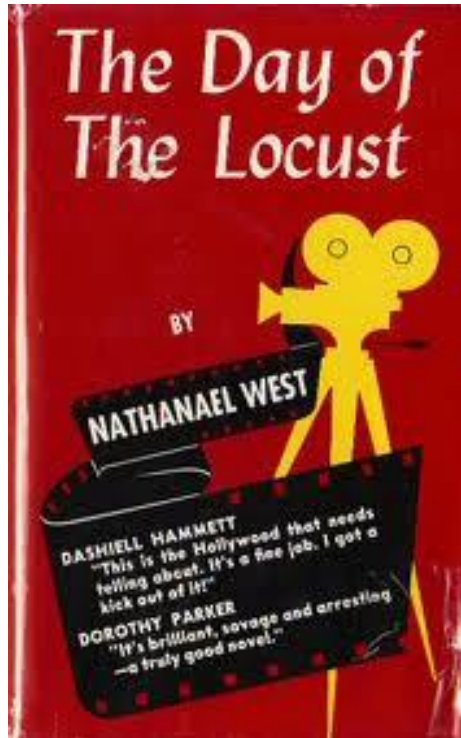


## Culture's Degradation in Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*

P. Ranjithkumar, Ph.D. Research Scholar and Dr. R. Palanivel

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Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Day\\_of\\_the\\_Locust](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Day_of_the_Locust)

### Abstract

This paper will look at the philosophies depicted and caricatured in every novel, appearing on one hand West's want to make development over again and on alternate his inexorably particular worries with communist legislative issues, exhibiting the end hole between his creative drive to shape and style, and his wistfulness and sympathy with the mistreated and the swindled. In *The Day of the Locust* West judgment, not such a large amount of private enterprise, but rather of breaks itself. The grotesquerie, misery, and distress that West observed basic masterful and social conventions merited a level of examination that all workmanship before him had endeavored to stay away from or muddle with binding together hypotheses or subjects of escape. West demonstrated the destructive force and constructive potential in both his writing and his personal life. The novel *The Day of the Locust*— variously attack artistic or political formulae that privilege escape from culture's degradation, or that offer erroneous promises of subjective or cultural wholeness. West's life and art, then, exhibits the usefulness of the mask in the grim battle for the formation of artistic and political subjectivity. The novel of Nathanael West is preoccupied with the

deconstruction of satirizing western culture and parodying its most respected ideologies and literatures; they are also involved in recreating both cultural and personal identity from the deconstructed fragments of this culture by performances of identity.

## Introduction

Nathanael West might have been conceived Nathan Weinstein clinched alongside New York City on October 17, 1903. (He legitimately transformed as much name for 1926.) West was the child for Jewish foreigners Max Weinstein, A prosperous building contractor, Anna Wallenstein Weinstein. Mr. Weinstein needed his son to try under those family business also offered Nathan duplicates about the Horatio Alger books, an arrangement about books done which. straightforward junior men do well to themselves in business. He laid as much path under Tufts University, which expelled him for poor grades; et cetera got himself admitted on tan college by using somebody else's transcripts. West moved on starting with tan to 1924, where he might have been better referred to as much sense for cleverness enthusiasm imparities over any academic abilities.

Then afterward completing college West went through two a considerable length of time over Paris. He was called back of the united states On 1927, as those family's contracting business might have been encountering those initial investment shudders that would become that's only the tip of the iceberg broad over 1929. West's family members discovered him an arrangement of jobs overseeing private hotels in this way that he might gain a living. Through these jobs, West might have been ready to provide a number impoverished writers with without rent discount spots should sit tight previously, New York city and on meet many journalists who might before long get famous, including Dashiell Hammett, Erskine Caldwell Lillian Hellman and encountered with urban decay because of deindustrialization, engineering imagined, government lodgin. J. Perelman, West's brother by marriage. West found those frantic exists from claiming exactly for his tenants fascinating, he might have been referred to steam open Furthermore perused their letters. He disregarded the realist fiction for as much American contemporaries in favor for French surrealist's furthermore British also Irish poets of the 1890s, in particular Oscar Wilde. West's diversions centered on surprising artistic style and in addition surprising substance. He turned into intrigued by Christianity and mysticism, concerning illustration encountered alternately communicated through writing Also craft. Throughout this period, he done as much to begin with book, *The dream of Balso Snell*, and distributed it will very nearly no basic alternately businesses perceive in 1931.

## The Depression

The Depression started early in West's family, with his father's business. Beginning to lag in 1928 and financial troubles that brought West home from Paris early. Martin argues that "the personal disaster of West's hopes preceded the national crash— giving him a feeling of individual bitterness—and also that the national experience of disaster followed soon after his own, imparting, to some extent, a sense of the community of disaster" (106). This financial disaster did not sit well with West, whose parents had inundated him and his sisters with the language and literature of success throughout their lives. It was this rhetoric that West's third novel, *A Cool Million*, would attack, exposing the grinding greed underlying the capitalist cliches of the American Dream. Because of this satire, the novel is important not only in what it exposes but also because it marks the turn in West's work to a much more specifically *American* literature.

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## Focus of This Paper

This paper will inspect the philosophies depicted and ridiculed in every novel, appearing on one hand West's want to make human advancement once more and on alternate his undeniably particular worries with communist governmental issues, exhibiting the end hole between his masterful motivation to frame and style, and his wistfulness and compassion with the mistreated and the deceived.

*The Day of the Locust's* judgment, not such a large amount of free enterprise, but rather of getaways itself. The grotesquerie, sadness, and franticness that West observed hidden masterful and social customs merited a level of examination that all workmanship before him had endeavored to maintain a strategic distance from or jumble with binding together hypotheses or subjects of escape.

## Destruction of Society

The matter of destroying society debasement down to its verifiable roots in established relic appears like no simple undertaking, yet in only one short novel. West oversaw it. After allegorically crushing history and culture, West discovered he allowed utilizing the veil of craftsmanship to build an exact representation of society that delineated its profound ideological clashes and insolvencies, its absence of beliefs and establishments, and its populaces of marginals, abused, and grotesques.

West, frightened by a custom that energized escape from reality, mercilessly assaulted the foundation from inside. The modern age lies wrecked; that human progress is nothing now except for the pieces we have shored against our aggregate destroys. Not regardless of this but rather as a result of it, West and his innovator brethren remain as a Janus-figure, an entryway through which we can glance back at our modern pulverization and forward to our postmodern future.

## The Day of the Locust: Giving the Racket a Front

West's work centered dynamically on more particularly American concerns, and in his last novel he blends his communist sensitivities for the hard-nibbled authenticity. This work assaults American idealism at its root: the fantasy dump of Hollywood. Hollywood here stands as a portrayal of all that is false: it is the externalized universe of the Trojan stallion, the lie advised by American culture to itself. Although, *Locust's* primary focus is satirizing the puerility of American movies and dreams, West aims to make ridiculous a number of other American cultural fixtures. He satirizes psychology once again by introducing his protagonist, Tod Hackett, as “really a very complicated young man, with a whole set of personalities, one inside the other like a nest of Chinese boxes” (242). It is unclear whether the last box in the series contains some sort of prize; perhaps the last box would be empty, implying that Tod's personality, maybe anyone's personality, consists of really nothing.

## American Psyche

Homer Simpson's eventual catatonia is also a damning statement against the American psyche: he has curled into a tense, tight ball and responds to nothing. Tod is unable to explain this behavior any other way than with his pop-psychology knowledge of “Uterine Flight” (372). Tod reminisces on how wonderful this retreat from reality seems to him: “What a perfect escape the return of the womb was...It was so snug and warm there.. No wonders one fought so desperately against being evicted when the nine months' lease was

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up” (372). Homer, of course, has escaped from nothing: the chaos inside him wells up to uncontrollable proportions, and in his final attempt to literally escape from this city of illusions by waiting for a bus out of town, he is assaulted by a small boy whom he hysterically kills, inciting a city-wide riot. The illusion of civilization is so thin and built on such fragile foundations that it takes only one public taboo act to bring the entire construct down in flames. There is no escape in West’s Hollywood: this final conflagration makes clear only the danger of hiding behind the fragments shored against America’s ruins.

### **Examples of Vicious Polemic**

West’s portrait of Hollywood and Los Angeles contains other notable examples of vicious polemic against the things that the citizens of his dream-city were using to achieve a similar kind of romanticized escape; chief among them is West’s tireless reference to popular spiritual fads. Tod observes many of these churches: The “Church of Christ, Physical” where holiness was attained through the constant use of chest weights and spring grips; the “Church Invisible” where fortunes were told and the dead made to find lost objects; the “Tabernacle for the Third Coming” where a woman in male clothing preached the “Crusade Against Salt”; and the “Temple Moderne” under whose glass and chromium roof “Brain-Breathing, the Secret of the Aztecs” was taught (337).

According to the churches are all, of course, absurd, reducing the mission of a serious place of worship and spiritual guidance to glorified health clubs or palmistry studios. The idea that Christ cares about the upper-body strength of his followers is as strikingly absurd as conjuring up the dead just to make them look for a pair of misplaced reading glasses or lost set of keys; running a holy crusade against salt is manifestly foolish. The conflation of the high (a religious institution with a serious spiritual mission) with the low (fictitious Aztec brain-yoga) is a classically dangerous tool for reducing a serious thing to absurdity. This descent into absurdity fills West’s Hollywood: the movie industry makes people ridiculous because the escapes it sells are so insidious. Locust is filled with people who have begun to believe the fantasies they peddle.

Claude Estee, for example, lives in an “exact reproduction of the old Dupuy mansion near Biloxi, Mississippi” (252). Claude has a great deal of fun posing on the porch as a Southern gentleman, where he “teetered back and forth on his heels like a Civil War colonel and made believe he had a large belly” (252). This is all an act: Claude, of course, “had no belly at all. He was a dried up little man with the rubbed features and stooped shoulders of a postal clerk” (252). A familiar routine for him is one in which he called to the butler, “‘Here, you black rascal! A mint julep.’ A Chinese servant came running with a Scotch and soda” (252). Claude is entertaining himself with the performance of some antebellum romance taken from the set of *Gone with the Wind*, but his performance is painfully obvious: he is nothing but a little man with very conventional tastes and an overactive imagination. This escape is the reason that “the starters” have “come to California to die” (242). American life has become so boring, so fixated on illusion, that when the time comes for retirement all these people head to Hollywood in search of the adventure and romance they were promised in films, but once there find the entire affair is phony. Looking for an escape from the useless junk that constitutes their society (as identified by Chief Satinpenny), the starters find out that their culture is a sham, a collection of lies based on illusions.

## Conscious about Their Own Crookedness

Even the people who work to create the escapist world of film know that they are a crooked industry. At one of Claude's parties, some people in the industry propose jokingly that they should "have a Cinema Foundation and make contributions to Science and Art. You know give the racket a front" (255). There is a preoccupation among Claude's guests for making their jobs respectable, if only on the surface. By donating to the vague high culture issues of "Science and Art"—with capital "S" and "A" no less—they add significance to an industry devoted to eliding significance.

Widmer argues that even "given the style of a Juvenal describing Rome, one could not find a fall from Republican virtue to Imperial corruption" in the history of the film industry, because it was "masquerade from the founding" (188). Because of Hollywood's pervasive influence on American culture generally, the Hollywood masquerade portrayed by West could be read as "the insatiable longing for some final masquerade-ending negation. Yet the end to a life of masquerade is only masquerade become all reality" (Widmer 193). By undercutting the false dream of Hollywood's hollow mask, West ends the masquerade for us, revealing the insidious spread of the mask throughout Western culture, from the popular in Hollywood to the classical of Ancient Greece.

This mixture of high and low, of escape and real destroys all conventional boundaries of time, space and history. By situating his narrative in a place where escape and reality are hopelessly intermingled, West can decontextualize and destroy history, and can then, by reordering the monuments of history, remake it. The American identity is indefinable; it is a fine dust of shattered history, art and time, hopelessly mixed and blanched of all meaning. In the parody of the philosophical underpinnings of his country in the early Twentieth century, West had identified the mask that hid the reality of America.

## Conclusion

More important than looking back, however, are the ways of looking forward that West's work and the trope of the mask potentially provide for us. Now, in a time when American political ideologies are taking on more global meaning than ever before, we must be aware of the pretensions and illusions, the commonplace assumptions from which we are working. Only a careful evaluation of such ideologies will afford a way of putting any literature, modernist or otherwise, to use. So with West's dizzying legacy of demolition and reconstruction behind us, the importance of his work is clear: the painstaking portrayal and parody of the social and intellectual institutions of Western civilization and specifically American culture can mark a starting place for a process of questioning. If we can, as West's work has positioned us to do, begin to critically examine the significance of what we consider sacred or decorous, we become equipped to uncover the falseness and danger of many of these concepts.

West has left us no blueprint for avoiding absurdity or meaninglessness, existentially, politically, or otherwise; any such plan for human redemption or cultural renewal would certainly be suspect, and in any case, West was not interested in writing a "Utopia" for the 20th century. But his work provides a useful example for continuing the search to uncover the limiting and damaging cultural taboos that are instrumental in manufacturing conflict and lack of awareness. Indeed, West was not at all interested "dragging the hose to the spot," but his works doubtless indicate where the smoke is coming from: the burning shell of the

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construct of a homogenous or unified conception of self or culture. The modern age lies destroyed; that civilization is nothing now but the fragments we have shored against our collective ruin. Not in spite of this but because of it, West and his modernist brethren stand as a Janus-figure, a doorway through which we can look back at our modern destruction and forward to our postmodern future.

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