trees, whose exposed roots withered dramatically in the arid ground, and by shrubs that carried, not flowers or berries, but armories of spikes, hooks and swords. Like the field of ashes in The Great Gatsby, the studio lot is a spiritual, as

63 Wilson, Boys in Back Room, 62.

64 West, Day of Locust, 96.
well as physical, wasteland; and Tod Hackett notices this junkward of the
spirit when one day, while looking at the studio prop dump, he

thought of Javvier's 'Sargasso Sea.' Just as that imaginary body of water
was a history of civilization in the form of a marine junkyard, the studio
lot was one in the form of a dream dump. A Sargasso of the imagination!
And the dump 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.65

In Chapter XVIII of the novel, Tod finds himself nightmarishly lost in this
modern inferno. While looking for Faye, Tod makes his way through a Western
street, an African jungle, an Arabian desert, and a Paris boulevard. Finally,
he

pushed his way through a tangle of briars, old flats and iron junk,
skirting the skeleton of a Zeppelin, a bamboo stockade, an adobe fort, the
wooden horse of Troy [O Balso Snell!], 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, a corner of a
Mayan temple, until he finally reached the road.66

The fantastic contrasting images are in keeping with the surrealist method, but
the brief quotation hardly does justice to the scene as a whole, for as one
critic said, "the only passage of fiction I know of like it is Stephen Dedalus'
vision of hell."67

But the studio lot is not the only place where spiritual emptiness
must be covered up by pretense and illusion; even the houses in which these
people dwell are artificial and unsubstantial. As Tod is walking home from

65 Ibid., 97.
66 Ibid., 96.
67 George Hillburn, "The Hollywood Nobody Knows," Saturday Review of
Literature, XX, May 20, 1939, 14.
work one evening, he notices that 

not even the soft wash of dusk could help the houses. Only dynamite would be of any use against the Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination of these styles that lined the slopes of the canyons. 58

The interiors of the houses are no better. Opening the door of Homer's Irish cottage, we find: "Although made by machine, the hinges had been carefully stamped to appear hand-forged. The same kind of care and skill had been used to make the roof thatching, which was not really straw but heavy fireproof paper colored and ribbed to look like straw." 69 One critic has noted that West's description of California architecture is comparable to Sinclair Lewis' famous description of the Zenith Athletic Club. 70 But West is concerned with something far larger than ridicule of bourgeois pretension and affectation; for him architecture was a concrete representation of spiritual states. Just as his characters must turn to perverse amusements, so too must they resort to artificiality in their dwellings; for West, the way we build expresses the state of the spirit of both individuals and the nation, and spiritual exhaustion is certainly evident in the architectural styles exhibited in The Day of the Locust. Somehow we must cover our spiritual barrenness with Samoan huts and Spanish ranches. These monstrous dwellings are, of course, only indicative of the length to which these people must go in their vain attempts to fill the

68 West, Day of Locust, 3.
69 Ibid., 29.
vacuum created in their lives by the absence of all meaning in the universe. And this use of architecture is not only to be found in *The Day of the Locust*, but appears in modified form in *A Cool Million*, where the bordellos are "done over" in Pennsylvania Dutch and Old South. It is not that these things are merely ridiculous that is important; rather, they reveal the underlying sense of futility and desperation which rules these characters' lives. And, as always, there is the author's sense of the pity of it all; at one point Tod Hackett thinks: "It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous."\(^71\)

After the stylistic failures of *A Cool Million*, West once again allowed his true talents to take their natural course in *The Day of the Locust*. There is a stylistic development here as well, as F. H. Britten (who followed West's career from the beginning) noted when he said, "*The Day of the Locust* is superbly written. Less on the surrealist side than Mr. West's earlier *Miss Lonelyhearts,* it is a more disciplined piece of writing; has a flexibility and a finish which the previous novel lacked."\(^72\) It is a comparative judgment, of course, for on the level of style *Miss Lonelyhearts* stands very high indeed. Another critic, commenting on the vividness of several of the chapters—the cockfight, Tod's wandering among the studio props, Harry Greener's funeral—said that the final chapter dealing with the riot at a premiere was "a picture of an American Walpurgis Eve that must make anyone who

---

\(^71\) West, *Day of Locust*, 4.

reads it feel that he was there, too, and remember it as vividly.\textsuperscript{73} While the final scene is too long to quote in full (as it deserves to be), we may, however, give a brief example of West's impressionism in describing Tod and Homer's involvement in the riot:

The next thing Tod knew, he was torn loose from Homer and sent to his knees by a blow in the back of the head that spun him sideways. The crowd in front of the theatre had charged. He was surrounded by churning legs and feet. He pulled himself erect by grabbing a man's coat, then let himself be carried along backwards in a long, curving swoop. He saw Homer rise above the man for a moment, shoved against the sky, his jaw hanging as though he wanted to scream but couldn't. A hand reached up and caught him by his open mouth and pulled him forward and down.\textsuperscript{74}

This scene as a whole is not only an almost perfect example of impressionist technique, but, in the present writer's opinion, ranks with such examples of stylistic excellence as the opening passages of \textit{A Farewell to Arms} or the closing paragraphs of \textit{The Great Gatsby}. And the excellence is not only confined to scenes which are full of action and therefore naturally visual, because West can also concretize an intangible emotion by using the appropriate visual metaphor. Speaking of Homer, West says:

\begin{quote}
His emotions surged up in an enormous wave, curving and rearing, higher and higher, until it seemed as though the wave must carry everything before it. But the crash never came. Something always happened at the very top of the crest and the wave collapsed to run back like water down a drain, leaving only a refuse of feeling.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

And when Homer cried, the "sound was like an ax chopping pine, a heavy hollow,\textsuperscript{76}


\textsuperscript{74} West, \textit{Day of Locust}, 161.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 37.
chinking noise." As in his other work, West's sentences are almost always short and brief, testifying to the urgency and fear of failure which his characters possess in their search for meaning in life. Though the use of contrasting images in the surrealist manner is more restrained here, it is nevertheless vividly present. At night in Claude Estee's garden, Tod notices that through "a slit in the blue serge sky poked a grained moon that looked like an enormous bone button."77

Perhaps the chief development in style in The Day of the Locust centers around its heightened use of color and its intense visual realization. Though the color sense was high in Miss Lonelyhearts, here it almost becomes the technicolor process employed in the studios which form the background of the novel. While Homer is shopping one day he turns into a supermarket:

The Sun Gold Market into which he turned was a large, brilliantly lit place. All the fixtures were chromium and the floors and walls were lined with white tile. Colored spotlights played on the showcases and counters, heightening the natural hues of the different foods. The oranges were bathed in red, the lemons in yellow, the fish in pale green, the steaks in rose and the eggs in ivory.78

Again, while walking in the country, Tod notices that the "path was silver, grained with streaks of rose-gray, and the walls of the canyon were turquoise, mauve, chocolate and lavender. The air itself was vibrant pink."79 And the visual perception is acute, as well as being highly colored, as though a camera

76 Ibid., 143.
77 Ibid., 15.
78 Ibid., 38.
79 Ibid., 71.
were picking out the tiniest details: "Orange poppies bordered the path. Their petals were wrinkled like crape and their leaves were heavy with talcum-like dust." But of all colors, violet, purple, lavender--whatever one calls it--is West's favorite. On his way home from work Ted notices that as night approaches, the "edges of the trees burned with a pale violet light and their centers gradually turned from deep purple to black. The same violet piping, like a neon tube, outlined the tops of the ugly, hump-backed hills and they were almost beautiful." It is an unusual but excellent visual perception. And time after time the color violet, in one shade or another, occurs: "She led them into a small drawing room whose color scheme was violet, gray and rose"; the wallpaper had a "widely spaced flower design in violet"; the chairs are "bound in violet piping"; "the walls of the canyon were turquoise, mauve, chocolate and lavender"; the weeds "flowered in purple, blue and yellow"; "It was one of those blue and lavender nights... Even the darkest shadows held some purple"; "he saw a dozen great violet shafts of light moving across the evening sky in wide crazy sweeps."

This is only an indicative and by no means an exhaustive list of references to the color violet or shades thereof. West's use of this color establishes not only the emotional but the moral climate of the novel as well. The Westian world is bathed not in the red hell-fire of the past, but in the cold, somber, sterile violet light of the twentieth century--the light that comes

---

80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 3.
82 Ibid., 20, 71, 119, 153.
from a searchlight at a Hollywood premiere, or from the fluorescent fixtures of our restaurants and supermarkets, or from that latest dream machine, the television set. The violet light in which West's characters are bathed testifies to the futility, frustration, and failure they encounter in their search for meaning in the twentieth century, and by comparison the red hell-fire of Dante's inferno is cheerful indeed.

The Day of the Locust forms a continuous connection with West's previous work in that its theme is basically the same as that of the other novels—the absence of meaning in the world. West's major obsession is here told in slightly different terms, to be sure. Progressing from the ancient world of Balso Snell to the modern city-life of Miss Lonelyhearts, after the failure of A Cool Million the author turned to that symbolic city of America—Hollywood, with its concentrated pretense, artificiality, and, above all, its despair. The symbols, the characters, the setting, the style here, as in West's other books, have only one purpose: to paint the hopeless despair and futility that result from man's being trapped in a meaningless universe. It is a cosmic despair which combines savageness, pity, sadness, and sympathy.

The influence of West's career as a screen writer may be most clearly seen, perhaps, in the structure of The Day of the Locust. Though numerous sociological studies of the influence of the film upon the American public have been made, little serious attention has been paid to the influence of the movies upon novelists and their work.\(^3\) Whereas the earlier films, before

\(^3\) One excellent study of cinematic technique in relation to the American novel is Maguy's L'Age du roman. Cf. Chapter I, n. 52.
sound, used as few sequences as possible, the constant trend, as any observant movie-goer knows, has been toward more numerous sequences which, though increasing the pace of the story, have a tendency to loss of unity. And according to one critic: "The worst fault of the book is that it follows the choppy, episodical technique of a movie scenario. It has that peculiar disorganization that most movies have."\textsuperscript{84} Richard Gelman also pointed out the film influence when, speaking of The Day of the Locust, he said:

It is episodic in structure, but panoramic in form: appropriately enough, it in some ways resembles a motion picture—the early scenes are leisurely, fading in and out as though the writer were turning his mind upon them like a camera, and then, as the characters come more and more into focus, becoming tighter, faster, and more merciless.\textsuperscript{85}

To characterize the structure of The Day of the Locust in this way is not enough, however, and to understand how the novel is designed and moves along we must take a closer view of its plot. According to the function of the chapters, the book is designed in the following way. Chapters I-III sketch in Tod Hackett and his background, his meeting with Abe Kusich, and his relations with Faye Greener. Chapters IV and V introduce Claude Estee and his friends and amusements, while Chapter VI introduces Harry Greener and Homer Simpson. Chapters VII-XII consist of a flashback that sketches in Homer's past life, character, and present situation and provides a temporary suspension of the action. Chapter XIII develops Faye's character, while Chapter XIV introduces Earle and Miguel and their rivalry over Faye. Chapters XV-XVII are concerned with Harry Greener's character and past, his death, and

\textsuperscript{84} Milburn, "The Hollywood Nobody Knows," Saturday Review, XX, 11.

\textsuperscript{85} Gelman, "Introduction," Day of Locust, xxi.
his funeral. Chapter XVIII finds Tod lost in the studio lot, and Chapter XIX concerns Tod's invitation to supper with Homer and Faye and his resolves to forget Faye and concentrate on his painting. Chapter XX foreshadows the break between Homer and Faye. Chapters XXI-XXIV deal with the cockfight and the ensuing party, after which Homer, discovering the affair between Faye and Miguel, prepares to return to Iowa. Chapter XXV, Homer's return to the womb and resultant insanity, foreshadows the close of the novel. In Chapter XXVI, Tod sums up Faye's character and fate, and his doing so provides an interlude so that the ending will have the force of the unexpected. With Chapter XXVII, Tod's attempts to rescue Homer and his own destruction by the mob, we have the end of the story and a summary of the meaning of the novel as a whole.

It would be possible, of course, to indicate the organization of the novel, as was done with Miss Lonelyhearts, in these terms: Chapters I-XIX deal with exposition and development; Chapter XX begins the complication; Chapter XXIV is the turning point for the story; Chapter XXVII embraces both the climax and denouement. But such a division does not suit The Day of the Locust, for unlike Miss Lonelyhearts, it is not dramatic in nature. According to Edwin Muir's division of dramatic and character novels on the basis of Time and Space, Miss Lonelyhearts would be dramatic, its concern is with Time; but since Space is the chief factor in The Day of the Locust, it could, then, be classified as a character novel. Unlike Miss Lonelyhearts, where we are only conscious that the action is taking place in a large city, in The Day of the Locust, though Hollywood is the main scene, we have echoes of the Middle West.
and a frame of reference is built up which includes California only as a par-
ticular aspect of life in the United States. And space, in the literal meaning
of the word, certainly rules The Day of the Locust, which contains approximate-
ly forty-five thousand words in comparison to the twenty-five or thirty thou-
sand words which make up Miss Lonelyhearts. Again, returning to Muir, we may
note his comments on the function of plot in the novel of character, keeping in
mind the previous discussion about the flatness of West's characters:

Given their flatness, what can the writer do with them? What will the
function of his plot be? Obviously not to trace their development, for
being flat they cannot develop, but to set them in new situations, to
change their relations to one another, and in all of these to make them
behave typically.

So it has been a convention that the plot of a novel of character should
be loose and easy. 87

(Perhaps it should be noted here that although West's characters in Miss Lonely-
hearts are also flat, the dramatic development which takes place in that novel
is not the development of Miss Lonelyhearts' character, but the development of
the problem which he represents.) Again, later in his book, Muir says: "The
primary purpose of plot in the novel of character is to introduce and sustain
the actions of a variety of characters"; 88 and it may be noted that The Day of
the Locust introduces far more characters than any of the previous novels ex-
cept A Cool Million. The variety of characters is necessary, of course, if one
is attempting to build up a picture of society and of life in general, in con-
trast to a novel which attempts to draw an individual's character. Then, too,

87 Ibid., 27.
88 Ibid., 131.
the picaresque quality, which has been commented on in West's other novels, is also strongly present in The Day of the Locust. According to Muir: "The object of the picaresque novel is then to take a central figure [in this case Tod Hackett] through a succession of scenes, introduce a great number of characters, and thus build up a picture of society."

Thus, in this type of novel, the need for a plot bound tightly together by causality is not very great. We have a central character who meets a variety of people and undergoes a series of adventures, much the same as in the picaresque novel. Gradually a picture of society, of life, is built up. The kind of people the central hero meets and the kind of adventures he undergoes, and his attitude toward them, determines the meaning or theme of the story as a whole. And the people and incidents in The Day of the Locust surely give ample testimony to the meaningless nature of life in the Westian world. Causality plays little part here (except for the "planting" of such details as Homer's discovery of the affair between Faye and Miguel, and the relation of the characters' past lives to the present), for unlike Miss Lonelyhearts, where the conclusion is prepared for in earlier chapters (Doyle's suspicions, threats, etc.), the ending of The Day of the Locust occurs gratuitously--by Tod's accidental involvement in the riot at the premiere. It is true that the "mob" has been symbolically introduced previously in Tod's picture, but their riot at the premiere, in which Tod becomes involved, occurs spontaneously, without specific intent of engulfing Homer or Tod. The plot of Miss Lonelyhearts could at least be partially bound by causality because it deals with development and change in

89 Ibid., 32.
a character who is representative, whereas the plot of *The Day of the Locust* deals with characters who do not develop, whose problems are static, but who are used to build up a picture of life and society. Thus it is that Richard Gehman calls *The Day of the Locust* "episodic in structure, but panoramic in form,"90 consisting as it does of a loose plot which broadly sweeps over a large area of life. The episodic nature of West's plot in the novel, the feverish search or journey on the part of a central hero, is appropriate to the theme of the novel—the meaningless nature of life. The novel's main structural fault, however, lies not in the loose, episodic nature of the plot, but rather in the handling of the point of view, which is our next consideration.

According to one critic: "Analysis of story structure can go but a little way without employing the term 'point of view,' thus introducing a structural principle of the widest implications."91 And modern criticism has generally come to accept the idea that there is always one best point of view from which to tell a story. But why this is so is not always grasped. The question is both asked and answered by Grabo when he says: "Why should a point of view once adopted be maintained if a shift to another seems convenient? There is no moral or even logical objection. The difficulty is imaginative only and inherent in the nature of story telling."92 And in West's previous novels, especially in *Lonelyhearts*, the point of view, rather than causality in terms of plot, served as the main unifying factor in binding the


92 Ibid., 42.
story together. By concentrating on his central character, by making all that happened meaningful in terms of its relation to him, West gave his work psychological and imaginative unity. Thus, we may examine the handling of point of view in *The Day of the Locust* to see whether a similar effect is achieved, and if not, why not.

Richard Gehman has commented on the fact that West had originally written the novel in the first person (as he did with *Miss Lonelyhearts*), with Claude Estee as the narrator; later, upon editorial advice, West changed the story to the third person and shifted his point of view to that of Tod Hackett. The reasons for such a change are perhaps suggested by Percy Lubbock, who speaks of the blurring of the main character that occurs when a story is told in the first person. By using the third person the author keeps a hold on his narrator as an object, yet allows him to gain distance from him, ceasing to render all through his eyes and consciousness, but without substituting the eyes of another. He does this merely by closing the consciousness of the hero. The rule of the method is not broken since it only demands that the author, once deciding to share the viewpoint of his character, does not set up another viewpoint of his own. It does not prevent him from closing the consciousness of his hero at times. Again, by changing from a first to a third person point of view the author is free in time, enabling some parts of the story to be brought into relief (a kind of close-up) while

---


94 The following discussion in this paragraph is all from Lubbock, *Craft of Fiction*, 253, 260-261.
other parts remain in the background. Thus, the point of view is not only with a character in the book, but is that of the author as well, who rounds off and fills in so that the picture becomes more complete. According to Lubbock, though not really confined to the range of one mind, since the mind of the author is lurking behind the eye of his point-of-view character, the focus is not blurred by a double point of view.

In *The Day of the Locust*, West chose as his point of view Tod Hackett, the young artist. Chapters I-VII conduct Tod on his journey; we see the various characters he meets as they appear to him. Then, suddenly, with Chapter VIII Tod is removed from the scene, and for five chapters (through Chapter XII) we learn of Homer’s past life, his reasons for coming to California, his relations with Faye, and his present dull life. Then, with Chapter XIII, Tod is re-introduced as the point of view for the rest of the story. And this was West’s mistake. The focus became badly blurred as a result of this double point of view, even to the extent of causing confusion as to who is the central character of the story, which is discussed under characterization in the present chapter of this study. West did not really have to abandon Tod as his point of view in order to sketch in Homer’s past and present situation and character, for in Chapter XV of the novel we learn of Harry Greener’s background by his relating it to Tod, who has come to visit. A similar device could have been used with Homer, and was used in Chapter XXIV when Homer relates to Tod how he discovered the affair between Faye and Miguel. By splitting his point of view in this manner, West endangered the whole structure of *The Day of the Locust*. The episodic, loose nature of the plot, since it is
not bound together by causality, needs some cohesive element to hold the story together. In the previous novels, especially in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, this knitting together is accomplished by concentrating on a central hero who is also the point of view for the story; all of the characters he meets, and all of the adventures he undergoes, have meaning only in their relation to him. Thus, no matter how episodic, no matter how little causal linkage there is between the incidents in the plot in themselves, the story is yet given psychological unity, and that is all that is necessary in an imaginative work. It is this factor—the mismanagement of point of view—that is really responsible for the structural deficiencies in the story and not the episodic nature of the plot, as most critics have assumed.  

Alan Ross spoke of "a slight slowness in the narrative momentum," and this occurs precisely where West splits his point of view—from Chapters VIII-XII, causing a lengthy suspension of the action in dealing with Homer's past and present background. It is not due to the episodic nature of the plot, since such a method actually speeds up the action of a story. This, of course, is one reason why the movies (which depend upon action and a fast pace) are so fond of such a method. And George Milburn, after condemning the episodic nature of the story as its "worst fault," goes on to say that the novel "is not long enough to carry the shifting back and forth from the lives of Tod Hackett . . . to Homer Simpson . . . without losing force." But this implies a failure in the handling of point of view.

96 Ross, "Novelist-Philosophers," Horizon, XVIII, 294.
more than anything else. Yet Hoffman, after speaking of the failure of point of view in Fitzgerald’s *The Last Tycoon* (1941), goes on to say: "Though Nathanael West’s *Day of the Locust* (1939) has its own reasons for failure, it is much more successful in isolated scenes and in sharpness of focus than Fitzgerald’s fictional view of Hollywood."98 Hoffman never tells us what these "reasons for failure" are, however, and if by "sharpness of focus" he is talking about point of view, he is simply mistaken; more likely he is merely referring to the vivid visual effects which West achieves by the use of significant details and images. To stress the mismanagement of point of view as the main structural fault of the novel, rather than the use of an episodic plot, is not to imply that it is merely a slight technical fault, for the problem goes deeper than that. Edmund Wilson, for example, points out that

Mr. West has introduced a young Yale man [Tod] who, as an educated and healthy human being, is supposed to provide a normal point of view from which the deformities of Hollywood may be criticized: but it is precisely one of the points of the story that this young man should find himself swirling around in the same aimless eddies as the others.99

While it was essential to West’s theme to have Tod Hackett caught up in the frustration and futility which dominate the other characters’ lives, the book lacks an explicit attitude on the part of Tod towards the people he meets and the situations in which he becomes involved. Implicitly, of course, the attitude is there, but one must read between the lines to find it. It would have perhaps been an improvement if West had given his point of view, Tod Hackett, an opportunity to express an attitude overtly, in the manner of Nick Carraway


in The Great Gatsby, for the attitude of the point of view eventually becomes that of the reader himself, and in reading The Day of the Locust one is apt to become confused for lack of a point of reference by which to judge the characters and situations, and, eventually, the meaning of the book as a whole. This objection, of course, deals not so much with the technical handling of point of view as with its quality, and, one is tempted to say, its moral significance. Yet when one is attempting to draw a picture of hell, one must populate it with devils, and for the reader who is both willing and able to read between the lines in West's work, even the absence of high ground from which to judge the story takes on significance. West was never a writer who would drag the hose to the spot, as he himself once said, but merely indicates where the smoke is coming from; and for the purposes of art it is perhaps better to say too little than too much.

Among West's novels there are great differences, to be sure, but it is the similarity persisting in spite of these differences that is important; and the similarity that exists in West's basic structural pattern, as well as in his theme, is particularly striking. The pattern of The Day of the Locust is basically the same as that of Basso Snell, Miss Lonelyhearts, and A Cool Million. Like the heroes of those novels, Tod Hackett undertakes his picaresque journey through life in an attempt to find meaning in the world. He is, of course, unsuccessful in his quest. Each character he meets, whether it

100 Letter from West to Jack Conroy, cited in Gehman, "Introduction," Day of Locust, x.

101 Cf. Chapter I, n. 82.
be Abe Kusich, Claude Estee, Harry Greener, Homer Simpson, or a host of others, is only a symbol of frustration and despair. And the incidents in which Tod becomes involved, whether they be the pornographic movies at Audrey Jennings', the cockfight at Homer's, or his involvement in the riot at the premiere, demonstrate in a particularly forceful, and frequently violent, way just how futile and meaningless life really is, not only in twentieth-century Hollywood but in any place in any moment of history. Unfortunately geometric symbols, such as squares, circles, and triangles, which many critics are so fond of using to characterize the structural pattern of a novel, are inapplicable here, and we must resort to characterizing the pattern of The Day of the Locust as that of a search or journey through life on the part of a central hero. After we have finished reading the book and attempt to see it from beginning to end, the impression stamped upon the mind is that of a search or journey. As we read the book, we are certainly aware of its episodic nature, its rapid shifts from scene to scene; but it is only after we finish reading and reflect back upon the story as a whole from start to finish that we realize the episodes form a structural pattern in the form of a search. The search idea is everpresent, not only occurring in the transition from chapter to chapter, but within the organic units of the book as a whole. We are constantly aware that things are happening, that people are constantly rushing from place to place, as though seeking something they fear has been lost, or perhaps never existed. In the beginning of the novel Tod comes home from work, gets dressed, and is off for Claude's party, which barely gets started when Tod and the other guests are rushing off to Audrey Jennings' place. Again, in Chapter XVIII, the pattern
of the search occurs in Tod's attempting to follow Faye and becoming nightmarishly lost in the maze of a studio lot, where he encounters only symbols of decay and degeneration and defeat ("The Battle of Waterloo" and the collapse of the set). And like any search, the process is filled with haste and fear of failure. West's theme, of course, enters in the failure of the search, the despair of finding meaning and order in the world. Yet the pattern of the search in itself has many implications. No matter how many times Balso Snell, Miss Lonelyhearts, Len Pitkin, and Tod Hackett meet with failure in their search, still they persist in it, even though West shows them that life is useless, that the search is doomed before it has begun. There is the implication that somehow it is worth while, that there is something in man that refuses to accept complete and utter nothingness, that there is at least a dim ray of light in the distance. But all too often the light seems to flicker and go out.

In The Day of the Locust, as in all West's previous work, the theme and structure of the novel are embraced by the formula, the futility of the search for meaning in a meaningless universe. In this novel, however, West, like his artist hero, attempted to paint on a broader, mural-like scale. The Day of the Locust is a more complex novel than Miss Lonelyhearts, introducing a greater number of characters and situations and containing echoes of the nation as a whole from East to West. But in spite of its ambitious nature, it is a less successful novel than the tiny, almost fragile, Miss Lonelyhearts. And this is due not only to its structural deficiencies and lack of concentration, but also perhaps to the fact that West, like the artist Tod Hackett, has
been engulfed by the despair and futility surrounding him, for in The Day of
the Locust the vision of paradise, faintly glimmering in the distance, has
been blotted out, and only darkness remains.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Although the foregoing chapters have been concerned with demonstrating the theme and structure of each of West's novels, lest the relation between these two aspects in all of West's work be overlooked, we may here summarize the results of the present study as a whole. West's theme is imperfectly stated in his first novel, The Dream Life of Balso Snell, but as one critic has remarked, "Balso was an inverted book, a young man's intellectual parlor trick performed chiefly for his own amusement and that of those inner-circle friends he permitted to watch." As a first book it is bitter and extremist, yet well written. It is anti many things--anti-art and anti-scholarship--but it is mainly anti-life, in the sense that it undertakes to show the futility of man's actions in a chaotic universe. And West's theme--the meaningless nature of life at all times and places in history--is everywhere demonstrated. Symbols such as that of the tragic clown and the circle imagery--as well as the grotesque characters, the Trojan Horse setting, and the style--point to the meaningless nature of life itself. And, significantly enough, the conclusion is reached after an examination of the self, after a plunge into the ego.

West's second novel, Miss Lonelyhearts, brings the quest for meaning out of the self into the everyday world of twentieth-century life. The search for meaning is now told in terms of a young reporter who attempts to forestall the collapse of all values by assuming an identification with Christ. But just as Miss Lonelyhearts fails to find anything to sustain him in art, hedonism, or sex, so too his eventual identification with Christ proves meaningless. Fundamentally his problem is without solution, for a solution implies meaning, but the meaningless nature of life precludes any answer. Again, the symbols, such as the letters Miss Lonelyhearts receives, the characters, such as Shrike and Doyle, and other aspects of the novel, all testify to the futility which exists in this world. The surface simplicity of the novel—the story of a reporter who conducts an advice-to-the-lonely-and-heartbroken column—should not blind one to West's central theme of the futility of life, as represented by the meaningless nature of religious experience. West could have chosen another popular form of "salvation," such as science, in terms of which to explore his central idea, but the outcome would have been the same, for no area of human activity is exempt when the universe is essentially without purpose.

After the artistic, if not financial, success of Miss Lonelyhearts West wrote A Cool Million, a potboiler written to a publisher's deadline. The important thing about this comic-strip Candide, aside from its stylistic deficiencies, is the clear connection in terms of theme it forms with West's previous work. Because West chose to reveal his central obsession in terms of a young man who unsuccessfully attempts to find success according to the American economic ideal, it was hailed by many critics as a "political" or
"social purpose" book. And if isolated and read apart from West's other novels it may seem that West was joining the social protest school of the Thirties. Not only the story itself, but the author's failure to penetrate beneath the surface matter of the narrative, its lack of symbolism, for example, tended to give this impression. But when placed in a frame of reference with the other novels, it can be seen that West was only utilizing the contemporary failure of the American economic ideal to voice his own belief that life is essentially without meaning; the author is only signifying in new terms his preoccupation with chaos and futility. Aside from the fact that the American economic ideal had fallen flat in the Thirties, confirming in a particular way West's own conviction, it would have mattered little whether he had told his story in terms of a different economic ideal, such as communism, for example. Lem Pitkin would only have become Ivan Nevsy, and the futility of the collectivized society would have been no less complete than that of rugged individualism. Life, no matter what political or economic form it took, is devoid of meaning was West's theme in A Cool Million.

After the failure of A Cool Million, West recovered his talents and wrote The Day of the Locust, his fourth and final novel. Like Scott Fitzgerald, West had a strong "sense that life is essentially a cheat."² And it is not strange that The Day of the Locust was originally entitled The Cheated. But whereas Fitzgerald all too often felt cheated of the material benefits of


the very rich in this world, West felt cheated of the meaning that was supposed to exist in life. And this feeling, though present in all his previous work, is perhaps more complexly expressed in *The Day of the Locust* than in any other novel. In the story of Tod Hackett, who seeks his own development as an artist and an insight into the order of things, West embraced his central theme—-the meaningless nature of life. It is not a criticism of life in Hollywood, any more than *Baise Snell* was a criticism of life in the ancient world, or *Miss Lonelyhearts* a criticism of life in New York (although the novels must of course treat of a particular time and place), but rather a cosmic despair about life at any time in any place. The symbols West uses here—"The Burning of Los Angeles" and the "mob"—are different from those used in the earlier novels, to be sure, but their essential meaning is the same, just as the characters have been given new names without their essential meaning having been changed. Just as Miss Lonelyhearts is killed as a result of becoming involved in the sordid lives of those around him (specifically, that of the Doyles, who are representative), so Tod Hackett is destroyed in his attempt to help Homer Simpson, a living example of "the people who came to California to die." Painted in technicolored imagery, *The Day of the Locust* vividly brings to a close West's vision of life as a meaningless cage in which man is securely and everlastingly trapped; bereft of hope, facing only frustration and futility, he can only look forward to death as a blissful and welcome release.

The reasons for West's central theme, his obsession that life was hopeless, are largely unknown, and the lack of a detailed biography of the
man is no doubt a contributing factor. As one critic has pointed out:

Aside from knowing that he was a native New Yorker, born in 190h, and that he reached maturity during the between wars period, there are very few salient facts that give a clue to why he was a pessimist. For characteristic as it was of many writers of his generation to be pessimistic, he carried his pessimism much further than most of his contemporaries. Those who really knew him claim that this negative viewpoint colored his complete outlook on life, and, later on, whatever writing he did reflected this bleak attitude.4

West's pessimism is quite unlike that of Hardy, for example, where though the universe is indifferent to man, by chance things may be given a twist for the good as well as for the bad. The wheel of fortune apparently never turns for the better for West, remaining suspended for all eternity at a point marked DESPAIR or FUTILITY. "Life is terrible, that was the despairing conclusion that led nowhere and which was the motive spring for his novels."5

But given West's theme--the meaningless nature of life--that theme can only be expressed in novelistic terms if it is embodied in an appropriate design or structural plan. Yet, as one critic remarks in speaking of an author's philosophical conceptions, "He may write a novel structurally good, imagining that life is a chaos, and one structurally false, thinking it an order."6 In The Dream Life of Balso Snell the plot dispenses with causality, following instead a dream-like illogicality that is in keeping with the nature of the fantasy. Though the plot is episodic and loose, by its concentration on Balso Snell as both point of view and central character the novel has at

5 Ross, "Novelist-Philosophers," Horizon, XVIII, 287.
6 Muir, Structure of Novel, 11.
least psychological unity. In reality, the adventures of Balso Snell take the form of a search for meaning in life, and it is this search that becomes the overall structural pattern for the novel.

In Miss Lonelyhearts the element of causality operates more strongly than in Balso Snell, yet it is still relatively weak in comparison, for example, with the plot of a "well-made" play or novel. The plot is still episodic at least until the complication in the story begins. Rather than causality, the point of view is the real unifying factor in the book. The incidents or episodes which go to make up the story as a whole are in the form of a search on the part of Miss Lonelyhearts, who seeks meaning in art, hedonism, and the religious experience, only to find them all equally valueless. And the search is life-like--episodic and nervous, almost hysterical, as though the fear of failure had been present in Miss Lonelyhearts from the beginning.

Although A Cool Million is in many ways West's least characteristic novel, yet it does exhibit his characteristic theme and basic structural design. True causality is lacking, and the story is given a semblance of unity by concentration on the figure of Lem Pitkin, who undergoes a series of adventures in the picaresque tradition. Each incident in which Lem becomes involved, of course, ends with failure, and gradually the search-failure pattern comes to encompass the whole book, providing a structural framework that is essentially the same as that prevailing in West's other novels.

Several years of writing for the films on West's part may have influenced the design of The Day of the Locust. Aside from its episodic tendency, his last novel could almost be analyzed in movie terms according to
fade-in, fade-out, close-up, long-shot, tracking-shot, and montage, to mention only a few. But West's characteristic structural design was really determined, as it had been in all the previous books, by his obsession that life was meaningless, and his experience in working for the movies in Hollywood only served to sharpen certain talents which he had previously possessed.

The plot here, as in West's previous work, pays little heed to causality, being concerned rather with introducing a succession of characters and scenes embracing incidents which are to have their meaning in terms of their relation to Tod Hackett, the central character. The loose, episodic nature of the plot is particularly noticeable here because it lacks the concentrated effect produced by adhering to the single point of view which prevailed in the other novels. Much of the psychological unity that was achieved in West's earlier works by concentration on the central character, relating all characters and events to their effect upon him, is here lost. Yet the basic structural pattern that prevailed in the other novels is also present here. Tod Hackett, no less so than Balso Snell, Miss Lonelyhearts, or Lon Fitkin, is engaged in a search for the meaning of life. His search is more complex, covering more ground, but it is no more successful, for it is a search for a non-existent goal.

For some readers the plots of West's novels will appear as major faults. Somehow the very words "loose" or "episodic" when applied to plot carry a disapproving tone, while a "tight" plot carries universal approbation. But in reality there is no inherent reason why an episodic plot should be thought of as bad, or a tight, closely knit plot as good. The function of
structure is imaginative, not moral, and any structure that successfully works out the meaning or theme of the novel as a whole should meet with our approval as one critic says: "Form is the objectifying of idea, and its excellence, it would seem, depends upon its appropriateness to the idea." In West's novels the "idea" or theme is the meaningless nature of life. The structure of the novels undertakes to show how, by what process, life is discovered to be without meaning. After all, West was not writing tracts, where the ideas are simply stated, but novels, in which characters and situations are used concretely to dramatize, to render actively, the central idea or theme. This process of discovering the meaningless nature of life is carried out in terms of a search on the part of the central character. To speak of West's novels as loose or episodic is to characterize only the relative degree of causality present in the plot, which is only one element (if a chief one, to be sure) in the total design of the books. The overall structure of West's novels, the pattern formed by the incidents in the plot and their relation to the point of view, can only be spoken of in terms of the theme of the search. Thus, both theme and structure are embraced in the formula the futility of the search for meaning in life, and it may be seen that the structure of West's novels is not only appropriate to his theme, but is determined by the author's conception of life. And this is perhaps what John Peale Bishop meant when he claimed that the meaning of a novel exists in its structure and not in the words alone.8

---

8 Bishop, cited in Schorer, Foreword, Critiques and Essays, xiii.
Though the central purpose of this study—the relations of theme and structure in West's novels—has been completed, the ramifications of such a study go far beyond the scope of this paper. But at least one of them—that of West's importance and relation to the literary world of his day and ours—may be tentatively explored here. West was no genius, but he did have one mark of the artist who is of more than ephemeral importance—the capacity to develop. As Alan Ross said:

Perhaps the most remarkable things about West's career are its unevenness and its development. West's early associations and writings are bitter, extremist, near surrealist and aggressive. The criticism underlying them is based on a disgust that is not far from hysteria, and which in a book like The Dream Life of Balso Snell is coupled with a complete disregard for any audience. So the language is obscure, extravagant, privately allusive and contemptuously scatological.

Yet from this unrelated little essay in intellectual gauchery, West could suddenly strip his writing of all pretence, of all arrogant obscurantisms, and produce a novel of the direct and economic intensity of Miss Lonelyhearts, in which every word is used exactly and functionally—and then again, immediately after, in A Cool Million write a hurried, exaggerated allegory without a phrase of distinction. Only several years later, when he had got through his incubatory period in Hollywood, and had written The Day of the Locust, was it apparent that West was somewhere on the way to integrating his gifts, to merging his bitterness and savagery into a wider, more organic pattern. 9

Many American writers of importance—Hemingway, Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner, to mention only a few—have been uneven writers who produced artistically unsuccessful books. And West also had his failures in Balso Snell and A Cool Million; but with the exception of Fitzgerald, whose best work was probably done before his death, the writers previously mentioned have all lived long enough to get the best out of their talent, whereas West was killed at thirty-six, a very young age for a novelist to die. West's best novels

9 Ross, "Novelist-Philosophers," Horizon, XVIII, 267.
stand in somewhat the same artistic relationship to each other as Fitzgerald's best work does. Miss Lonelyhearts, like The Great Gatsby, is small in scope but almost perfectly executed as a work of art, while The Day of the Locust, like Tender Is the Night, though less perfect in execution and form, attempts to do far more, is more complex and ambitious, than the earlier novel. Among some of the more formally successful novels produced in America, such as The Sun Also Rises, The Great Gatsby, and The Sound and the Fury, Miss Lonelyhearts certainly deserves a place; and stylistically West ranks with the best of our writers. It is all the more difficult, therefore, to determine why West's reputation, in spite of his small output, should be so slight, why he should be virtually ignored by the literary histories.

One of the probable reasons would seem to be his original critical reception. Richard Gehman remarked: "The critics, particularly those in the newspapers, seemed unable to be objective when reviewing West's books. They were either wildly enthusiastic or scathingly scornful, and many of them went out of their way to chastise West for his [occasional] 'bad taste.'"10 And after The Day of the Locust appeared, in a letter to Scott Fitzgerald, West said: "So far the box score stands: Good reviews—fifteen per cent, bad reviews—twenty-five per cent, brutal personal attacks—sixty per cent."11 Gradually, through neglect and misunderstanding, West was relegated to the position of a coterie writer and all but forgotten. In a contemporary review of The Day of the Locust, George Milburn said:


11 Letter from West to Fitzgerald, ibid., xii.
It is hard to see why Nathanael West should ever have become... a 'coterie writer.' The comedy of his novel about forlorn clowns should make it popular, because it has the same ineffable appeal which caused millions to go to see Charlie Chaplin. But the chances are that comparatively few readers will greet this novel by the author of 'Miss Lonelyhearts' with the enthusiasm it deserves.\textsuperscript{12}

Another factor that has played a part in West's neglect is the tragic comedy of his publishing history. As Gehman says,

His publishing history was a bitter farce such as he himself might have thought up. The Dream Life of Balso Snell was printed by a small avant-garde firm, and was noticed only in the little magazines; Miss Lonelyhearts was brought out by Liveright only a few weeks before the firm went out of business; A Cool Million was published by Covici-Friede, and went quickly to the remainder tables; and The Day of the Locust sold only about 14,400 copies, thereby prompting Bennett Cerf of Random House to write West, 'By God, if I ever publish another Hollywood book, it will have to be "My 39 Ways of Making Love" by Hedy Lamarr.'\textsuperscript{13}

Fortunately, today West's best works are being republished,\textsuperscript{14} but characteristically the movement was not initiated in America, but in Europe. Speaking of the French enthusiasm for American books, Malcolm Cowley states:

Not only were the French translating or planning to translate dozens of the more prominent American novelists and the plays of Eugene O'Neill; they were also discovering and publishing, in the midst of a paper shortage, American books that had been largely neglected at home; for example the fantastic Miss Lonelyhearts, by Nathanael West, which had been pub-

\textsuperscript{12} Milburn, "The Hollywood Nobody Knows," Saturday Review, XX, 11.

\textsuperscript{13} Gehman, "Introduction," Day of Locust, xi.

lished here in 1933 and had promptly gone out of print.15

And, as one critic has recently remarked, "Perhaps it is only now, when some of West's books are again being made available, that he will reach the wider audience, with a different view on both him and his times, of which he was originally deprived."16

Perhaps the major reason for West's notable absence from the literary histories is that he is so different from most of the writers of his time. The Thirties in the literary histories are almost invariably discussed in terms of the school of social protest, and a writer who cannot be conveniently stuffed into this category is in danger of being ignored lest he destroy the convenient organization of the work. Richard Gehman points out that while West's friends and contemporaries were writing novels of social protest in the Thirties, West himself "always stood a little apart from them in philosophy and in the climate and character of his novels."17 And from West's background we can see that the depression, which hit writers as a group particularly hard, did not materially affect him. Coming from a rather well-to-do family, he spent his youth and college days in time of rare prosperity; returning from Europe, he took a rather well-paid job as manager of two respectable hotels; and during the middle and late Thirties he was working for the movies, a job that provided him with not only the necessities and basic comforts of life,


16 Ross, "Novelist-Philosophers," Horizon, XVIII, 296.

but a certain amount of leisure time in which to do his real writing as well. From the beginning the more perceptive critics, sometimes to their dismay, noticed that West was writing apart from the characteristic concerns of his day. Reviewing Miss Lonelyhearts along with three other novels, William Troy, after commenting on their negative characteristic of lacking the proletarian self-consciousness of the day, said:

there is nowhere in these novels any effort to relate the vicissitudes of the characters to any particular economic system. There is no evidence that for these writers the hardships of the body have yet replaced in interest or in importance the more traditional and possibly more complicated hardships of the soul.

For a writer who could see it, the economic collapse of the Thirties was only the most striking visible collapse of something much more fundamental. Alan Ross said:

Somewhere hidden, Man was being anonymously pinned down with the weight of suffering on his back, this noisy civilized burden demanding a new martyrdom. It is this ruthless outline of collapse (of all values) that Nathanael West created more savagely and poetically than any other contemporary writer in his two important novels Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust—blueprints of the faithless Christ-symbols that in the end stood for the American common man, like bitter flowers, as he lay on the ground at the stockades of his own defeat.

And it is everywhere clear that for West what might be called the moral predicament of his characters transcended political or economic considerations.

As Richard McLaughlin points out:

18 The other three novels were Vincent McHugh's Sing Before Breakfast, George Weller's Not to Eat, Not for Love, and Clifton Cuthbert's Thunder Without Rain.

19 William Troy, "Four Newer Novelists," Nation, XXXVI, June 14, 1933, 672.

20 Ross, "Novelist-Philosophers," Horizon, XVIII, 206.
His was a private protest. While others were turning out social protest novels at white heat, West stood apart and chose to reflect on the tragic implications of human existence that never altered for the individual no matter how economically secure he might become. To him nearly all Americans (and man in general, one might add) were lost or alone or both.21 And West himself once said in a letter to a friend, "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..."22 In choosing to be an artist rather than a reformer, West "stands apart from most of the other Americans who were writing in the Thirties, and for this reason his writing is far more likely to remain with us."23

It is perhaps significant that the school of social protest in the Thirties was, for the most part, committed to naturalism, both in thought and technique. The gargantuan novels of such prolific writers as Farrell, Dreiser, Wolfe, and others are all too often badly digested (and badly written) slices of experience. All too often the interest they may and do have for the reader is not that of the novel. In Farrell art gives way to sociology; in Wolfe the novel becomes lost among the dithyrambic rhythms of the pulsating ego. What one may call West's naturalism occurs principally in the distortions he employs in his drawing of character. The physical deformities of his characters, however, are only indicative of a spiritual state; their animalism is not the result of a natural state, but the result of spiritual

21 McLaughlin, "West of Hollywood," Theatre Arts, XXV, 47.
22 Letter from West to Jack Conroy, cited in Gehman, "Introduction," Day of Locust, x.
suffocation. West's naturalism is not systematized, nor does it become a hopeful answer for man's dilemma as, for example, Dreiser's "chaos" does. West is completely different from a writer like Farrell because he can raise his naturalism to a symbolical level. And in technique West differs from the naturalists in that his interest is not in size, in amassing detail upon detail, in order to paint the whole of life; rather, he was an impressionist in the sense that he could select the significant word or feature that would make a scene come alive. But West's place in relation to his contemporaries in the Thirties has never been properly evaluated, and Alan Ross points out:

Despite the fact that out of his four books only two can be called successful, West's slightness of reputation is not easy to understand. For Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust rank almost with any novels that came out of America in the thirties—more condensed, penetrating and poetic than many, that with much larger scope and subsequent recognition, purported to give the lie to the American scene.  

Then, too, the writer who stands apart from his times is generally of less interest to the literary historian than one in which the subject of "influences" can be brought to bear, and West stands outside the native American tradition. As Edmund Wilson points out:

The development of West as a writer had taken place largely outside the tradition to which the other novelists of Hollywood [or America] belong. He derived rather from those post-war French writers who had specialized, with a certain precocity, in the delirious and diabolic fantasy that had in turn come out of Rimbaud and Lautréamont.  

It may be noted that such practitioners of symbolism as Poe, Rimbaud, and Baudelaire were also the forerunners of Surrealism, in which symbolism plays

---

24 Ross, "Novelist-Philosophers," Horizon, XVIII, 296.

25 Wilson, Boys in Bexk Room, 67.
an important part; and West is also related to Symbolism by way of his surrealist affinities, previously mentioned in this study. If West has American affinities it is by way of his philosophical approach to his materials, what Edmund Wilson calls his "poetic-philosophic point of view," which places him in the tradition of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville with their concern for metaphysical speculation rather than with the more pragmatic approach that is characteristic of American thought.

Another aspect of West's work that has been ignored is his contribution to the development of American humor, which by itself makes him important. As one contemporary critic pointed out:

American literature of recent years has produced very little vigorous humor. There are indications, however, that certain of the younger writers, notably Erskine Caldwell and Nathanael West, are attempting to restore the comic view of life to its legitimate place in art. . . . Their works may ultimately form a contribution to our literature and enrich the tradition of native humor. West's humor is quite outside the usual vein of tall-story exaggeration practised by our native American humorists. It consists, rather, in a subtle blend of comedy and tragedy, belonging wholly to neither but using elements of both. Commenting on Miss Lonelyhearts' eventual destruction by the very people he tries to help, one critic said, "It is an ironic and bitter humor that arises from such a dilemma--quite unlike the merely amusing type of New Yorker fun-poking at superficialities. Mr. West pierces beneath the surface


27 Wilson, Boys in Back Room, 63.

28 T. C. Wilson, Saturday Review, IX, 589.
of his material."

At least West did not make the mistake of so many of his contemporaries—the attempt to make tragic epics out of unsuitable materials. Reviewing Miss Lonelyhearts, Wilson points out: "Mr. Dreiser would have made a tragedy out of this material; Mr. West, in making a satiric comedy of it, has perhaps given a more adequate rendering of men whose warped lives do not offer any theme considerable enough for tragedy." And Richard Gehman points out that while West too considered life in the twentieth century a wasteland, like so many other contemporary writers, unlike them "he chose to reflect that life in terms not of characters who were consciously involved in a struggle, but of those who were unconsciously trapped—characters who were, in the blindness of their lives, so tragic as to be true comic figures." Though based upon irony and the bitter laugh, resulting from the contrast between man's aspirations and his achievements, West's satire is without Swiftian disgust for humanity. Rather, he realizes what a sad thing it is to be human, to have the ideals of gods and the humanity of men; and like the clowns in the circus, his humormingles laughter with the weeping of invisible tears.

In concluding our discussion of West's importance and some of the factors that have militated against a true view of his place in the literary world of his day, we may briefly ask what relation he bears to those writers today who, no matter how different in their individual work, form a convenient group by reason of their religious faith. The present writer is speaking, of

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
course, of Greene, Mauriac, Bernanos, and a host of others. At first glance there would seem to be no relation between West and these writers, for as one critic said: "To suggest that West's novels have a religious flavor about them may seem nothing short of sacrilege to readers who have only dipped into his books." But West is related to this group of writers nonetheless. Somehow tragedy seems to gravitate naturally towards sin, and particularly sins of the flesh seem to be one of its constant elements; and the Catholic writers (to use a weak phrase) have, for the most part, attempted to deal with tragedy, and sins of the flesh are frequently present in their works. West does not deal directly with tragedy, but his novels do contain tragic overtones and implications, and the conflict between the devil and the flesh is also there, though not in theological terms. One critic, for example, says "there is an almost ascetic, saint-like aversion to the flesh that comes through on nearly every page of The Day of the Locust." The statement applies even more so to Miss Lonelyhearts, one might add.

Primarily, of course, it is by way of his pessimism that West is related to these writers, for most of them have, at one time or another, been influenced by Pascal. At first glance the Catholic critic (to use another weak phrase) will dismiss West's theme—the meaningless nature of life—as a false view of things; yet the position does have a certain validity if qualified! As one writer has said, "There is an abyss of nothingness at the very heart of

---

33 Ibid.
our being. . . ." The same writer goes on to explain that "apart from the knowledge of God, man really is doomed to live in a meaningless universe, and he can but grow weary of the effort to live a meaningful life in a context that has no meaning." In effect this is the kind of picture West paints—a world apart from God and untouched by His grace. Within the terms of the world he creates, West's theme cannot only be justified, but is eminently right. The Catholic writers have also been obsessed by the meaningless nature of life apart from God. Mauriac, for example, has said: "The picture I have painted is indeed black. It shows mankind as warped, as showing to the world a mask fixed in a hard and hateful grimace. It shows humanity untouched by grace." The grace does break through, however, even if somewhat late, but not until "the very last sentence, almost the very last word. . . ." West merely carries the process one step further—the grace never does break through. We have, of course, only one hint of God's relation to man in West's novels, and that occurs in Chapter X of The Day of the Locust, where Homer watches a lizard devouring flies. God for West remains impersonal, standing wholly apart from the characters' lives, never interfering with but always watching their pitiful struggles. Just as the Westian world is filled with frustration, futility, and

35 Ibid., 333.
37 Ibid., 3.
38 Cf. Chapter V, pp. 124-125, of the present study.
despair, so too in the world created by the modern Catholic writer is this attitude dominant. The qualitative difference, of course, is in the fact that while West's characters are doomed forever to such a life, are in hell already, the characters in the Catholic writer's world may possibly, in the very end, find salvation through grace.

Although it is true, as Alan Ross says, that for "West there was no religious redemption to be found in human weakness, no transfiguring sense of good-and-evil, no compensation in the physical life," it would perhaps be unjust to call him a nihilist, not because his novels offer any explicit positive values, but rather because of the spirit in which they are written. If we may, for the moment, accept Nietzsche's definition of a nihilist as "one who judges of the world as it exists that it should not be, whereas he says of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist," we see that it applies as well to the idealist who has become disappointed by existing imperfections. West was this kind of idealist, and the great gap between what men are and what they should be, the gap between what they did and what they should do, provided him with the spectacle of man caught in a meaningless trap. Man's futile endeavor to find a way out of the trap, his puny intellect combating the unknown, was perhaps comic because of the inequality of man against life; but it was also tragic, because man was, though insignificant, still man, because he possessed ideals and aspirations, because his illusions, which would eventually prove

fatal, were born out of despair and desperation and a great need. If we lose
sight of West's novels, if we forget what he has written about and the reasons
for those writings, then in a large degree we will have also lost insight into
ourselves and our world, for what West can and does give us is an understanding
of what it means to be human--the horror of it all.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. PRIMARY SOURCES

A. BOOKS


B. PUBLICATIONS IN PERIODICALS


West, Nathanael, "The Dear Public," *Americana: A Magazine of Satire and Humor*, I, August, 1933, 29. (Contains a chapter from *Balso Snell*).

West, Nathanael, "Excerpt," *Americana: A Magazine of Satire and Humor*, I, September, 1933, 25. (Contains a chapter from *Balso Snell*).


West, Nathanael, "Miss Lonelyhearts on a Field Trip," *Contact: An American Quarterly Review*, I, October, 1932, 50-57.

II. SECONDARY SOURCES

A. BOOKS


B. ARTICLES


Matthews, T. S., New Outlook, CLXII, July, 1953, 58. (Review of Miss Lonelyhearts)


"Neglected Novelist," Newsweek, XXXVI, September 4, 1950, 77-78.

New York Times, November 23, 1938, 24h. (Closing notice of Good Hunting)

New York Times, December 23, 1940, 23. (Obituary notice for Nathanael West and wife)

Review of A Cool Million, Nation, CXXXIX, July 25, 1934, 112.


Review of The Day of the Locust, Time, XXXIII, June 19, 1939, 81.

Review of Miss Lonelyhearts, Boston Evening Transcript, July 26, 1933, pt. 4, p. 2.


Review of Miss Lonelyhearts, New Republic, LXXIV, April 26, 1933, 314.


Solomon, L. B., Nation, CXLIX, July 15, 1939, 78-79. (Review of The Day of the Locust)

Stevens, G. George, Saturday Review of Literature, X, June 30, 1934, 784. (Review of A Cool Million)


Wilson, T. C., Saturday Review of Literature, IX, May 13, 1933, 589. (Review of Miss Lonelyhearts)

C. ARTICLES IN BOOKS


APPENDIX

THREE MODERN MOVEMENTS: THEIR INFLUENCE ON WEST

Although passing mention has already been made in the present study of West's surrealist and naturalist tendencies, no mention of his affinity with Existentialism has been made. Since Surrealism, Naturalism, and Existentialism have been three of the characteristic movements of the twentieth century, we may here make a brief attempt to discern what influence they have had upon West's work. Richard Gehman points out that while West sometimes used the enormous contrasts and incongruities of the Surrealists, he refused to identify himself with the movement, and even protested angrily when Clifton Fadiman attempted to stick the Surrealist label on him; but in spite of this, as Gehman says, "the paintings and writings of their 'official' school affected him profoundly when he first came across them in Paris, and his feeling for their destructive derision, their preoccupation with decay and degeneracy and disintegration was indisputably emphatic. . . ." The three basic principles of Surrealism, as formulated by Nicholas Calas, are Objective Hazard, Estrangement of Sensation, and Black Bile. We may briefly examine these concepts for their

1 Gehman, "Introduction," Day of Locust, x.


173
bearing on West's work. **Objective Hazard** is basically the idea that life is strange, full of mysterious chances and mischances that have symbolic meaning.\(^3\) An example of this in West's novels occurs in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, where the young reporter rushes to greet the cripple out of love and is accidentally shot by him out of fear of being attacked. It is a chance event, occurring at the very moment when Miss Lonelyhearts has achieved his identification with Christ, which symbolizes the futility of any escape out of the blind trap of life. The same kind of thing occurs in Tod's involvement in the riot in *The Day of the Locust*, where he is accidentally caught up and destroyed in the mob, of which Homer is the living representative. In Christian terms Objective Hazard may be thought of as the result of blindness or misinterpretation on man's part to fathom God's plan for the universe; and West's concept of God as standing wholly outside His creatures' lives, unwilling or unable to give guidance to their actions, provides an ironic contrast for the characters' vain attempts to seek a meaningful solution to their problems while acting in utter darkness.

**Estrangement of Sensation**, the second basic principle of Surrealism, involves a shocking or startling juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous images or ideas which ignores usual or logical associations.\(^4\) One critic has said:

> in this practice, I believe, lies the chief contribution of the Surrealists. It links them with the long tradition of the grotesque, the recurrent horse-laugh at propriety and pretentiousness. It leads to the strategy that Kenneth Burke calls 'perspective by incongruity,' which is

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Ibid.
the method not only of paradox and epigram but of all revolutionary art and all highly original art."

Basically this is the technique West employs in his use of what one might call symbolic imagery. Though occurring more strongly in Miss Lonelyhearts (on almost every page), such scenes in The Day of the Locust as Tod's wandering through the studio lot, his contemplation of the Sargasso of the imagination, and his view of the filming of "The Battle of Waterloo" are all constructed by juxtaposing odd and incongruous images so that a new, symbolic whole is formed out of seemingly opposed or unrelated images or ideas. It is perhaps this aspect of West's technique that is responsible for his work's being referred to as "fantastic"; in reality, of course, it is "a way of seeing around corners, getting outside of rigid, conventional attitudes that blunt our perceptions as well as limit our conceptions."6

Black Bile, the third basic principle of Surrealism concerns the bitter and ironic humor present in much of surrealist writing. As one writer comments: "Distortions are extremely funny, and the lip that curls in a frightful grimace as a result of acute pain, not necessarily physical, a pain which causes the bile to turn black, is also extremely funny."7 West employs this type of humor frequently in his work, particularly in connection with his concept of the clown, which embraces both the comic and the tragic. It is the kind of humor that results from a tragedy so absolute and complete that it be-

5 Ibid., 560.
6 Ibid.
7 Nicholas Calas, "Towards a Third Surrealist Manifesto," New Directions 1949, 111.
comes funny with the humor of madness and desperation; constant frustration, bitter disappointment, and the complete absence of any hope are its characteristic ingredients.

Thus, West's surrealist affinities occur principally in the area of technique. The concept of Objective Hazard is present in some degree in West's symbolic situations, and Black Bile sometimes influences his humor; but it is in the idea of Estrangement of Sensation, which is for the most part a matter of his style, that West has his closest affinity with Surrealism. When West denied his associations with Surrealism, it is probable he was denying the philosophical or "thought" aspects of the movement (such as the belief in unconscious writing) and its political leanings (which were communist), rather than his technical affinity with it. And rather than forming his pessimistic bent of mind, the surrealist preoccupation with negativity probably only appealed to a tendency already present in his thinking.

Although West is outside the main tradition of Naturalism, he nevertheless does use naturalism as a technique in his drawing of character. According to Malcolm Cowley,

Naturalism has been defined in two words as pessimistic determinism and the definition is true so far as it goes. The naturalistic writers were all determinists in that they believed in the omnipotence of abstract forces. They were pessimists so far as they believed that many men and women were absolutely incapable of shaping their own destinies. 8

West embraced half the formula and carried that half further than it had been carried before—his pessimism is so complete that it cancels out the determin-

ist belief in even the "omnipotence of abstract forces," which were, for the most part, the laws of physical science. For West meaning in the world was a chimera, and neither science nor religion nor political economy could provide a real solution for man's problem, for no solution exists. West's characters are not incapable of shaping their own destinies because of any deterministic forces, but because they are completely lost and isolated from any directing force whatsoever. It is this aspect of his work that makes West's characters seem like the unreflecting animals of much naturalistic fiction; deprived of spiritual direction they can only sink back into their animal nature. In other words, the naturalist views man as composed only of flesh and blood and instinct as his natural and right condition, whereas West portrays his characters as animals solely because their spirit—which distinguishes them as men—has been nearly blotted out by the kind of lives they lead. It is in this sense that West's naturalism goes beyond itself and becomes symbolic. Then, too, West's technique goes far beyond that of our traditional naturalists. Mark Schorer maintains:

The techniques of naturalism inevitably curtail subject and often leave it in its original area, that of undefined social experience. Those of our writers who, stemming from this tradition, yet, at their best, achieve a novelistic definition of social experience—writers like the occasional Sherwood Anderson, William Carlos Williams, the occasional Erskine Caldwell, Nathaniel (sic) West, and Ira Wolfert in Tucker's People—have done so by pressing naturalism far beyond itself, into positively Gothic distortion. The structural machinations of Dos Passos and the lyrical interruptions of Steinbeck are the desperate maneuvers of men committed to a method of whose limitations they despair.9

The above mentioned critic, however, seems to have been misled by the similarity

---

of effect produced by West's characters and those of writers stemming from the naturalistic tradition. He does not perceive the difference between the two, for West does not stem from the American naturalistic tradition at all, though it is true, as Schorer maintains, that he presses naturalism into Gothic distortion. Thus, in reality, West merely uses naturalism in his description of character to represent symbolically what happens to man when spiritual poverty and directionless living envelop him. And it is in this sense that West is concerned with man's moral dilemma, for though the word sin never occurs in his books, its effects are everywhere painted in vivid and significant detail.

Perhaps there is some significance in the fact that the three major influences on West all originated in France. Both Naturalism and Surrealism only made themselves felt comparatively late in the work of American writers, and though Existentialism as a philosophy was developed long before, it was not until World War II that it assumed the shape of a unified movement which concretely influenced the work of contemporary writers in France. Though West's work was finished long before Existentialism ever appeared as an influence upon American writing, he does, nevertheless, have existentialist overtones in his best work. Heinrich Straumann states that West was the unconscious forerunner of an Existentialism that did not really appear in American literature until after the end of World War II, of which perhaps Paul Bowles' The Sheltering Sky is the most eloquent expression of man's fear and horror of

---

10 Cf. Chapter VI, pp. 160-161, of the present study for the discussion of the traditions from which West derives.
piercing the sky, of finding complete nothingness beyond human existence.\textsuperscript{11}

Although West's existentialist affinities pervade the whole tone and feeling of his best work (for example, the surrealist principle of Objective Hazard has been all but formally adopted by contemporary existentialist writers), fundamentally it is his philosophical pessimism which relates him to modern Existentialism. Though this movement possesses great variety among its different adherents, the exact sources of West's existentialist thought are difficult to identify. As one writer put it: "Among existentialist thinkers today, there are nihilists and atheists as well as Christian believers."\textsuperscript{12} Regardless of the differences in doctrine of the various "schools" and adherents of Existentialism, all of them "stress the pathos of existence as experienced in either an unrelieved dread or the passionate desire to partake of God's infinity."\textsuperscript{13} While it is true that Existentialism generally sees man as inhabiting a meaningless universe, some adherents of what might be called "religious" existentialism (Jaspers, Marcel) do not deny the universe was created by God for a purpose, but merely affirm that man, in attempting to serve God's will, is acting in darkness; he does not despair, however, since he believes in God's eventual victory. \textsuperscript{14} Rather than with the atheism of Sartre, West would seem to have a closer affinity with the existentialism of Jaspers, Marcel, and, to go back a little further, Kierkegaard. For example, one writer states:

\textsuperscript{11} Heinrich Straumann, \textit{American Literature in the Twentieth Century}, London, 1951, 81.


\textsuperscript{13} Naiboen, \textit{Four Prophets}, 30.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 25.
The supreme interest of Kierkegaard's hero, the subjective thinker, was 'becoming a Christian' as a condition for salvation.

According to Kierkegaard, it is the isolated individual who has to work out his salvation by becoming a Christian; this is achieved in a supreme 'moment' when one embraces 'faith' in an experience incommensurable with the happenings of everyday life.\(^{15}\)

And surely something of this sort takes place in Miss Lonelyhearts, in spite of the fact that the religious experience is deemed futile as a way out of the blind trap of life. Then, too, Kierkegaard's statement that "I too have both the tragic and the comic in me: I am witty and the people laugh—but I cry,"\(^ {16}\) might be taken as West's own view of comedy.

West's existentialist affinities, of course, have not gone unnoticed by European writers and critics. For example, it is interesting to note that although Marcelle Sibon did the translation for the French edition (1946) of Miss Lonelyhearts, nearly a year before Jean-Paul Sartre had been greatly interested in obtaining the translation rights for the novel.\(^ {17}\) Significantly enough, Heinrich Straumann includes West in his survey of modern American literature in Chapter III, entitled "The Fate of Man: The Philosophical Approach," where he comments upon the difficulty of determining which forms of existentialism appeal to the American temperament.\(^ {18}\) According to Straumann:

An American writer courageously defined existentialism as 'the Search

---


16 Kierkegaard, cited in Hubben, Four Prophets, 8.


18 Straumann, American Literature, 79-80.
for the concrete.1 Whatever objections may be raised against this sort of
definition, it indicates at least that, to the American mind, it was less
a new departure than a new way of formulating old problems and of estab-
lishing a link between metaphysical questions and personal experience.

If, however, one adds the criterion that at the end of the search for
the concrete there is death or nothingness as the only certainty the num-
ber of books that tentatively could be labelled as existentialist becomes
more limited.19

Straumann thus includes Miss Lonelyhearts under the existentialist label be-
cause the young reporter "experiences the collapse of what little is left of
the concrete in his world."20 But it is precisely this collapse of concrete
values that makes West's work so different from that of most American writers
—his refusal to accept a pragmatic solution to the plight of man. If West
refuses to accept a religious solution for man's problems, he also refuses to
accept a pragmatic-materialistic answer. As Straumann says of Miss Lonely-
hearts: "The borderline between reality and nightmare is intentionally defaced
and the devastating force at work in the dissolution of all values at all
levels, is only equalled by the power and precision with which symbols and
imagery are handled."21 All values at all levels are indeed shown to be worth-
less, but in Miss Lonelyhearts' attempt to seek reconciliation between a mean-
ingless universe and man's need for an existence in which life and death take
on meaning, there is a profound idealism. The desire to give significance to
man's life is there, but the harsh, brutal facts of reality demand a funda-
mental honesty that must testify to its impossibility. Self-delusion, escape

19 Ibid., 30.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
through art, hedonism, or flight to the South Seas, is at least not the answer; it is far better, in West's view, to accept life as devoid of meaning, even though it entails fear, horror, and anguish. It may be true, as one writer claims, that the existentialist portrayal of nothingness as man's ultimate destiny is a sign of a sick civilization that is morally exhausted and is indicative of how far we have come from the Christian belief in faith to overcome horror, weakness, and fear. But because the artist paints the condition of the world in which he lives, this does not necessarily mean that he approves of that world; rather, in diagnosing the illness which besets us, he enables us to take the first step towards health.

Thus, bearing in mind a necessary degree of over-simplification, the areas of West's work which have been influenced by the three modern movements that have been discussed are the following: the surrealist influence can be most clearly seen in the matter of style, in the odd juxtaposition of unusual images which West employs as a technique; the naturalist influence occurs primarily in West's drawing of character, in his physical description of the grotesques who inhabit his novels; the existentialist influence occurs primarily in the area of thought, in the philosophic pessimism which provides the driving force for his novels. Our brief survey of the influence of these three modern movements upon West has not been intended to be exhaustive; rather, it has only attempted to indicate for future investigators some of the influences which have played a part in shaping West's art. If such a survey has been unsatisfactory, it is because West is not a Surrealist, a Naturalist, or an

22 Hubben, Four Prophets, 163.
Existentialist, but an original—and in that fact alone there is always something both wonderful and disturbing.
APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Richard Waldron has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

1 February 1954

Date

Nicholas Lord

Signature of Adviser