The Day of the Locust Study Guide

The Day of the Locust by Nathanael West

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Introduction

The Day of the Locust, by Nathanael West, is set in 1930s Hollywood and follows the lives of a handful of people peripherally associated with the movie industry. Today, many critics consider it the best novel about Hollywood ever written, but it received little notice from the general public when it was released in 1939. According to Richard B. Gehman in his introduction to the 1976 reprint of the novel, many critics at the time considered the novel to be in "bad taste."

The novel combines realistic features, such as characters who are flawed, with the artificial and surreal atmosphere of the movie industry. Tod Hackett, recently graduated from Yale University, is an illustrator and set designer for a film company. He lives in the same apartment building as Faye Greener, an aspiring and ambitious actress who will not date Tod because he is neither rich nor handsome. Through Faye, Tod meets a cast of seedy and sad characters whom he intends to include in his large painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles." Tod's life is spent unsuccessfully pursuing Faye and imagining the violent scenes that will make up his painting.

Author Biography

Jewish immigrants Max Weinstein, a prosperous building contractor, and Anna Wallenstein Weinstein. Mr. Weinstein wanted his son to go into the family business and gave Nathan copies of the Horatio Alger books, a series of novels in which honest young men do well for themselves in business. West, whose friends gave him the nickname Pep because he was so lazy, was uninterested in the typical trappings of upper middle-class success and dropped out of high school. He lied his way into Tufts University, which expelled him for poor grades, and then got himself admitted to Brown University by using someone else's transcripts. West graduated from Brown in 1924, where he was better known for his sense of humor and interest in parties than any scholarly abilities.

After finishing college, West spent two years in Paris, courtesy of his father. He was called back to the United States in 1927, as the family's contracting business was experiencing the first economic shudders that would become more widespread in 1929. West's family found him a series of jobs managing residential hotels so that he could earn a living. Through these jobs, West was able to provide many impoverished writers with rent-free places to stay in New York City and to meet many writers who would soon become famous, including Dashiell Hammett, Erskine Caldwell, Lillian Hellman, and S. J. Perelman, West's brother-in-law. West found the desperate lives of some of his tenants fascinating, and he was known to steam open and read their letters. During this period, he finished his first book, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, and published it to almost no critical or commercial notice in 1931.

West published his second book, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, in 1933 to great admiration from the critics and others within his literary circle, but it received very little attention from the book-buying public. Concerned about his apparent inability to earn money from his books, West moved to California in 1933 to take a job as a screenwriter for Columbia Pictures. This job only lasted about a year, so West moved back to New York City to write his third book, *A Cool Million: The Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin*. In 1935, a major movie studio bought the rights to the novel, so West went to California to try his hand at screenwriting again. Upon his return, West lived in cheap hotels much like the ones he had lived in and managed in New York City. West enjoyed learning about the lives of the people he met at these hotels, and soon his circle of friends included prostitutes, petty criminals, and stuntmen. West's struggle for screen-writing work lasted about a year, during which he was supported by money from his brother-in-law, Perelman, before he found a job with a minor studio that produced low-budget films.

Through his newfound income from screen-writing, West was able to afford a more comfortable lifestyle, one that allowed him to focus more artistically on his novels and plays. He published *The Day of the Locust* in 1939. Like *Miss Lonelyhearts*, it received some acclaim but little notice from the general public. Over the course of his lifetime, West earned only about $1,300 from his novels. He died in an automobile accident with his wife of only nine months, Eileen McKenney, on December 22, 1940, when he drove through a stop sign near El Centro, California.

Plot Summary

Chapters 1-7

The Day of the Locust begins after Tod Hackett has recently graduated from Yale University, and has been living in Hollywood for about three months. While preparing to go to a party, he thinks about Faye Greener, the very attractive aspiring actress who lives just below him with her father, Harry. He is also reminded of his friend Abe Kusich, because he has found Abe's card stuck in his door, a note on it offering a tip on a horse race. He also thinks about his planned painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles," and the people who "come to California to die" that he will depict in it. When Tod sees these people on the streets, he notices that they are poorly dressed and "their eyes are filled with hatred."

At the party, hosted by Claude Estee, a successful screenwriter, Tod sees the fake dead horse the Estees have bought to shock and surprise their guests. He tries to leave the party, but Claude grabs him and forces him to come with the rest of the partyers to Audrey Jenning's whorehouse to watch a dirty movie. The movie projector, playing *Le Predicament de Marie*, breaks just as the exciting part is about to start, and the guests hoot and clap in displeasure.

Tod begins to spend more time at Faye's apartment, helping out with Faye's sick father. Tod enjoys hearing the stories Harry tells of his life as a clown in vaudeville shows. He meets Homer Simpson, one of Faye's suitors. Homer is shy and naive and has just moved to Hollywood from the Midwest.

Chapters 8-12

The novel begins to focus on Homer and how he came to live in Hollywood. He moved to California at the suggestion of his doctor after he became quite ill with pneumonia. While he was absent from work, he lost his bookkeeping job of twenty years. When Homer thinks about his life in Iowa, he also thinks about Romola Martin, who was a drunken resident of the hotel where he worked. When Homer first met Romola, she disturbed him with her drunken and flirtatious behavior, and he "hurriedly labeled his excitement disgust." Later, when his boss asked that he evict her from her room, Homer realized, "through his growing excitement," that he was sexually attracted to her. While evicting Romola, Homer offered her money to pay her back rent, which she happily interpreted as money for sex. Just as they begin holding each other on her bed, the phone rang; it was one of Homer's colleagues checking to make sure he did not need the police to help with the eviction. This interruption completely ruined the moment for Homer. Now in California, Homer feels that he missed his chance to be with Romola, and he still cries about that missed opportunity.

Homer's house is in the style of an Irish cottage, complete with a thatched roof. He gets settled in very quickly because he has very few possessions. About a month after he has moved into the Irish cottage, Harry Greener shows up at his front door, selling his homemade silver polish. Harry gets inside the house by asking for some water, and when he becomes ill, he asks for Faye to be brought inside. This is a con that Harry and Faye do with regularity, but this time Harry is really sick. Homer gives Faye some lunch while Harry is resting on the couch, and Homer begins to fall in love with her. Days pass and Homer continues to think about Faye. He decides to visit Faye and Harry at their apartment. This is the day when Tod first meets Homer.

Chapters 13-17

Harry is still sick, and Tod is continuing to spend a lot of time with him. One night, when Faye thinks Harry is about to die, she runs up to Tod's apartment and asks him to come and help. By the time Tod gets there, Harry is breathing better. Faye spends the rest of the evening telling Tod about her ideas for movies, which she suggests that he could write, so that they could both become rich and famous. Tod thinks her ideas are awful, but he still tries to sneak a kiss. She lets him kiss her at the door to her apartment, but when he tries to embrace her, she stops him. Back at his apartment, Tod thinks of his painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles," and how Faye will be a naked girl running in the left foreground, being chased by an angry mob.

As he has done a few times before, Tod accompanies Faye on a date with Earle Shoop, a former cowboy from Arizona. Earle and his friends live in a sort of permanent camp outside the city, where Earle traps small game to survive. Earle is broke again, but Faye does not let Tod pay for their meals as he usually does. Instead, the three of them drive to Earle's camp. There, Earle has some pheasants trapped that they can cook and eat for dinner. They meet Miguel, who shows Tod the fighting roosters he raises. After dinner and tequila, Miguel and Faye dance in a very provocative and drunken manner. Earle tries to join them, but his "crude hoe-down" dance steps do not fit in. When Faye's back is turned, Earle strikes Miguel with a club. Tod tries to stop Faye from running away, but he just misses grabbing her. He thinks about what it would be like to run after Faye, bringing her down to the ground and raping her. He also thinks about his painting.

Harry dies. Faye keeps saying that she killed him because she was in the apartment when he died but was so busy looking at herself in the mirror that she did not notice him until it was too late. Mrs. Johnson, the janitor, offers to help Faye with the funeral arrangements, but Faye has no money. Faye gets the idea to work at Mrs. Jenning's whorehouse to earn some money, but Tod is horrified and tries to talk her out of it. She and Mary, Faye's prostitute friend, laugh at him.

Tod attends Harry's funeral after he has been drinking heavily. He finds Faye and tries to talk her out of working at Mrs. Jenning's, but he is too drunk.

Chapters 18-20

The day after the funeral, Faye moves out of the San Bernardino Arms. The next time Tod sees her it is through the window of his office, but she only waves when he tries to flag her down. From her costume, he guesses that she is an extra in a picture being filmed on a nearby lot. He leaves his office to chase her but finds himself wandering through set after set of various pieces of scenery.

After a short while, Faye leaves Mrs. Jenning's whorehouse and moves in with Homer. They have a "business arrangement" in which Homer serves as Faye's patron, buying her nice clothes, because he believes that Faye will soon be a big movie star. Tod has dinner at their house, where he and Homer meet Maybelle Loomis and her eight-year-old son, Adore. Maybelle has brought Adore to Hollywood to become a star and has trained Adore to act as if he is a man with perfect manners, not a child. She has also trained him to sing a sexually suggestive song, which he does for Homer and Tod, complete with erotic moves.

Tod spends the next few months trying to get over Faye. He spends time at some local churches, hunting for more models for his painting. Tod believes he will "paint their fury with respect, appreciating its awful, anarchic power and aware that they had it in them to destroy civilization." The people Tod plans to portray in his painting have moved to California after working at miserable jobs all their lives and having to save for the day when they can live in the sunshine and eat oranges all day. Tod believes that they have become bored with this easy life and crave excitement in any form: a Hollywood sex scandal, a plane crash, or some other disaster. He believes that because the easy life is so disappointing, these sun-seekers will feel cheated and their subsequent anger will lead them to turn on the city. Some of the dissatisfied thousands seek answers at the many churches in Los Angeles that preach such odd doctrines as the "Crusade Against Salt" and "Brain-Breathing, the Secret of the Aztecs."

Homer and Faye's relationship is beginning to sour. Faye finds him boring and has taken to taunting him. Homer and Tod go to a nightclub with Faye so she will not be bored. Tod learns that Miguel and Earle have moved into Homer's garage with the fighting roosters, at Faye's insistence. Tod urges Homer to remove Miguel from his garage, but Homer says that Faye has threatened to leave if he does and, besides, he believes that they are "nice enough fellows, just down on their luck." Faye later asks Tod if he will come to watch a cock fight the next night at their house.

Chapters 21-27

Tod brings Claude Estee to the cockfight in Homer's garage, but when they get there they discover that the original fight is off. Miguel sells Claude a rooster so that Claude can see a fight, but the bird is old and has a cracked beak. The fight takes place with Abe handling Claude's red rooster, but the rooster is badly beaten by Miguel's bird and dies.

Homer and Faye invite everyone into their house for a party after the fight, but the party is mostly Faye walking around in sexy green pajamas and dancing with Claude, Earle, and Miguel. Because Tod is drunk and frustrated that Homer is so unaware of Faye's increasingly reckless behavior, he tells Homer that she is a "whore." A fight breaks out between Earle and Abe, with Miguel helping his friend by picking up Abe and throwing him against the wall. Tod and Claude leave the party with Abe.

Tod wakes up the next morning with a hangover and calls in sick to his office. He later walks over to Homer's house to apologize for calling Faye a whore. Homer is there, sitting in the middle of the wrecked living room with his head in his hands and the curtains drawn. Tod tries to talk to him, but he starts crying loudly and tells Tod that Faye has left him and that he is going back to Iowa.

Homer tells Tod what happened earlier that morning. Thinking that Faye was sick, Homer took her some aspirin and water. When he opened the door, he saw Miguel naked in bed with Faye. Moments later, Earle showed up, and he and Miguel started fighting so violently that Homer ran to his room, too afraid to watch. He fell asleep and when he awoke, everything in Faye's room was gone and so was Faye.

Tod leaves Homer sleeping, but on his way back home, he stops at Kahn's Persian Palace Theatre to watch the crowd gathering for a movie premiere. There are spotlights sweeping the sky and thousands of people behind a roped-off area, straining and pushing to get a closer look at their favorite stars.

Tod sees Homer walking through the crowd as if he is an automaton, dressed in his nightshirt and a pair of slacks and carrying a suitcase. He says he is going back to Iowa. Tod tries to get him a cab, thinking he must take Homer to a hospital, but he is unsuccessful in getting Homer to walk with him. He leaves Homer sitting on a bench, away from the crowd, thinking of what to do next while watching Homer from across the street. He spies Adore behind a tree, trying to get Homer's attention by pulling a purse attached to a string along the ground. Homer is completely oblivious. This angers Adore, and he throws a rock that hits Homer. Homer violently erupts and begins stomping Adore. Tod tries to intervene, but the crowd sees what is going on and surrounds and absorbs Homer and the boy, pushing Tod further and further away. The crowd shifts and turns, and Tod is carried around with it, crushed and barely able to breath. Tod begins thinking about his painting and what he can add to it. In addition to the flames consuming the city and the mob holding torches, he has Faye, Harry, Claude, Homer, and himself running in front of the mob.

A policeman is able to lift Tod from the crowd and helps him walk to an ambulance. In the ambulance the sirens sound, and Tod thinks he is making the noise until he realizes that his lips are shut. He laughs and imitates the sound of the siren.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Tod Hackett watches the approaching cavalry and infantrymen with mild interest. They are resplendent in their epaulets and fluttering plumes. The noise of horse hooves and swords in shields is broken by a voice, amplified through a megaphone, that informs the group that they are headed the wrong way.

Tod looks out through his window at a Hollywood sound stage. The little man with the megaphone chases after the celluloid army to get them to the correct stage. Tod watches them until they disappear and decides that it's time to leave for the day. He'll take a streetcar to Vine Street and then walk the rest of the way.

Tod has been in Hollywood not quite three months. He still finds it fascinating every day. A talent scout hired him on the strength of some drawings he exhibited at the Yale School of Fine Arts. Tod is here to learn set and costume design, although he feels too gawky to undertake such aesthetic work.

On the way home, Tod studies the people he encounters. They are like none he ever met back east. Scattered among the contented, in their sports clothes and evening wear, are others who scowl at him with hatred in their eyes. He can only think that they have come to California to die.

These are the people Tod wants to paint, and he vows to learn more about them. He's finished with painting still life and old barns. He's interested in Goya and Daumier now, and he thinks he has found his new subjects. Fortunately, Tod discovered these artists when he was almost ready to give up painting altogether. He was tired of studying color and composition, so when the Hollywood job came along, he grabbed it despite the cautions of his friends.

As Tod finishes his walk home, he falls in love again with the purplish haze of the trees in the dusk, but he doesn't feel that way toward the houses. They are of every cultural design, and he thinks dynamite is the only thing lacking. He tries to be charitable, though, because it is hard to laugh at people's need for beauty, no matter how tasteless.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Tod Hackett is a young man about to embark on a learning experience that he couldn't have anticipated from his days at Yale. He is new to Hollywood, which is probably about as far as you can get from his world in academia. Fortunately, that seems to be what he wants. He'd become bored with the theory and study of art and wants to experience other worlds and other subjects. There's a positive, hopeful streak in him, which shows up as his unwillingness to make fun of what other people consider beautiful. The angry

people he encounters on his way home interest him most of all, but he may not be ready for what they have to teach him.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Tod has a room in a three-story house called the San Bernardino Arms, a nondescript stucco the color of diluted mustard. He pauses on the way up to his room, in hopes of catching a glimpse of Faye Greener, who lives in 208. No such luck. When he opens the door to his room, he sees a note under the door. It's a racing tip from Abe Kusich, another resident in the building.

Abe and Faye are both models for a painting Tod is working on. He was intrigued by both of them. He met Abe while staying at another hotel. One night, he saw what he thought was a pile of laundry in front of the door across the hall. When he investigated further, he realized that it was a tiny man wrapped in a bathrobe. The man was Abe. Apparently, he had had a fight with the woman inside and was trying to convince her to give him his clothes. Finally, the woman relented and Tod let Abe dress in his room.

As a thank you, Abe gave Tod a tip on a horse and left. They ran into each other few days later, and they exchanged a few words. Tod explained that he was looking for a new place to live, and Abe told him about the San Bernardino Arms. When he went to check it out, the place was small and not very clean, but Tod didn't notice anything except Faye Greener standing in the hall.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Tod's friendship with Abe, who is a dwarf, lets us know that this will be a story with unusual twists. So far, Tod's experience in California has been a real eye-opener. He likes things that are outside the norm, though, and is relatively comfortable with ambiguity. Abe introduces him to life at the track. Tod's world expands again, when he catches sight of Faye Greener. We can't wait to see what she'll be like.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Tod naps for a while after work and then prepares to go out for the evening. Tucked into the frame of his mirror, there is a picture of Faye, wearing a harem costume for a movie in which she had a bit part. As he studies the picture, Tod thinks that her head and face seem too large for her long body. She is supposed to be wearing a come hither look in the photo, but he thinks to himself that falling on her would be like falling on jagged edges. Not that he'll ever get the chance. She has already told Tod that she can't love him, because he is neither good looking nor wealthy. He is a good-hearted man, but Faye has no place for his type, as far as love is concerned. Tod resigns himself to worship her from afar and hurries out to Claude Estee's party.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Tod is learning more and more about the ways of the world. His artistic sensibilities allow him to see the world with a fair amount of romance, but he learns that that isn't enough all the time. There are women who have no place for someone who can't further a jewelry collection or a career. Tod is definitely not that person for Faye. Still, it will be interesting to see where his infatuation may lead.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

When Tod arrives at the Estee residence, Claude is waiting for him on the porch of his Southern colonial house. Claude mimics the accent and mannerisms of a Civil War colonel and invites Tod in for a drink.

Claude is a screenwriter who looks more like a postal clerk. The only thing that gives him away is his impeccable clothes. He whispers to Tod not to run off too early, as they'll be going to a sporting house later. Tod is left on his own, then, and meets up with Joan Schwartzen, a friend of Mrs. Estee. She is a women's tennis champ and a bit too bawdy for Tod's taste.

Joan escorts Tod into the pool area in the back yard, where she flips a switch to reveal a plastic life-sized replica of a dead horse on its back. She thinks it is incredibly witty, but Tod is not amused and excuses himself to talk shop with some other men in the film business. He tries to bid Claude good night, but Claude won't hear of it. They're going to Audrey Jenning's place, and Tod must go along.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Every outing is an adventure for Tod. He is meeting interesting people, and he likes it that way. He's still on the fringes of this new world, and it will be interesting to see if he will be pulled in wholeheartedly into the fantasy world of film, or if he'll maintain his east coast sensibilities and keep a distance.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The caravan of guests includes several cars. While they drive, Claude tells Tod about Mrs. Jenning. She was once a silent film star. Her voice did not work well when talking pictures came in. I Instead of reducing herself to bit parts, like so many other actresses, she decided to open a brothel, or sporting house. She charges each "sportsman" $30 for a night with one of her girls, and she keeps half of that. She does, after all, have to take care of chauffeurs and a lifestyle that permits her to meet men who could pay $30.

When Tod and Claude arrive, she shows them to the screening room, and it becomes clear to Tod that they will view a film. This piques his interest. It's a French film about a maid in service to a family of four. The husband, wife and son each have designs on her, but she has interest only in the little girl of the family. After a short while, Tod excuses himself to get some fresh air. On his way back, he hears a girl singing in another room. When he peeks in, he sees that it's Mary Dove, one of Faye Greener's friends. His heart lifts for a minute. He thinks that maybe Faye also works for Mrs. Jenning, and maybe he could raise the $30 somehow. Then he returns to watch the rest of the film with the others.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Here is another intriguing experience for Tod in Hollywood. Audrey Jenning's brothel isn't quite what he expects. Audrey uses films to tease, as opposed to blatant bartering in the front parlor. Audrey herself is quite refined. It makes one think that Tod has met her for some other reason than just to visit her sporting house. She is quite cultured, and he is a young artiste. Perhaps they will establish a mutually beneficial relationship.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Apparently, Faye Greener is not one of Mrs. Jenning's girls. That's fine with Tod, who prefers to kindle a relationship in a more standard way. He has begun to hang out at Faye's apartment to keep her father company. He hopes that ingratiating himself to both of them will make his way easier. Besides, Harry Greener is good company, and Tod enjoys spending time with him.

Harry used to be a vaudeville clown and has stories upon stories for Tod's amusement. He, like so many others, came to Hollywood with big dreams but hit his plateau on the vaudeville stage. He supplemented his income by making silver polish in his bathroom and selling it door to door. Faye drove him around in her Model T on his last selling trip, until he fell ill.

That's when Faye met her new suitor, Homer Simpson. One night, Homer comes to the door when Tod is visiting. He extends some flowers and a bottle of wine to Tod, for Faye and Harry, but he won't come in. On the following evenings, Tod sees him leaning against a palm tree and watching the apartment, but he won't speak to Tod at all. Finally, Tod makes a point to speak first and tells him that the Greeners really appreciated the gifts. From then on, Homer speaks to Tod without being prompted. To Tod, it seems as if just a little bit of sympathy has made this awkward man almost eloquent.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The characters just keep coming at Tod in the forms of Harry Greener and Homer Simpson. His spending time with Harry, though he originally does it in order to be around Faye, may prove to be beneficial to him, after all. It seems that he has found a friend in Harry, whose vaudeville stories are bigger than anything Tod could ever imagine living. For some reason, Tod has also befriended the awkward, bumbling Homer Simpson. It's a mystery why Faye is spending time with Homer, since he's not suave or debonair. Perhaps he is wealthy, though, and we'll soon find out. At any rate, all these characters seem to have some injury or flaw and that brings out the tenderness in Tod.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Homer Simpson never planned to come to California. He was an accountant in Waynesville, Iowa, where he worked for 20 years in a hotel. He developed pneumonia one month, and the hotel hired a new bookkeeper while he wasin the hospital. They offered to re-hire him, but Homer's doctor suggested some recuperation in California, and so he came.

Homes settled on the cottage he lives in, because he was tired and the real estate agent was a bully. He has grown to like it, even though it's a bit odd and not considered to be the favored "Spanish" architecture. The house has a crooked stone chimney, with elements that were machine-made but made to look hand hewn. The main sections of the house are decorated in heavy Spanish furniture and appointments, but the two bedrooms are more in New England style, complete with spool beds and Windsor chairs. There is even a painting of a snowy Connecticut farmhouse on the wall. The two bedrooms are exactly alike, right down to the paintings on the walls.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Homer seems to be a man who is easily swayed. He lets his doctor tell him to leave for California, even though he could have had his old job back. He rents the crooked little house, because the real estate agent was grumpy. The oversized Spanish furniture in most of the house seems very out of place, maybe like the bumbling Homer is in California. It's intriguing that both bedrooms are exact duplicates, down to the same picture on the walls. Maybe it's a hint that Homer is very boring, or maybe it's just that, unlike Tod, he doesn't care about such things.

Chapters 8, 9 and 10

Chapters 8, 9 and 10 Summary

Homer stretches out to take a nap in his new home, well aware of his fear that he might not wake up. He puts the alarm clock near his ear and sleeps until it goes off two hours later. Every part of him gradually awakens, but his hands are always last. He plunges them into cold water, as he waits for the tub to fill for his bath. This is the moment he hates, because he knows he will start to remember. His cries come as the memory comes back.

Back when he worked in the hotel, he had encountered a small woman with a bottle of gin in the elevator, and she flirted with him in her tipsy state. When the manager told him that she was weeks behind in rent, the job fell to Homer to get her to pay up. He was exhilarated when he stood at her door, and when inside he saw that the room was a shambles. The woman was cowering on the bed in a man's dressing gown. She knew why he was there and began sobbing that she was completely broke.

Homer simply walked over to her, dropped his wallet on her lap and sat beside her on the bed. Something about her helplessness made him embrace her awkwardly. When the phone rang, he answered it. He noticed that she was now reclining in a suggestive position, and he left the room. Soon after, she paid up and moved out, and the manager congratulated Homer on his efficiency.

Homer dries himself off after his bath and dresses to go out to get something to eat. The store at the corner is brilliantly lit, and he decides on mushroom soup, crackers and sardines for his dinner. Somehow, the walk back up the hill to his house is too much, so he takes a cab the rest of the way.

Most of the time, Homer sits on his patio in a broken-down lawn chair. He never moves its position to change his view. He watches a lizard, hid among the plants, waiting to catch unsuspecting flies. Homer never makes a noise, but he secretly roots for the flies. Every time the lizard miscalculates, Homer lets out a little laugh. He is probably happy like a houseplant is happy. The only difference is that Homer has memories to disturb him, and a plant is luckier that way.

Chapters 8, 9 and 10 Analysis

As Homer's life is slowly revealed, it becomes even more pitiful. He is tormented by a misdirected sexual encounter with the hotel guest to whom he gave all his money and could not find later. He buys a meager dinner at the grocery, even though he has money and could eat in a nice restaurant. He seems to be very much alone and has only his patio lizard and the flies for entertainment. Any encounter or incident would be a great change for him, and one hopes that something will come along soon. This character has a very giving spirit, and it would be nice to see that reciprocated for him in some way.

Chapters 11 and 12

Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

Homer's life was a series of lackluster days until the knock on the door that revealed Harry Greener. He was there to sell his silver polish and made his way inside under the guise of needing a glass of water. His selling routine was part clown, part carnival, and Homer grew increasingly irritated at the intrusion. Harry's act was not all insincere. He began having chest pains and gasping for air. He asked Homer to call to his daughter outside in the car. That's the first time Homer saw Faye Greener.

After Faye and Homer determined that Harry just needed some rest, Homer fixed lunch for them, and Faye told him about her plans to become a movie star. She had no interest in Homer's life, so he just quit talking and basked in her glow. Harry, now recovered a bit, inquired about Homer's situation and whether he would take boarders into his house, and Faye tried to quiet him. Finally, she was able to get her father back into the car. As they left, they called out an invitation for Homer to visit them at the San Bernardino Apartments.

Homer's life continued as it had with one exception. He couldn't stop thinking about Faye Greener. Sometimes his hands would not be still in their excitement, and he had to sit on them to control himself. He knew that he had narrowly escaped disaster with the sobbing woman at the hotel in Iowa, but he wouldn't be so lucky the next time.

Homer thought that sleep would give him some reprieve from thoughts about Faye. That was only temporary relief, though. When he woke up, Faye was still on his mind, and the silence of the house was overwhelming. Homer's sadness turned to anguish, and he began to cry again. Later in the afternoon, he bathed, dressed and decided to go for a walk. There was only one way to go, and that was past Faye and Harry's apartment. On the next night, he did the same thing, except that this time he brought flowers and wine.

Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

Homer is such a pitiful creature, and it is inevitable that something or someone would interrupt the tedium of his days. Harry and Faye are each very vulnerable, too, and they touch something in Homer, so that he wants to give them gifts and be a part of their lives. Will he be sucked into something that his naiveté can't warn him about? What is buried inside him that he is afraid will come out? Why do his hands tingle and attempt to betray him? What secret have we not yet learned about him?

Chapters 13 and 14

Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

Tod visits the Greeners almost every night, now that Harry is ill. When Harry is asleep, he and Faye go into her room and talk. Tod finds that he is intrigued by her, although she is shallow and self-involved. She tells him ideas she has for movie scripts. She wants him to write them, because he is educated. He superficially indulges her, but his real intent is to get closer to her. Once, he kisses her, and she breaks away quickly, insisting that they are only business partners. Tod doesn't take this for an answer and vows to keep chasing her.

What makes it more difficult is that Homer Simpson is not Faye's only suitor. There is also Earle Shoop, for one. He's a rodeo cowboy from Arizona who did some movie work. Most of the time, he hangs out at a western goods shop with other like-minded cowboys. Earle, Faye and Tod go out together some nights, and Tod always pays for dinner, because Earle is always broke.

One night, Earle promises to pay, but then he has to admit that he's broke, and Faye is furious. Earle charms her, though, and they go to the campsite he shares with some other cowboys. They cooka quail he trapped, drink tequila and smoke around an open fire. As the evening progresses, Earle's Mexican friend Mig shows obvious interest in Faye. Faye dances and sings around the fire, and all three men are on the verge of grabbing her. Fortunately, she is able to run away, and by the time Tod runs to the place where she parked the car, Faye is long gone.

Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

Faye is playing with fire. She's only 17 and cavorting with the men who do not have noble intentions toward her. She is so caught up in the energy and drama of these Hollywood characters that she doesn't see that they're not playing parts. They are very real and have the capacity to hurt her. It seems as though Tod has adopted a watchful approach and goes along to make sure that no harm comes to her. Maybe we'll see that he is the only one who has her good at heart.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

One night, when Tod stops in to see the Greeners, Harry tells him that Faye is gone to the movies with Homer Simpson. Tod can see that the old man is very sick. Harry punctuates his speech with coughs and groans that he surely must have developed on the stage. Tod wonders if stage people actually suffer less than others, but decides that Harry suffers just as much as anyone else, in spite of his theatrical groans.

Faye comes in later, and Tod is still sitting there, even though Harry is asleep. He asks about her evening with Homer, and she says Homer is "strictly home cooking." Tod wants to talk more, but Faye is tired and cuts him off.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Tod's attempts to get closer to Faye don't seem to be working. She is clearly dating other men and won't give him any chance. Maybe he's just waiting for her to come to her senses after she's had her fill of the others. It's also possible that he's lonely, and spending an evening with Harry is better than being alone. Tod seems to be a genuinely caring person, however, and he won't desert the old guy, even if it's not working out the way he envisioned.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Harry Greener is dead. The crowd gathered in front of the apartment door is only too eager to repeat the news. Tod lets himself into the apartment to see Faye, who is crying into a bath towel and wearing a ratty old negligee. He isn't very successful in consoling her, but Mary Dove shoves her way in, and Faye is glad to see her.

Mrs. Johnson, the janitress, finally gets Faye to come to her senses. It's her job to see that funerals are handled properly. She inquires about Faye's ability to pay for a proper burial for her father. If she doesn't have any money, the city will bury him in a pauper's grave. Both Mary and Tod offer money to help, but Faye declines it. Composing herself, Faye asks Mary if she can get her a job at Mrs. Jenning's. Mary is certain she can, and the two girls join arms and go into the bathroom to fix Faye's face. Tod implores her from outside the door not to go to work there. He offers financial help again, but Faye tells him to get lost.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Harry Greener has finally died, and Faye can get on with the life she has wanted. She is no longer daddy's little girl, and she doesn't miss a beat finding her way into Mrs. Jenning's brothel. She wants money, and she wants important men, and now she'll have both. Tod is literally and figuratively shut out now, and he stands helplessly by. What will he do to try to convince her to change her mind? Will he give up or continue to try?

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Tod intentionally gets drunk on the day of Harry's funeral. He wants the courage to speak to Faye about her decision. By the time he gets to the funeral parlor, he is well past brave and headed into ugly. He respectfully looks at Harry in his coffin and thinks that they've made him up to look like he belongs in a minstrel show.

When Tod catches sight of Faye, he thinks that she has never looked more beautiful. She wears a tight black dress, and her hair is done up in a bun under a black straw hat. He certainly admires the way she looks, but he can't help but cringe, when he remembers how she earned the money to buy her new outfit.

Tod pulls Faye away to a separate room to talk before the service begins. He kisses her and wants more, but she resists. In his urgency to change her mind about working at Mrs. Jenning's, he blurts out something about how sexual diseases ruin beauty. She simply bolts from the room.

Tod joins the others for the service and waits impatiently for it to end. When the request comes for the mourners to come forward and view the body one last time, he slips away.

Chapter 17 Analysis

It's interesting that Tod feels that he needs to be drunk in order to talk to Faye. Why can't he just tell her how he feels and that he doesn't want her to work for Mrs. Jennings? Apparently, it's easier for him to convey his true feelings behind a mask of some sort. It might be easier for Faye to take him seriously, if he didn't make advances every time he sees her. Faye has struggled to make ends meet throughout her childhood. Now, she sees the door open to a new life, and no inconsequential man will ever hold her back again.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

The day after the funeral, Faye moves out of the apartment. The next time Tod sees her is from the window of his office. She is dressed like a Napoleonic army cook, and he figures she's working on the picture *Waterloo.* He runs out after her, but she vanishes into the crowd. Tod decides to find the *Waterloo* set so that he can talk to her again.

Tod's jaunt across the soundstages takes him through a desert with a papier mache' sphinx, a jungle compound complete with a water buffalo, followed by a truck of snow and some malamute dogs. On his way, Tod thinks about Goya, Daumier and other painters of mystery and destruction. The soundstages he's crossing now would serve as perfect backgrounds, he thinks. When he comes up over a hill, he sees a ten-acre field with a gigantic pile of sets and props. A dump truck adds even more material. He likens this big studio dump to the dreams of those who don't survive in this make-believe world.

A flash of red catches Tod's eye, and he knows that must be the *Waterloo* set. He moves toward the sound of cannons and arrives in time to watch, fascinated, as see a battle plays out. Unfortunately, the actors charge up a hill that has only been fabricated, and the paint is not yet dry. The weight of the charging men collapses the hill amid screams of men and horses. The English army waits for ambulances and carpenters to free them of this embarrassing predicament.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Tod wants to find Faye on the movie set, but he has some revelations along the way. He is reminded of the painters whose themes were decay and destruction, and that is literally placed in front of him when he comes across the dump of old movie sets. How many dreams were at the bottom of that decaying mess? He did not come here to be a star, but maybe Faye is his elusive dream, and he is following a path to nowhere when he pursues her.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Tod escapes injury at the collapsed set and gets a ride back to his office. To his great surprise, Faye is waiting for him there. She tells him that she thought about what he said, and she has moved in with Homer. Homer has agreed to give her room and board and take care of her until she's a star. They are keeping a list of all expenditures and will have a lawyer draft a contract. Tod says that seems like a good idea. Faye invites him to dinner the next night.

Faye and Homer seem very happy with their living arrangement. He takes care of the household, and she rests. He brings her breakfast in bed, and they shop for her in the afternoons. Tod can't help but think that if he had acted decently, she might be living with him and not Homer.

Faye, Homer and Tod all go to a movie after dinner. Sitting next to Faye is an ordeal for Tod. It is more than her beauty that drives him to distraction. It is her impenetrable veneer of self-sufficiency that he wants to shatter. Tod decides to stop running after Faye. He finds it more easily said than done, but he puts away all his drawings of her. He spends his days and nights looking for new models.

Chapter 19 Analysis

Faye has found in Homer, not a handsome man, nor a rich man, but someone who cares for her. It's painful to imagine how his heart will break after he gives so much, and she will tire of him when the next new thing comes along. At least Tod has come to his senses. He realizes that he should have treated her with more respect, so that's a lesson for him. He is also wiser in that he is no longer following her around like some moping schoolboy.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

After a little while, Faye and Homer's relationship sours. She gets bored with their life and begins to persecute him. He responds with more servility and gifts. He is so unselfish that it makes her want to strike him. Toward the end, they stop at Tod's late one night, to get him to go to a club with them.

Homer doesn't drink and orders coffee, but Faye orders a champagne cocktail, anyway, and forces it to his closed lips. The drink dribbles off of Homer's chin. His resistance makes Faye even more contrary, and she proceeds to order a brandy. She accuses him of acting superior to her. Tod intervenes and asks her to dance. On the dance floor, he asks her to sleep with him. She tells him she couldn't do that, because she just doesn't love him.

When Tod and Faye return to the table, Homer tries to feign a festive mood, which irritates Faye all the more. She accuses him of feeling superior, because she's drunk, and he's sober. Another man in the club asks Faye to dance. While she is away, Homer asks Tod if he knows Earle Shoop. He admits that he does and listens to Homer talk about a cock-fight orchestrated by Earleand his Mexican friend. Tod wants to know when Homer went to their camp. Homer reveals that Earleand Mig are living in his garage.

Homer doesn't have the heart to throw the cowboys out, because they're broke with nowhere to go. Tod suggests that Homer call the authorities, but he wonn't commit. Faye comes back to the table. Tod confronts her about this affront to Homer and his hospitality. She replies simply that if Earleand the Mexican leave, so will she. She is in a happier mood now and even makes little preening gestures toward Homer, which made him beam.

Chapter 20 Analysis

It didn't take long for Faye's and Homer's living arrangement to worsen. He is such a tender-hearted sap. She is so young that she's needs someone to take care of her, but this is completely ill-fated. The situation goes from bad to worse when Tod finds out that the worthless cowboy and his friend have taken up residence in the garage, where they host their cock fights. How long will Homer tolerate this situation?

Chapters 21 and 22

Chapters 21 and 22 Summary

Claude Estee goes with Tod to the cock fight at Homer's garage the next night. When they get there, Abe Kusich tells them that the fights are off, because the guy with the other birds never showed up. Earle and Miguel are musing about the money they would have made, so Claude offers to buy one of their birds, just to see a fight. The men agree, and Claude pays $15 for an old red rooster, which is pitted against their prize-winner. It's almost not even a fight. The old bird is dead before long. The men don't say anything after it's over. They just pass the whisky.

The men were all are getting drunk, when Homer comes out to invite them inside for a drink. Faye meets them at the door dressed in green silk pajamas and stilettos. She charms them and gets drinks for them all as they take their seats. She continues to stand as the men circle around her. Claude is new to her company and particularly eager to please her. She realizes that he works in the film industry and wastes no time in charming him in return.

Tod and Homer can't watch Faye's performance any longer, so they go outside for some air. From the open window, they hear Faye singing in her drunken voice. Homer doesn't know what to do about the intolerable situation in his home. Tod takes that as his cue to call the health department tomorrow about the chickens. That will take care of Miguel. Tod tells Homer that he will have to find the courage to throw Earle out. Homer just groans.

Chapters 21 and 22 Analysis

The cock-fight is a study in foreshadowing, as all the men in the garage gathered around the cockpit will soon be gathered around Faye in the same way. This time, it will be one of the onlookers who will receive a fatal blow. Faye is in control of all of these men, and she could have her pick as she struts and preens in the middle of their circle. Tod and Homer eventually remove themselves from the circle, and we're left to wonder who her next victim will be. Logic says that Claude Estee doesn't stand a chance.

Chapters 23, 24 and 25

Chapters 23, 24 and 25 Summary

Faye is dancing with Miguel when Tod goes back into the house. Claude has a go at her, too. When Earle holds her, Abe decides to cut in, and a fight breaks out between the two men, resulting in the dwarf's being knocked unconscious. Tod and Claude revive him with cold water and convince him to leave. Homer disappears into his room and won't open the door when Tod knocks. Abe invites Tod and Claude to join him as he goes to find some girls, but they decline, and he takes off in his specially equipped car.

Tod has a huge hangover the next morning, calls in sick and goes to Homer's as soon as he feels a little better. The house is boarded up tight, and no one answers his knock, but he sees a curtain move a little and decides to try another door. Tod enters through an unlocked kitchen door and calls out, but Homer doesn't answer. He's just sitting in the dark in his nightclothes. From a glance down the hall, Tod can see that Faye's room has been cleaned out.

Tod tries to break Homer out of his stupor. Finally, Homer tells Tod that Faye has left. Homer found her in bed with Miguel early this morning. Homer had heard Faye groaning and thought she had a headache. Earle overheard the commotion from where he lay sleeping in the parlor, and he and Miguel fought, while Faye cried hysterically. The two men left, and Faye kicked Homer out of her room. He went back to bed and fell fast asleep. When he came out later, he found that Faye had cleared out. The only things remaining were Earle's boots, which he threw outside.

Chapters 23, 24 and 25 Analysis

The climax of the big brawl changes many things for Homer. He now sees Faye for who and what she really is. He realizes that he has been used. Maybe he'll go back to Iowa, like he says he will, where he will fit in, and people are hopefully not so greedy and superficial. It is a noble effort on Tod's part that he shows up the next day to see how Homer is doing, after the devastating events of the night before. He does have some very redeeming qualities. Perhaps if he thought of himself that way, he would see that Faye doesn't deserve him, as opposed to the other way around.

Chapters 26 and 27

Chapters 26 and 27 Summary

Before going to dinner that night, Tod goes to the saddlery store, hoping to catch Earle and find out about Faye. He learns that Earle had been there and gone already. The men at the store tell what they know about the night before and the cause of Earle's two black eyes. It's clear that they don't know any more than Tod does, so he continues on to the restaurant, where he orders a steak and scotch.

Tod thinks about Faye. She's like a pretty little cork, he thinks, bobbing along in seas that would drown heavier creatures. She will always survive. His thoughts turn dark, when he realizes like to accost her in some vacant lot one night and rape her. He fantasizes that he would wait for her, greet her cordially and hit her over the head with a wine bottle to daze her. The waiter keeps interrupting Tod's dark reverie, and he finally gives up, pays the check and leaves.

Out on the street, Tod sees the searchlights that herald a movie premiere. He's intrigued, but decides to go in the opposite direction to Homer's house. When he realizea that it's only 6:15, though, Tod decides to wait another hour or so, to let Homer sleep.

People have already gathered in a great crowd at the movie premiere, even though it will be some time yet before any celebrities arrive. Tod finds himself walking down a narrow lane between the crowd and the front of the theatre. The police yell at him to leave, but he keeps going, and soon he finds that the crowd is angry at him. They shout at him and try to break through the police lines to get at him.

The police tryin vain to keep the crowd in check, and Tod can tell that this crowd is a lower middle class crowd, just the people he loves to draw. As new people approach the crowd to wait, he can see their expressions change from furtive looks to adopt the glares and catcalls of those already in line.

As Tod gets tossed about, he reasons that these are the people who come to California to die. They scrimp and save all their lives at meaningless jobs, so that they can get to this paradise called California. At first, it is a paradise to them, because they never had oranges or ocean waves where they came from. After a while, though, you've seen one wave, and you've seen them all. The sunshine alone just isn't enough. If only something would break the monotony of paradise. These people feel cheated, as if they have saved their whole lives for nothing.

Suddenly, out of the crowd, Tod sees Homer's head bobbing around. He can tell that something isn't right. Homer's pajama shirt is tucked into his pants, but part of it hangs out of his open fly. He carrys a suitcase in each hand. He's headed to Iowa. Tod tries to convince him to share a cab with him to the station, thinking to divert it to a hospital to

get Homer some help. Still, Tod isn't quite sure that Homer is mad, and the big man isn't going anywhere. Homer has planted himself on a bench and won't budge now.

Suddenly, Tod feels a blow to the back of his neck, which spins him to the ground. The movie crowd surges forward, and he is caught up in the middle of it, like the cork he compared to Faye just a little while ago. Tod watches the eucalyptus tree he's been standing near disappear into the distance, as he's rushed along by the crowd. He finally stops struggling and lets himself be swept along. The pressure is cracking his ribs. He thinks it would be good to be raised above the madness, yet he struggles to keep his feet on the ground.

Several more rushes leave Tod with a wound above the ankle on one leg. At another point, he comes face to face with a man trying to accost a young girl, who is crying hysterically. Tod is finally thrust forward toward the street, where he finds a lamppost and clings to it. The crowd in this area seems a bit tamer and makes amusing comments about what they are observing.

Tod can hear ambulance sirens. He closes his eyes and tries to protect his leg, as he is buffeted about once more. This time, he ends up with his back against the wall of the theatre. After a long while, the crowd seems to thin, and he imagines painting a picture of all the desperate types of people who come to California to die. He envisions broad charcoal strokes and minute details of the faces of the people he has come to know here.

Tod has almost forgotten the pain in his leg, until he realizes that a police officer is trying to help him. Tod declines an ambulance, but accepts a ride home, and gives the officer Claude Estee's address. It is a little while before he realizes that the siren noise isn't coming out of his own mouth. He finds this amusing, and then he screams along with the siren, as loud as he can.

Chapters 26 and 27 Analysis

Tod gives one last mental episode to conquering the unapproachable Faye and leaves her as a dark memory. His goodwill rises once more as he intends to check on Homer. Unfortunately, Tod is caught up in a mob of people, the kind he says come to California to die. They have saved all their lives to be able to live in paradise, and now that they are here, they realize that life is really no different from where they have come. Sure, there are the token orange trees and ocean waves, but after a while, those are as common as the subways or cornfields they left behind. The mob of these ordinary people with vanquished dreams is seething, and they see Tod's refusal to stay behind the lines as an act of betrayal to them. They have played by all the rules and lost, so he will have to play fair, too. The mob symbolizes anger and betrayal, and Tod tries his best to stay above it all, while the others are pushed around. Not surprisingly, Homer is lost in the crowd. Tod is rescued, and one thinks he'll survive the madness. All he can do now is accept the ride in the police car and howl at the futility of all he has seen.

Characters

Calvin

Calvin is one of Earle's cowboy friends who hangs out with him in front of Tuttle's Trading Post, a Western-wear store and souvenir shop. He appears in rodeos to earn money and enjoys making jokes about people.

Mary Dove

Mary Dove is Faye's best friend and works at Mrs. Jenning's whorehouse as a prostitute. She encourages Faye to come work at Mrs. Jenning's place after Harry dies and Faye needs money for his funeral expenses. Mary acts tough when Tod is upset at the thought of Faye becoming a whore.

Claude Estee

Claude Estee is a well-known screenwriter with "a reputation for worldliness and wit." He lives in a mansion built to look exactly like a famous plantation home in Mississippi. While in his house, he struts around and drawls, pretending to be a southern gentleman in his plantation home even though he is a small, "dried-up little man." Claude seems desperate for excitement. He places a rubber horse in his pool to amuse his guests during a party and, when he goes to a cock fight only to find that the event has been canceled, he hastily buys a rooster—an injured one, no less—so that he can witness a cock fight after all.

Faye Greener

Faye Greener is a seventeen-year-old aspiring actress who lives one floor below Tod at the San Bernardino Arms with her father, Harry. She admits that, even though Tod is nice, she will not go out with him because he is neither rich nor good-looking. Faye is tall with "platinum" hair. She drives Harry around in her Model-T car and participates in his "act" during his sales calls. Faye occasionally takes a job as an extra in movies, but she is convinced that she is just moments away from becoming a huge star. She works as a whore for a brief period to pay off her father's funeral expenses.

Faye, like her father, usually acts as if she is on stage. She has an affected manner that would normally repel Tod, but on Faye it seems only charming to him. He also finds her attractive because she has "some critical ability, almost enough to recognize the ridiculous" and even makes fun of herself sometimes. However, he does not consider her terribly smart.

She is very ambitious and will do just about anything to get ahead in the movie industry. Men flock to her, even though she primarily teases them with her flirtatious behavior. After her father dies, she moves in with Homer. They have a "business arrangement" in which Homer pays for everything in the expectation that Faye will soon become a star and be able to pay him back. He also lets her stay because he is desperately lonely and in love with her. Faye has a mean streak and taunts Homer for his naiveté. Eventually, Faye becomes bored with Homer and leaves him.

Harry Greener

Harry is Faye's father. He is old and ill and lives with Faye. In the past, Harry worked as a clown in vaudeville shows but was never very successful. He moved to Hollywood to see if he could get a few small parts in the movies but ended up having to make money selling his homemade silver polish door-to-door. Tod likes Harry and enjoys sitting with him for long hours, listening to his stories. Harry has a maniacal laugh that Faye hates; it often starts arguments between the two of them.

When Harry goes on his sales calls, he tries to execute a con in which he becomes sick and must call in Faye from the car to help him. They proceed to have a fight, prompting the customer to feel sorry for Harry and buy more of his polish. Harry, even when he is not acting or working as a salesman, always behaves as if he is on stage, telling jokes or pretending to trip over something on the floor that is not there. Harry's face, like those of all actors, according to Tod, is a mask.

Harry dies one evening while Faye is looking at herself in the mirror, not paying attention to him. She feels guilty and wants Harry to have an expensive funeral, which requires her to work as a prostitute for a brief period.

Tod Hackett

Tod Hackett is a young man, an art school grad just a few months out of Yale University, who works at a Hollywood studio as an illustrator. He is not particularly handsome and has a "doltish" air, but he believes that he has a "complicated" interior. Tod is in love with Faye Greener, who lives one floor below him at the San Bernardino Arms apartments, but she will have nothing to do with him primarily because he is neither handsome nor rich. An autographed movie still of Faye is tucked into the frame of a mirror in his apartment.

Tod is planning a painting entitled, "The Burning of Los Angeles." It features a mob of the sad and angry people he sees on the streets of Hollywood, intent on destroying the city. He seems to have trouble making any true, heartfelt connections with other people, and the only dates he goes on are Faye's dates with other men. She sometimes invites Tod along, at least partly because he often pays.

Tod's fascinations with violence and with Faye cause him to have very vivid dreams about raping her. He has incorporated images of her running away from him into his concept of the painting.

Mrs. Audrey Jenning

Audrey Jenning was once a famous silent film actress, but the new films with sound have "made it impossible for her to get work." She decides, instead, to open up a whorehouse, or "callhouse." Everyone agrees that her callhouse is run well and in good taste. Mrs. Jenning interviews all of her prospective clients to make sure they are men of "wealth and distinction" and "taste and discretion," and she conducts intellectual discussions while the men are waiting for their girls. Faye briefly goes to work for Mrs. Jenning to earn money to pay her father's funeral expenses.

Mrs. Johnson

Mrs. Johnson is the janitor at the San Bernardino Arms apartments. Tod does not like her because she is "an officious, bustling woman with a face like a baked apple, soft and blotched." Her hobby is funerals; she is interested in the clothes the mourners wear, the flower arrangements, and other details. She offers to help Faye with Harry's funeral arrangements.

Chief Kiss-My-Towkus

Chief Kiss-My-Towkus is an American Indian who has been hired to walk around town wearing a sandwich board that advertises Tuttle's Trading Post. He is one of Calvin's friends. His name is a joke and not his own idea, but he laughs and says, "You gotta live."

Abe Kusich

Abe Kusich is a dwarf with horse-racing and betting connections. He and Tod first meet when Abe is sleeping in the hallway of Tod's apartment. Abe's girlfriend kicked him out of her apartment without any of his clothes, and he went into Tod's apartment to get dressed. Abe refers to himself as "Honest Abe Kusich" on his business cards.

Abe has a hot temper and is easily angered. During the cockfight, he demands to inspect the rooster Miguel sold Claude and discovers that it has a crack in its beak. This enrages Abe, who believes that Miguel is trying to cheat Claude and the others who are interested in betting on the fight, but he still helps Claude handle the rooster during the fight. Later that evening, Abe gets into a fight with Earle over Faye.

Adore Loomis

Adore Loomis is Maybelle Loomis's eight-year-old son. She has trained him to behave as a young man with extremely formal manners. When Maybelle introduces him to Homer and Tod, Adore behaves "like a soldier at the command of a drill sergeant," shaking their hands and bowing and clicking his heels. When his mother's back is turned, he makes horrible faces at her, but he will sing a sexually suggestive song and shake his body when she demands it. Homer beats up Adore when the boy teases him one too many times, sparking the riot near the movie theater at the book's end.

Maybelle Loomis

Maybelle Loomis is one of Homer's neighbors and Adore's mother. She moved to Hollywood to get her son in the movies and is convinced that he is not as big a success as Shirley Temple because of "favoritism" and "pull." Her husband, Mr. Loomis, died six years earlier. Tod has seen many such women around the studios, spending every dime they have to send their children to "one of the innumerable talent schools." Maybelle is a follower of Dr. Pierce, the leader of a raw food cult. "Death comes from eating dead things," Maybelle believes.

Miss Romola Martin

When Homer worked at an Iowa residential hotel as a bookkeeper, Romola Martin rented a room in his hotel. She was a drunk and always behind in her rent, but Homer soon discovered that he was attracted to her because of her flirtatious and bold behavior. One day, the hotel management asked Homer to get the back rent from Romola and kick her out. When Romola started crying, Homer threw his wallet down on her bed, indicating that she should take his money and use it to pay her rent. She interpreted his gesture as a request for sex. They began touching each other, but an ill-timed phone call from one of Homer's colleagues ruined the moment for Homer. Even in Hollywood, Homer still cries about his lost chance to be with her.

Mig

See Miguel

Miguel

Miguel lives in a camp two canyons away from the city and raises fighting chickens. He is very poor and wears ragged clothes. Tod refers to Miguel's eyes as "Armenian," but he is Mexican. Miguel eventually moves into Homer's garage with his fighting chickens, at Faye's insistence. Homer discovers Miguel and Faye in bed together after a party.

Earle Shoop

Earle Shoop is another one of Faye's suitors, but he is much more successful than Tod. He is "criminally handsome," according to Faye, a quiet and skinny former cowboy from a small town in Arizona. Faye often invites Tod along on their dates, and Tod usually ends up paying for dinner because Earle is always broke. Earle has a violent temper and becomes jealous when another man gets too close to Faye.

Homer Simpson

Homer Simpson is one of Faye's suitors, a shy, lumbering, and naive middle-aged man. He is a large man, like "Picasso's great sterile athletes, who brood hopelessly on pink sand, staring at veined marble waves," according to Tod. His hands seem to have a life of their own and are often moving when Homer is trying to remain still.

Homer moved to California from Iowa on his doctor's advice after he became sick with pneumonia and lost his twenty-year bookkeeping job at a residential hotel.

Homer falls in love with Faye when she and her father show up on his doorstep to sell their silver polish. She is polite to him at first but does not seem romantically interested in him. After her father dies and she has no money, she moves in with Homer as part of a "business arrangement": Homer gives her all the money she needs to dress and act like a movie star, and she will pay him back when she becomes a star. Homer has allowed her to move in, though, primarily because he is lonely and enjoys having her around.

The riot at the end of the book is prompted when Homer, depressed and on the verge of returning to Iowa because Faye has left him, bludgeons Adore for taunting him one too many times. The movie theater mob, bored with waiting for their favorite stars, turns on Homer and he disappears.

Themes

Illusions

The theme of illusions forms the basis for much of what happens in the novel. West includes unreal and illusory images throughout the novel to indicate that what keeps Hollywood functioning are fantasies and dreams. Like the movie sets Tod designs and often has to walk through when he is at the studio, life in Hollywood in the 1930s is one-dimensional and flimsy.

Nothing seems to be indigenous in Hollywood; like most of the people living in Hollywood and the architecture of the buildings they inhabit, almost everything has been borrowed or brought from another place. The houses have been designed to look like Irish cottages, Spanish villas, or southern plantations. The characters often imagine themselves as someone different than they are really; for example, Claude Estee walks and talks as if he is a potbellied Confederate general, even though he is a "dried up little man with the rubbed features and stooped shoulders of a postal clerk." Harry Greener, a washed-up vaudeville clown, acts as if he has had a long and distinguished career on the stage.

Much of Tod's thinking is devoted to whom he will put in the painting and what he will have them doing. The painting itself is an illusion, as it depicts what Tod secretly hopes will happen to the city when the residents who came from other parts of the country to experience the good life in California become disillusioned and destroy the city in a violent, fiery riot.

Emotional and Physical Disconnection

West has created characters in his novel who have few, if any, solid attachments to other people or to places. Most have come to Hollywood from somewhere else, leaving other lives behind them. Their disconnection mimics the lack of substance that they see around them in the movie industry and in the architecture and atmosphere of the city. Many of the characters appear cold and callous, such as Faye when she tells Tod that she can never love him because he is neither rich nor handsome. He still desires her, yet admits that "her beauty was structural like a tree's, not a quality of her mind or heart." Tod does not require or expect an emotional connection to Faye; he only wants her body and even considers paying her for sex.

Power

To replace the lack of solid human relationships in the novel, West has given his characters relationships that are based solely on power. Everything of value in the book involves the use of power over a person or group of people. Faye has power over Homer, for example, and it defines their relationship: in exchange for a place to live and

plenty of money for nice clothes, Homer receives flirtatious attention from Faye, the fantasy that he has a normal life with a beautiful live-in companion, and the possibility, however remote, of sexual fulfillment. Faye and Homer even refer to their relationship as "a business arrangement."

In the novel, California and Hollywood exert a power over those who have given up their lives elsewhere and arrive expecting to become beautiful or handsome, rich, famous, and tanned. In this relationship, though, the newcomers to the city very often receive nothing in return for their travels. According to Tod, "they discovered that sunshine isn't enough.... Nothing happens. They don't know what to do with their time.... If only a plane would crash once in a while" to relieve their boredom.

Violence

Much of the power in the book is exhibited through violence, and often violence is the primary way in which people relate to one another. One of the first in a series of violent images in the book involves a horse's body floating in Claude Estee's swimming pool. It is a fake horse and has been placed in the pool for the amusement of Claude's party guests. Another guest becomes angry with Tod, in fact, when the horse does not amuse him. She calls him "an old meanie," and explains, "Think of how happy the Estees must feel, showing it to people and listening to their merriment."

Most of the characters are attracted to violence, as it makes them feel alive in a city where, according to Tod, many have come to die. Their lives are dull and empty, and only the prospect of death and destruction interests them. When Earle slams a club into Miguel's head, for example, Tod's response is not one of horror but of dreamy reverie. He begins to imagine a rape scene involving Faye, then plots out more of his painting depicting the violent overthrow and ruin of Los Angeles. Claude so desperately wants to see a cock fight that he buys a rooster to fight Miguel's, even though it is barely alive and has a cracked beak. Bloodshed raises the possibility that something real, something with consequences, will happen, however horrible.

Failure and Impotence

None of the characters in West's novel is a success or creates anything with substance. West's repeated use of failure and impotence reiterates the inadequate nature of the relationships in the novel. While Tod plans his painting, he is never seen actually working on it. Homer finds himself attracted to Faye and to another woman, but he does not know what to do with those feelings. And the only way that Tod can satisfy his misplaced and unrequited desire for Faye is to imagine raping her.

Style

Omniscient Point of View

West's book is written in the third person with an omniscient narrator, a voice that not only is able to report what events are taking place but also what thoughts and feelings are going on inside each character.

West's omniscient narrator shifts the focus a number of times during the course of the novel. The novel begins with Tod; his background, thoughts, and actions are the primary focus of the story. Then, in chapter eight, the focus shifts to Homer. While Homer settles into his new house in Hollywood, he remembers his old life in Iowa and thinks about his hopes for a new life in California. The focus is on Homer until chapter thirteen, when it shifts back to Tod. The narrator's focus also shifts between characters within some of the chapters.

Short Chapters

Chapters form the structure of this novel, and their brevity gives the book a particularly fast pace, much like episodic scenes in a movie. Many of the twenty-seven chapters are only one or two pages long, occur in one place, and cover only a few minutes or an hour. The longer chapters cover events that move from place to place and may last throughout an afternoon or evening, such as chapter fifteen, in which Tod tags along with Earle and Faye on their date. The final, climactic chapter, in which Tod is trapped by the mob at the movie premiere, is also one of the longer ones.

Use of Slang

West wrote his novel during the 1930s, using the popular slang of that period. His use of such language lets the reader know that the characters are involved in popular or youth culture or are not necessarily well-educated—with the exception of Tod. Though Tod has a degree from a very prestigious university, he uses slang words on occasion, mostly to fit in with the seedy residents of his apartment building. When he tries to convince Faye not to become a prostitute to pay for her father's funeral, he says, "Listen kid, . . . Why go on the turf? I can get the dough." West's use of slang, however, has also dated the book, making it somewhat challenging for modern readers to understand some of the language.

Of all the book's characters, Faye seems to use slang the most, possibly because she is the youngest adult character. Much of her slang is used in a way that sounds flirtatious and teasing, especially toward men. When Tod tries to kiss her after listening to her feeble ideas about a screenplay, she lets him but pushes him away when he tries to keep his arms around her for too long. "Whoa there, palsy-walsy," Faye warns, "Mama spank."

Historical Context

Hollywood's Golden Age

Many film historians and critics consider the 1930s to be Hollywood's golden age. Though much of the world, including the United States, was suffering from economic depression and high unemployment, the movie industry flourished both technically and artistically. In fact, 1939 saw the release of two of the American Film Institute's ten most popular movies: *Gone With the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz*.

By 1932 technicians had solved most of the early problems associated with adding sound to film, and nearly all Hollywood films included voice and music. The thirties also saw the use of color in

filming, and by 1939 the Technicolor Corporation had dramatically improved the industry's techniques such that colorized film no longer looked so artificial. This decade saw the birth of improved special effects, as well, with the release of *King Kong*. In the movie, the giant ape was actually a tiny metal skeleton covered with rubber and, for its close-ups, a huge mechanized ape head with only shoulders. The ape's filmed movements were carefully shot using such techniques as stop-action photography—a painstaking process in which the film-makers stop each frame of the film and move the model to its next position before they shoot another frame. Films featuring special-effects dinosaurs also became popular at this time.

The 1930s saw the dawn of hugely popular movie stars who became Hollywood's royalty. As depicted in the final scene of West's novel, thousands of fans would stand in line for hours for a chance to glimpse their favorite actors. Greta Garbo, a cool and sleek star with an air of mystery, and Clark Gable, a handsome leading man who always got the girl, were two of the most popular movie stars of the decade. Studios made huge profits even during the troubled economic times, mostly by making fun, escapist movies. Patrons seeking relief from their daily lives flocked to Westerns, musicals, comedies, and gangster films. The comedy of the Marx Brothers found a large audience; many of their films used slapstick humor to poke fun at businessmen, politicians, and such institutions as capitalism.

The Great Depression

On October 29, 1929, the New York Stock Market crashed when investors sold sixteen million shares in just one trading day. Just a year before, Herbert Hoover had been elected U.S. president, and the nation was basking in the glow of an unprecedented economic boom. Some sectors of the economy, however, had experienced a slowdown during the latter 1920s, particularly agriculture. The stock market collapse placed the nation on the road to the Great Depression and by 1933, the unemployment rate was at about 25 percent. Historians and economists disagree over the cause of the depression:

some maintain that the crisis was a global event, exacerbated by Germany's inability to pay the reparations that England and France demanded for its role in World War I; others blame a decline in consumption by Americans; still others point to overvalued stocks as the culprit.

The stock collapse did not affect the nation's economy all at once. Gradually, businesses closed, banks failed, and savings and investments disappeared. Fewer families could afford a new car, and spending on new construction in 1933 fell to one-sixth of its pre-depression level. Shantytowns, called "Hoovervilles" after the president, appeared on the outskirts of large cities and became places where men who had lost their jobs and homes could congregate. In West's novel, Miguel and Earle live in a small encampment on the edge of the city, where Earle traps small game for his meals and Miguel raises fighting roosters. Homer lets them live in his garage because, he tells Tod, they are "just down on their luck, like a lot of people these days, you know."

The nation had experienced prior cyclic economic depressions, occurring every eight to twelve years and each lasting a couple of years. At first, many businessmen and politicians saw the 1930s depression as part of an expected business cycle, but by the early 1930s, most realized that this depression was more widespread and intense than previous slumps. A series of disastrous economic decisions by Hoover resulted in Franklin D. Roo-sevelt's 1932 presidential victory. Almost immediately, Roosevelt launched a series of federal economic recovery programs referred to as the New Deal.

By 1937, signs indicated that the depression was loosening its grip on the nation. Many credit the start of war in Europe in 1939 with stimulating the world and national economies and ending the Great Depression, while others claim that the depression's end came only because the New Deal programs helped to strengthen the American people's confidence in the nation's economy.

Critical Overview

When he died at thirty-seven, West left a relatively small body of work: four novels, a few essays, a play, and some movie scripts. Critics differ on whether West had just begun to reach an advanced level of writing with the publication of his last novel, *The Day of the Locust*, or whether this work indicated merely an average talent with little more to offer.

Algis Valiunas, writing in *Commentary*, weighs in on the side that has never been particularly impressed with West and his style of writing. In his review of the 1997 Modern Library collection of West's work, *Novels and Other Writings*, Valiunas notes that other critics have called *The Day of the Locust* the best novel ever written about Hollywood, but he wishes there were a better one to consider. West "wrote about emotional, moral, and spiritual coarseness, and, notwithstanding his considerable learning, style, and wit, he wrote about them coarsely," charges Valiunas. He accuses West of cowardice for leaving out of *The Day of the Locust* the studio heads and other characters who, in real life, "were the ones doing the real destroying." Through this omission, West "missed a great opportunity," according to Valiunas.

Stanley Edgar Hyman, in *American Writers*, is equally critical of West and his writing abilities. While crediting West with a number of "very powerful scenes" in *The Day of the Locust*, he believes that the book "ultimately fails as a novel. . . . [I]t has no dramatic unity, and . . . it has no moral core." The characters in the novel "tend to be symbolic abstractions," Hyman asserts, pointing out that the character of Tod never quite "comes to life," primarily because of West's obvious struggle to keep him from being completely autobiographical.

Randall Reid, however, argues that those who expect straightforward realism will be disappointed with West's prose. "[T]hose who believe that the novel must portray with detailed fidelity the surface of life—whether natural or social—must necessarily feel that West fails as a novelist," he writes in his book, *The Fiction of Nathanael West: No Redeemer, No Promised Land*. West is a difficult author to read, Reid claims, because he "frustrates too many of the common motives for reading." West's style was simple, tending toward parody, and he found himself more interested in "the power latent in mass discontent," according to Reid, than in trying to make his reader comfortable.

Other critics have been more positive about *The Day of the Locust* without completely agreeing about it. I. B. Nadel in *Reference Guide to American Literature* considers the book "a realistic novel about an unreal city." West's prose in the novel is "relentless in its exposure of decay and violence," comments Nadel. Others focus on the dream-like atmosphere of the book, such as Earl Rovit, also writing in *Reference Guide to American Literature*. He compares West's last novel to T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, calling it "equally hallucinatory and probably more pessimistic, as well as more comic."

Some critics have focused on West's influences. In her article in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Diane Long Hoeveler argues that West was influenced by Henri Bergson, a

French philosopher who depicted modern industrial society as a pawnshop. According to Hoeveler, West created his characters with this philosophy in mind, as he has them living lives that are "ludicrously machine-like, commodified, and objectified." In doing so, "West condemns the schizophrenia and alienation that capitalism has produced in its modern victims," she writes. Richard Keller Simon, writing in *Modern Language Quarterly*, believes that in his final novel, West was attacking the 1930s movie director Frank Capra while also using many of Capra's storytelling techniques. *The Day of the Locust*, according to Simon, contains many story elements found in Capra's 1936 blockbuster, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, but turns Capra's happy ending on its head. He also argues that the German essayist and philosopher Theodor Adorno informed West's novel, noting that much of the argument in Adorno's 1938 essay on popular music reappears as social criticism in the book. "Once placed within these contexts [Capra and Adorno]," Simon writes, *The Day of the Locust* "can be recognized as one of the first complex analyses of modern mass culture written in America . . . as well as one of the first major works of modern literature to rework the conventions of mass culture."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Sanderson holds a master of fine arts degree in fiction writing and is an independent writer. In this essay, Sanderson examines images of nature, impotence, and violence in West's The Day of the Locust*, and how they relate to the novel's curious title.*

West's final novel before his death, *The Day of the Locust*, immediately presents the reader with a question: What does this curious title refer to? Even after a person reads the book, the title's appropriateness to the novel's contents may not be immediately apparent. There are no locusts in the book and, in fact, nature as it is commonly perceived seems to have been almost completely left out of West's image of a city defined by artificiality.

The most famous literary or historical reference to locusts is in the book of Exodus in the Bible, in which God sends a plague of locusts to the pharaoh of Egypt as retribution for refusing to free the enslaved Jews. Millions of locusts swarm over the lush fields of Egypt, destroying its food supplies. Destructive locusts also appear in the New Testament in the symbolic and apocalyptic book of Revelation.

West's use of the locust in his title, then, calls up images of destruction and a land stripped bare of anything green and living. Certainly, the novel is filled with images of destruction: Tod Hackett's painting entitled "The Burning of Los Angeles," his violent fantasies about Faye, and the bloody result of the cockfight, just to name a few. A close examination of West's characters and his selective use of natural images, which include representations of violence and impotence—and which are therefore contrary to popular images linking nature and fertility—reveals that the locust in the title refers to the character of Tod.

In his essay in *American Writers*, Stanley Edgar Hyman notes that while Faye Greener's character may represent nature, she is a version of nature that is "deceptive." Her last name may signify lushness and prosperity, but in reality Faye embodies neither. The photograph that Tod keeps of her displays a Faye who, with her "moon face," looks at first as if she is "welcoming a lover." But when Tod looks closely at the photograph, he sees a woman whose "invitation wasn't to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than love."

In the novel, then, nature, like humanity, is deceptive. Even the few animal images are presented as damaged or artificial. For the cockfight, Miguel chooses a rooster for Claude that looks like "an ordinary barnyard fowl," even though the bird has fought before. Upon closer inspection, Abe discovers that the rooster's beak is cracked, making him nearly useless in a fight. At Claude's party, a rubber horse floats in the swimming pool for the supposed amusement of his guests.

In fact, almost everything in the novel's Hollywood is falsified. Homer's Irish-style cottage contains a New England-style bedroom in which there is a bed with an iron frame that has been manufactured to look like heavily grained wood. Tod works at a

movie company where he must walk through acres and acres of fake ocean liners, Western saloons, and even Egyptian sphinxes, all made from flimsy plywood and plaster and forming a sort of hallucinatory neighborhood. This is what passes for a natural landscape in West's novel.

Alongside these images are representations of impotence—the very antithesis of nature's energy and fertility. Despite the numerous references to sex in the book, all but one ultimately point to failed efforts. West sets a scene in a whorehouse, where a projector screening a dirty film gets jammed just before it gets interesting. "The old teaser routine!" shouts one of the patrons. Homer approaches a woman sitting on her bed who seems somewhat interested in receiving his advances, but he freezes because he has no clue about what to do next. The closest he can get to a sexual relationship with Faye, the woman of his dreams, is to buy clothes for her and allow her to live in his house as part of a "business agreement." Faye, of course, presents the men in the story with everything they want but cannot have. Earle tries to court her but he is physically too clumsy, and Tod's advances are firmly brushed off, even when he begs or offers money.

Tod's response to Faye's rejection is twofold. Sometimes he imagines her in his painting, fleeing both the bloodthirsty mob about to destroy Los Angeles and a woman about to hit her with a rock. Faye is frightened but exhilarated by the chase, "enjoying the release that wild flight gives in much the same way that a game bird must when, after hiding for several tense minutes, it bursts from cover in complete, unthinking panic." Other times, Tod dreams of raping Faye, a fantasy in which Tod chases after her and brings her to the ground but is never quite able to complete the crime. Tod acts out part of these fantasies in real life when Faye flees the scene of Earle and Miguel's fight. Tod tries to grab her, but she is too fast; nevertheless, he lies down feeling "comfortably relaxed, even happy."

The only scene in the book in which the sex act is completed takes place between Faye and Miguel. At first, their coupling may seem to be a fluke, but there is more to Miguel than is immediately apparent. In Hollywood, where everyone is from somewhere else and there does not appear to be any indigenous culture, Miguel is about as close to a local as West gets. Miguel is Mexican, still living on the land taken from his ancestors centuries before. His connection to the dirt beneath his feet gives him power over those who have come to California from the East coast, like Tod, or the Midwest, like Homer. This man, who is still in touch with something natural, however fractured, is the only one Faye will allow into her bed.

Tod. Tod's last name is a reminder, for example, that he is a failure at most things he tries. He is a "hack" artist, paid to produce something that has commercial, but not artistic, value. While Tod thinks quite a bit about his painting, usually imagining the violence it will portray, West never shows him actually creating the painting.

Tod's failures drive him to imaginary violence. His violence is never acted out but is always just beneath the surface of everything he does and thinks. Even though Faye is a coarse likeness of nature, Tod still wants her and wants to plunder the natural world

that she represents. He describes his fantasy sex with her in almost hyper-violent terms. "If you threw yourself on her, it would be like throwing yourself from the parapet of a skyscraper," he visualizes. "You would do it with a scream. . . . Your teeth would be driven into your skull like nails into a pine board."

Tod is violence and destruction personified, much like a locust. He is entranced by the possibilities of violence, as pictured in his plan for his painting, where a great mob of dissatisfied and bored people attempt to destroy the city. Like Tod, they came to Hollywood to find something that would make their lives whole and exciting. "Once there, they discovered that sunshine isn't enough.... Their boredom becomes more and more and terrible. They realize they've been tricked and they burn with resentment," the narrator says. In Tod's painting, they explode and take out their frustrations on the city and everyone around them.

Like a locust, Tod is intent on destroying and plundering everything he sees, including Faye. But a single locust is nearly harmless; it is only when they swarm that they do real damage. Tod has spent the entire novel observing the people he thinks have "come to California to die," considering how he will fill his canvas with them and have them do the destruction he so desperately wants to see. Through his act of observation, Tod has set himself apart from them. But by the novel's final scene, it is clear that he is no less angry than they are and no less willing to be a part of their violence. Before he is swept up in the movie theater mob, Tod walks in front of the crowd, protected by a velvet rope, almost taunting, but certainly considering whether he will join them. After Homer bludgeons the young boy, the mob makes Tod's decision for him and sweeps him up.

There are, of course, nonsexual representations of impotence and failure in the book, especially for able to close his eyes and mentally work on his painting, one flame at a time. The day Tod becomes part of the mob is truly the day of the locust.

Source: Susan Sanderson, Critical Essay on *The Day of the Locust*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Nadel suggests that The Day of the Locust *is "relentless in its exposure of the decay and violence that comes from the betrayal of dreams."*

Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* is a realistic novel about an unreal city. Centered in Hollywood and the world of movie-making, the story avoids the glitter of stardom to concentrate on the life of the disenchanted. It presents the disillusioned, those who find themselves cheated of the glamour their fantasies promised and the movies provided. The novel emphasizes the spiritual and moral death of the city, symptomatic of the condition within the country as a whole. Focusing on the despair of out-of-work bit actors, the illusions of romantic but untalented actresses, the unhappiness of once-successful vaudeville comics, the paralysis of those who journey to the coast, the novel stresses the death of dreams and culminates in a fiery riot of frenzied movie fans at a Hollywood premiere. This scene, which ends the novel, embodies the efforts of the protagonist, Tod Hackett, to finish his panoramic painting recording life in the city which he titles *The Burning of Los Angeles*. With the Old Testament allusion of its title and it apocalyptic ending by fire, the novel stands as a unique indictment of romance and its destruction in modern America. This intensely moral work, displaying characters entrapped between their idealism and corruption, initiates a series of Hollywood novels which extend West's satire. F. Scot Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*, Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?*, and Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* are three distinguished examples.

The principal themes of *The Day of the Locust* are the tension between disillusionment and romance and the reaction to recognizing the absurdity of everyday life. The clearest demonstration of the conflict occurs in chapter 18 when Tod Hackett wanders about a studio lot in quest of Faye Greener, the lustful but elusive *femme fatale* he has met earlier in the book. Believing she is an extra in an epic entitled *Waterloo*—the title itself symbolic of the imminent downfall of Hollywood—he follows a group of *cuirassiers* heading for the set in search of her. He quickly loses them but encounters in succession a painted ocean liner, a papier-mâché sphinx, a desert, a western saloon, a jungle, a Paris street, a Romanesque courtyard, a waterfall, a campy resort, and a Greek temple where the god of Eros "lay face downward in a pile of old newspapers and bottles." Such is the fate of love in the novel—lost, discarded and impotent. Before he actually witnesses the literal collapse of a cardboard Mont St. Jean when hundreds of soldiers enter a mock battle but unexpectedly crash through canvas, cardboard, and plaster, Tod glimpses an adobe fort, a wooden horse of Troy, a set of baroque palace stairs, a Dutch windmill, and the bones of a dinosaur. In this pivotal chapter, West emphasizes the riot of scenes and fraudulent quality of history when placed in the hands of the image makers. But the chapter also echoes the illusionary lives all the characters lead in a city that is itself a jumble of architectural and life styles and which values masquerade over authenticity. In Hollywood, West emphasizes, the natural is the artificial.

The unusual characters in the novel parallel the melange of styles and values depicted. A dwarf, a painter, a bookkeeper, a family of Eskimos, a cowboy, a vaudeville comedian,

and an untalented actress/prostitute are the principals. But their mixture expresses the frustration rather than achievement of talents. The life of these extras, movie fans, would-be stars, screenwriters, and hangerson is one of boredom, suffering, and impotence repeated thematically and symbolically throughout the novel. Sordid rooms, sterile landscapes, and dead-end streets project the empty lives in Los Angeles. Promised romance and stardom, adventure and sex, the figured discover only the artificial world of make-believe. And for West's characters, resentment at this discovery unleashes violence. Not surprisingly, the original title of the novel was *The Cheated*.

Faye Greener, the heroine, embodies many of the contradictions of the city. Pursued by all, obtained by none, she is a kind of bitch goddess (like success) who will be possessed only by those who can pay for her. But like the image on a screen, she remains untouchable, a fantasy. She becomes a phantom bride not only for Tod Hackett and Homer Simpson, the retired bookkeeper, but also for the seedy cowboy actor Earle Shoop and the brutal but sexual Mexican Miguel. Faye remains elusive, the dream of love that is unattainable for the nation but which it continues to desire. "Her invitation wasn't to pleasure," West writes, "but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love."

The Day of the Locust is relentless in its exposure of the decay and violence that comes from the betrayal of dreams. Yet West exhibits supreme control in the telling of his story, despite the continued division between the idealism and actuality of Hollywood life. Adjusting to the discrepancy between the imagined and the real, Hackett becomes both an artist fashioning a new future and a Jeremiah predicting doom. The novel is a remarkable satire of America and its dreams, providing a disturbing portrait of its fantasies evoked through language, symbol, and character. And at the core of these desires is violence which for West is idiomatic in America. When the masses discover that "they haven't the mental equipment for pleasure," their only recourse is to destroy. Boredom and disappointment make them savage, as Hackett experiences when he is caught in the mob scene at Kahn's Persian Palace Theatre which ends the novel. But the event paradoxically allows him a vision of his completed painting which he has been unable to finish until that moment.

Just before the climactic riot, Hackett remarks that "at the sight of their heroes and heroines, the crowd would turn demonic." The frustrations beneath the surface of wish-fulfillment and dream-seeking sharpen the theme of middle-class dissatisfaction, creating a startling work of fiction. In its presentation of divided characters, split between their desires and actions, in its rendering of anguish-ridden romantics surrounded by indifferent pragmatists, the work conveys the dilemma of the modern American psyche. And in its accuracy in showing "all those poor devils who can only be stirred by the promise of miracle and then only to violence," the novel has a remarkable contemporary quality. For West, life as illusion masks discontent, although awareness of this condition ironically intensifies the need for fantasy. Difficult to control and uncertain in their goals, the masses feel threatened by their idols and are prepared to destroy them when they fail to gratify their dreams. In the neo-Gothic world of his California, West creates a riveting but profoundly disturbing fiction.

Source: I. B. Nadel, "*The Day of the Locust*," in *Reference Guide to American Literature*, 4th ed., edited by Jim Kamp, St. James Press, 2000, pp. 988-89.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Widner examines the Hollywood setting and culture that underpins West's novel.

Critical Essay #4

Early in the novel, West makes a distinction between the "masqueraders," the costumed role-players characteristic of Hollywood (and, more generally, of the manipulative, shifting, and anomic southern California culture and society), and those retirees and other refugees, mostly from mid-America, who have "come to California to die," They, representing the broader American society, provide the audience of the masqueraders. Several things, as we will see, go novelistically wrong with this division, but let us first consider the Greeners, Harry and Faye, as epitomizing the masqueraders.

Harry is a clown. Clowning often serves as a combination of the self-protective and the self-punitive masquerade (as we often recognize in the adolescent "class clown"). But clowning can become compulsive, the masquerade turning into an entrapping mechanism. West dramatized some of this with Beagle Darwin and Willie Shrike in his first two books and again in *Locust* with his most carefully detailed clown, Harry Greener, aging ex-vaudevillean, burlesque stooge, and sometime Hollywood bit player who makes his depression living huckstering with phony acts door-to-door a dubious homemade silver polish. "When Harry had first begun his stage career," forty years before, ruminates Tod, "he had probably restricted his clowning to the boards, but now he clowned continuously. It was his sole method of defense. Most people, he had discovered, won't go out of their way to punish a clown." His most successful professional role had been as a "bedraggled Harlequin" taking punishment from a group of acrobats (partly like Lem in the final scenes of *A Cool Million* playing masochistic stooge for the audience's sadistic guffaws). Now Harry specializes in burlesque pitifulness, playing the victim whenever he is "on," and overplaying the reverse, the rather nasty wise guy, when supposedly not masquerading. He dramatizes himself as the give-away fake, "dressing like a banker, a cheap unconvincing imitation" which by fooling no one "slyly" fools his auditors into sympathy. The "act" has become automatic.

Tod realizes this when in sickroom conversation Harry starts one of his compulsive routines and the auditor has "to let him run down like a clock." Though Harry's illness is "real," a heart attack which will shortly kill him, he "groaned skillfully. It was a second-act curtain groan, so phony that Tod had to hide a smile. And yet the old man's pallor hadn't come from a box." The only way Harry knows to express suffering is by exaggeratedly pretending it. His face, grotesquely overdone "like a mask" from the ravages of years of overacting, can never "express anything either subtly or exactly . . . only the furthest degree." (Historically, it has become unfashionable in fictions as well as in life to find revelations of character in physiognomy or illness, but West repeatedly points to the old existential truth that we really are what we have done and do, not least the counterfeiting.) Harry's once-chosen role as victim has also fixated the pleasure in his suffering, though, of course, "he only enjoyed the sort that was self-inflicted." Harry inflicts on any and every one his life story, an unstoppable jokey-piteous charade of doggerel, mimicry, melodrama, bombast, and self-parodying comic patter. Hamming up his life has, in fact, become his life.

Earlier, we see him peddling his misery act and polish when (at Homer's house) he has a real heart attack. He acts hurt, and does hurt, "wondering himself whether he was acting or sick." The high point of his routine is his "victim's laugh" which he uses to victimize others. His intended sales victim (Homer) tries to stop Harry:

> But Harry couldn't stop. He was really sick. The last block that held him poised over the runway of self-pity had been knocked away and he was sliding down the chute.... He jumped to his feet and began doing Harry Greener, poor Harry, honest Harry.... At the end of the pantomime, Harry stood with his head thrown back, clutching his throat as though waiting for the curtain. . . . But Harry wasn't finished. He bowed, sweeping his hat to his heart, then began again. He didn't get very far this time and had to gasp painfully for breath. Suddenly, like a mechanical toy that had been overwound, something snapped inside him and he began to spin through his entire repertoire. The effort was purely muscular, like the dance of a paralytic. Hie jigged, juggled his hat, made believe he had been kicked.... He went through it all in one dizzy spasm, then reeled to the couch....

As real victim he was "even more surprised" than his ostensible victim-audience; though "really sick," he can only think and respond in terms of "performance." While playing faint, he shockingly discovers that he really "is faint." Having role-played so much, he can no longer tell when his is acting pain and feeling pain, pretending suffering and really suffering. In role-playing desperation, like the poseur-poet in *Balso Snell*, his posing act takes over on its frenziedly mechanical own. The masquerade has become all.

The narrator's (and author's) detailed fascination with the Greener role-playing may be because Harry is a genuine fake, all pose with little person left over. So, too, with his daughter, Faye Greener, central idol in most of the violent masquerade of West's mock-scenario of Hollywood eroticism. From the second chapter to concluding riot-rehearsal, Faye is the unmoved mover of the obsessional sexual fantasies of all the particularized males in the novel. An unloving parody love goddess, she provides another masturbatory rape image of the long-dominant Hollywood fantasy type (Harlowe, Monroe, et al). A pretty would-be starlet, tall ("with sword-like legs"), wide chested and high breasted, "platinum" blonde seventeen year old (she usually looks even younger), she is "taut and vibrant" with a constant sexual come-on. Analyzing his own longings for Faye, Tod realizes her appeal "wasn't to pleasure" but to something else, "closer to murder than to love." In further images, coupling with Faye becomes an act of mindless self-immolation, an almost inverted mystical experience, which is much of what media eroticism is about. Even doltishly passive Tod has repeated visions of raping Faye.

The erotic deity is peurile and mannered, with a "subtle half-smile uncontaminated by thought," sexual fantasy unencumbered by other human dimensions. Her compulsive sexual gestures were "so completely meaningless, almost formal, that she seemed like a dancer rather than an affected actress," which she was badly imitating. Much of the time she mechanically, self-lovingly, postures before mirrors. Even to tasteful Yalie Tod, her "affectations" were "so completely artificial that he found them charming." Like Harry's, Faye's role-playing works by not fooling anyone; instead, it was "like being backstage during an amateurish, ridiculous play." The very totality of her absurdity takes people in, with a knowing smile but none the less caught. For example, we several times see one of her "most characteristic gestures" of erotic signaling "with a secret smile and the tongue caress" of her parted lips: "It seemed to promise all sorts of undefined intimacies, yet it was really as simple and automatic as the word thanks." But that very impersonality, the unencumbered sexual come-on, is the appeal.

Faye constantly turns and twists her well-shaped body in sexual automation. Even the so-phisticatedly blasé screenwriter, Claude, is mesmerized by it. He eagerly listens to her expound on Hollywood as she jumbles "bits of badly understood advice from the trade papers . . . fan magazines and □ legends"—all "nonsense"—but, like most of her auditors, he is "busy watching her smile, laugh, shiver, whisper, grow indignant, cross and uncross her legs, stick out her tongue, widen and narrow her eyes, toss her head

. . . ." It is a weirdly dissociated performance of gestures and words. Like other perhaps sincerely fraudulent people (Richard Nixon provides a famous example), her body language disconnects from her words, "her gestures and expressions didn't really illustrate what she was saying. They were almost pure. It was as though her body recognized how foolish her words were . . . ." But most of the listeners are not really connecting with her body, but with the fantasy of using it. Faye, an automated sexual charade, is as bad an actress otherwise as most popular media figures, existing only as crude fantasy image.

And that does express her. She lives in fantasy. In a scene of careful dramatization, West shows her choosing her "stories," running through stock fantasies as if thumbing a deck of cards. She takes them earnestly, wholeheartedly, sincerely stupid and ungenuine, proposing to friend Tod, whom she uses but never sexually, various garbled but literal-minded "B" movie scripts of the time—"a South Sea tale," a "familiar version of the Cinderella theme"—as something that would make them successful and rich. As so often in *Locust*, Tod summarizes the quality in a painting analogy: "Although the events she described were miraculous, her description of them was realistic. The effect was similar to that obtained by the artists of the Middle Ages, who, when doing a subject like the raising of Lazarus from the dead or Christ walking on water, were careful to keep all the details intensely realistic." (So does West with his fantasy figures.) Faye's literalism thus achieves a naive power. And a deeper irony since her faith is not cosmic Christianity but Hollywood shoddy, the crassest commercial-romantic junk, in which she is a true believer, an erotic nun of masturbatory dreams. It is "these little daydreams of hers" which "gave such extraordinary color and mystery to her movements," a tumescent holiness total in its human counterfeit. Faye is a mystical vibrating machine. And it seems to be this autoeroticism which leads to the male audiences' rape-longings

against her mad "completeness, egg-like self-sufficiency," that makes even Tod "want to crush her," or throw "her down in the soft, warm mud" of the fantasy swamp that she lives in. This is violating, as an old form of pornography emphasized, the nun, only this time of Hollywood fantasy-piety.

Faye's tormenting aroused males, fighting with her father (she counters his maniacal "victim's laugh" with mechanically lascivious singing of "Jeepers-Creepers"), or setting off violence between her incidental lovers (Earl, the drugstore cowboy, Miguel, the Mexican cockfighting primitive), do not really affect her. Nor apparently does her complacent whoring. It cannot faze her, Tod concludes, because "her beauty was structural like a tree's, not a quality of her mind or heart." She is simply not a real person.

When Harry dies, Faye, who has been treating him meanly, decides to role-play, rather forcedly, the devoted daughter. She will provide a proper funeral. And for that, within a few paragraphs, her language switches from stock sentimentality to tough-broad slang as she plans to earn the funeral money on her back—call girl for Mrs. Jenning's high-class establishment. After all, it is just another role-playing. Indeed, when she takes on a role that bothers her, as does her chaste moving in with middle-aged Homer as a "business arrangement" to provide her with the clothes, convertible, and other fetish accoutrements that will certify her stardom, she finds the doggily devoted dope shame arousing, and so decides to cancel the role. While Faye gets carefully delineated with touches of shame, anger, geniality, even lasciviousness, and a "viper" high (from the song she sings, earlier slang for a "stoner" or "pothead"), these can only be incidental to her masquerading, which is most of the essential self she has.

Tod's final vision of Faye, after the day of a gruesome and fraudulent cockfight in the garage and then a parallel stud fight in Homer's living room between Faye's sexually teased admirers, provides a metaphoric summary. He wonders if she has gone off with Miguel, whom she went to bed with the previous night, or, more likely, back to whoring for Mrs. Jenning:

> But either way she would come out all right. Nothing could hurt her. She was 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. He pictured her riding a tremendous sea. Wave after wave reared its ton on ton of solid water and crashed down only to have her spin gaily away.... a pretty cork, gilt with a glittering fragment of mirror set in its top. The sea in which it danced was beautiful, green in the trough of the waves and silver at their tips. But for all their moon-driven power, they could do no more than net the bright cork for a moment in a spume of intricate lace. Finally it was set down on a strange shore where a savage with pork-sausage fingers and a pimpled butt

picked it up and hugged it to his sagging belly. Tod recognized the fortunate man; he was one of Mrs. Jenning's customers.

The passage serves to again reveal Tod's own passive fantasy indulgence, but it also does other things. In this vintage West, an extended conceit, we see the intentional yoking of incongruities—gilt cork and concrete pier, intricate lace and pimpled butt, lyrical nature poetry and crude human grotesquery, wild vision and hard-nosed cynicism. But the larger significance may be seen in the final judgment of Faye-as-cork: narcissistic (the fragment of mirror on top), partially exempt from the natural order in her very denaturing (uncapturable by the destructive sea), subject only to one of her parodistic South Sea romance scripts, turned back into properly whorish reality. Faye, as person and type, is invulnerable, not only in her metaphoric journey here but in her "life" in the novel as well as in her final symbolism as a figure in Tod's painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles" (running ecstatically ahead of the ravaging locust-mob, who revengefully pursue the masqueraders who have helped cheat them of genuine life).

Faye is unfazable. But that also means she floats invulnerable to most human possibilities, always in bouncing escape, only momentarily netted in the spume. Neither tragic nor comic, Faye remains unarousable to fuller life, just a dancing cork in a kaleidoscopic masquerade of autoeroticism. Though bemused in tone, the passage may be read as propounding West's devastating view of the consequences of endless role-playing. With Faye always bouncing free to continue in her fantasies, or Harry not knowing what he feels because clown-ishly playing his disguised self, the Greeners show that for compulsive masqueraders little authentic life is possible. It is a disease of unreality as bad as religion. What "Hollywood" means, then, is not just the obvious grossness and corruption but the "greener" fantasy masquerading of life and self—and all America.

West's compassionate handling of the Greeners, and indeed of the whole masquerading ambience, should not detract from the sense of horror. Here, as he wrote in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, we can see some of the great "betrayal" of human dreams. Since West's time, our exploitative technocratic popular culture has extended, increased, and intensified; larger realms of daily activities—politics, religion, schooling, social responses, culture—have more fully merged into the masquerades. The probabilities can hardly be less than apocalyptic.

Critical Essay #5

Though not much of *The Day of the Locust* concerns cinema production, West seems to have perceived that an essence of the Hollywood "art" was to provide mechanical fantasies of violent eroticism for repressed mass America. His imagery for Los Angeles insists strongly on machined fantasy, fabricated dreams which become grotesque monstrosities. So, too, with his often wryly amusing descriptions of his caricature people. For example, Earl Shoup, Faye's stud and a minor cowboy actor, costumed in Western clothes, gestures, and clichés, "had a two dimensional face that a talented child might have drawn with a ruler and a compass." The flat symmetry of features and the coloring like a wash "completed his resemblance to a mechanical drawing." A mechanical and two-dimensional persona, his responses, mostly laconic posing and sex and violence, lack most fuller human depth.

Throughout the fiction, West plays variations on the mechanical phantasm. Tod goes to a party at the imitation Mississippi mansion in Los Angeles of successful screen writer Claude. His host has made masquerading into an infinite regress of mockery, such as calling to his butler, " 'Here you black rascal! A mint julep.' A Chinese servant came running with a Scotch and soda." A more simple mechanism, a floodlighted "conversation piece" (as it was later to be called by similar affluently bored people), is a "dead horse" in his swimming pool, "or, rather, a life-size, realistic reproduction of one. Its legs stuck up stiff and straight and it had an enormous, distended belly. Its hammerhead lay twisted to one side and from its mouth, which was set in an agonized grin, hung a heavy black tongue." Why is this grotesque mechanism there? "To amuse."

Claude also jokes with a parody rhetoric "that permitted him to express his moral indignation and still keep his reputation for worldliness and wit." So did Nathanael West, and other characters in his fiction such as "joke machine" Shrike, in a desperate effort to amuse, to mask horror and emptiness. Claude wants Tod to join the party in visiting Audrey Jenning's classy whorehouse to watch what turns out to be a blandly obscene movie of polymorphous sex. Tod demurs. Claude explains that the cultivated madam —"refined," she "insists on discussing Gertrude Stein and Juan Gris"—"makes vice attractive by skillful packaging. Her dive's a triumph of industrial design." "I don't care how much cellophane she wraps it in," Tod counters, "nautch joints are depressing, like all places for deposit, banks, mail boxes, tombs, vending machines." With cynical playfulness, Claude picks up the mechanical metaphor: "Love is like a vending machine, eh? Not bad. You insert a coin and press home the lever. There's some mechanical activity inside the bowels of the device. You receive a small sweet, frown at yourself in the dirty mirror, adjust your hat . . . and walk away, trying to look as though nothing had happened. It's good, but it's not for pictures." For instead of this mechanical autoeroticism, after all, the "barber in Purdue" wants an even more counterfeit mechanism of "amour and glamor." But all possibilities remain "industrial design."

So does most of the southern California scene, including the fantasy ersatz ("plastic," people in the 1970s would say) styles of housing and decorating and costuming: sports clothes which were "really fancy dress"; imitation northern European cottages (Homer's

is described in ugly detail) for a Mediterranean climate; plants made of "rubber and cork" mixed with real ones; everything painted and plastered and stamped to pretend to be something else (the "surfeit of shoddy" of *A Cool Million*, the violation of function and the nature of materials). By contagion, apparently, even nature appears as machined artifice. In truly apt metaphors, we get the night scene in Los Angeles in which, amid Claude's mimosa and oleander, through "a slit in the blue serge sky poked a grained moon that looked like an enormous bone button." That metaphoric direction had been set in the opening chapter with images of dusk with its semidesert purplish tones in which "violet piping, like a Neon tube, outlined the tops of the ugly, humpbacked hills." Much later in the story, it becomes "one of those blue and lavender nights when the luminous color seems to have been blown over the scene with an airbrush." The Westean twist to grotesquery almost convinces the reader that the hills are crippled and all the natural ambience tasteless machine work. Yet in comparison with the hard industrial and class impositions on nature in the East, it has crass charm.

West's stylistic problem is to find the metaphors which will meaningfully encompass the crippled beings within the mechanical artifice. He uses painting styles as analogues, in the first chapter having Tod announce his turn away from the positive Americana of Homer and Ryder for the sharper nineteenth-century European mockeries of Daumier and Goya. Somewhat after the middle of the novel, Tod favors the eighteenth-century picturesque painters of decay, such as Rosa and Guardi. Later, observing the Hollywood cultists, he turns to the tortured mannerism of Magnasco. Tod's projected painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles," suggests a combination of Ensor's early twentieth-century apocalyptic symbolism, surrealist incongruities (as do the machined nature descriptions quoted above)—and perhaps rather too much disaster-epic illustration, Hollywood style, since popular culture usually shows an exploitative willingness to mask cheap sensationalism and emptiness as portentous apocalypse.

An obvious part of the machined-fantasy conception comes out in the prop versus reality studio scenes where the mechanisms, and false facades, of dreams are so evident. The studio backlot serves as a "dream dump" for discarded sets and props. It is compared to T. A. Janvier's [*In the*] *Sargasso Sea* (a novel [1898] drawing a mythic illustration of the mid-Atlantic doldrums which collect flotsam and jetsam—and in legend, the Flying Dutchman and the Ancient Mariner). The studio, then, is "a Sargasso of the imagination!" (The metaphor had been used earlier in Ezra Pound's satiric portrayal of a culture-vulture rich lady, "Portrait d'un Femme".) The Hollywood "dream dump" is where every fantasy will be exploited and washed up.

This includes the costuming of history as well. Returning (Chapter 18) to his opening studio scene of the filming of "The Battle of Waterloo," we get ironic play on defeat—for the historic Napoleon because of a collapsed cavalry charge at Mont St. Jean, for the movie production because of the collapsed (unfinished) wood-canvas-plaster set of Mont St. Jean. Real people get hurt in the collapse, though they express, depression style, pleasure at the likelihood of injury compensation. The traditional mock-heroic provides the method here: great event, shoddy mechanical imitation, practical human point.

But much of West's treatment develops from more direct realism than these highlighted allusions and metaphors would suggest. Simply presenting actual southern California scenes and types gives more than enough of the bizarre. Note, for example, a comic-gruesome set piece: Mrs. Loomis comes upon Tod and Homer while searching for her darling child, Adore, talks to Tod of California as a "paradise," of her faith in raw vegetables (following one "Dr. Pierce . . . 'Know-All Pierce-All' " in "the search for Health along the Road of Life"), and of her obsessional displaced ambitions to make her child a screen star (the widespread "Squirrely Temple" craze as it was sometimes called in the 1930s). Adore, an artificially manner little boy of eight, appears, "with a pale, peaked face and a large troubled forehead . . . staring eyes . . . eyebrows . . . plucked and shaped. . . dressed like a man." Already full of horrific psychological tics, he makes faces; his mother apologetically explains that he thinks he is the "Frankenstein monster"—and so he is! She forces her machine-fantasy monster-child to perform, "expertly" singing a semiobscene hyped-blues, "Mamma Doan Wan' No Peas," while imitatively writhing with "a top-heavy load of sexual pain." (Such grotesque role-playing, of course, continues and expresses an all-American ideal of the "loving" ambitious parent, as with those tens of thousands of petit bourgeois ones who drive their daughters to be competitive and posturing baton twirlers, cheerleaders, fashion models, and other mechanically tuned and costumed obscenities, and their sons to be jocks.) Not at all incidentally, Adore breaks through his imposed role with inevitable violence, later throwing a stone at the near-psychotic Homer, which starts the mass violence of the final riot scene in the novel. West several times stresses the point that the role-players, by the obvious psychological mechanisms of repression and release, turn nasty.

Not quite all the masqueraders come out as such inhuman "automatons." Almost sarcastically, West presents as the most naturally spontaneous and responsive a three-foot dwarf, "Honest Abe Kusich," racetrack tout, pugnacious friend of whores and Tod, earnest handler of the losing bird in the rigged cockfight, and crusher of Earl's testicles when monopolizing Faye's attentions at the following part. Indomitable midget, Abe masquerades as a big macho tough guy, and in a not altogether ironic sense really is. But West, with a natural taste for the grotesque (as Balso Snell in his first fiction had a taste for cripples), perhaps expands too much on the role-playing of the dwarf, of Harry Greener, and of other grotesqueries such as a satire of a performing transvestite (a man who badly imitates a man). The author performs rather too much as transfixed Eastern aesthete with the Southland decor. Some of this, of course, may be attributed to writing in the rather documentary form of the "Hollywood novel" and its emphasis on bizarre detail. Postsick and black humor, which it foreshadows, it may have lost some of its shock and comic effects. But perhaps more generally West's fiction can be taken as implying what was to happen: the machined fantasies represented by Hollywood in an earlier period were to invade the repressed American character. But the result was to be less the violent upheaval with which West concludes his story than the Hollywoodization of everything until an amorphous counterfeit culture provided a technocratic masquerade of a civilization.

Source: Kingsley Widner, "The Hollywood Masquerade: *The Day of the Locust*," in *Nathanael West*, Twayne Publishers, 1982, pp. 67-94.

Adaptations

The Day of the Locust, starring William Atherton as Tod Hackett, Donald Sutherland as Homer Simpson, and Karen Valentine as Faye Greener, was adapted to film by Waldo Salt and directed by John Schlesinger. Paramount produced the film in 1975.

Topics for Further Study

West's death after running a stop sign recalls the implied and explicit violence in his novel. Learn more about West's life and death and compare and contrast him with Tod Hackett.

Watch a few of the most popular films released between 1929 and 1939 or research their content in books about film history. Many historians have argued that the content of these films helped reinforce popular American values such as individuality and hard work. From what you learn about these films, do you agree with this statement? How does the content of the films compare with West's description of the industry that made the films?

After finishing West's last novel, read one of his earlier novels. Do you think that he was improving as a writer? What in the two novels supports your opinion? If he had lived to write for another thirty years, what topics do you think he would have covered in his later novels?

Using what you know about the characters in the novel, write an epilogue in which you tell what becomes of them. Does Faye become a movie star? If not, what does she do? Does Tod finish his painting? Does Homer survive the riot and return to Iowa?

Choose a scene in the novel, change its outcome, and write about how this would influence the rest of the novel. For example, imagine what might have happened in the rest of the book if Earle had killed Miguel when he hit him with a club after the pheasant dinner in the canyon.

Compare and Contrast

1930s: Hollywood movie studios have a huge amount of control over their actors, even the stars. Actors sign multi-movie contracts that limit their ability to select the films in which they appear, and their private lives are governed by strict codes of behavior.

Today: Movie stars have unprecedented freedom to choose their work and in some cases play a role in the producing or directing of their films. Studios regularly pay stars millions of dollars for their work in only one film.

1930s: With the Great Depression taking a toll on families' budgets, multiple generations living under the same roof, or doubling-up, becomes the norm again. In West's novel, Faye and her father share an apartment.

Today: The post-World War II housing boom launched a series of generations that never expected to live with their parents after they left home for school or work. A trend has emerged, however, in which more and more young, post-college adults are moving back home. Some explain that these young adults are choosing their parents' homes over their own apartments because of the rising cost of living, while others believe the trend is linked to a rising first-marriage age.

1930s: Hundreds of thousands of people from the American Midwest, whose farms have turned into dust because of poor farming practices and freakish weather, travel to California in search of jobs and new lives. Unfortunately, conditions are not quite what they hoped; jobs are scarce and many Californians are not happy about competing for what jobs there are. Close to six million people live in California.

Today: California is still a popular place to live; its population is now more than thirty-four million. Demographers estimate that California's population grows by sixty people every hour of every day.

1930s: Hollywood film technicians are making huge strides in adding sound and color to movies. Special effects are improving, but they are usually achieved by technicians creating tiny models and using stop-action film—a painstaking process in which the filmmakers stop each frame of the film and move the model to its next position before they shoot another frame.

Today: Most special effects are done by computer. Sometimes the images seen in films are completely computer-generated, and other times they involve the use of as many as thirty individual still cameras to capture an image and manipulate it. For example, the film *The Matrix* features a sophisticated technique using multiple still cameras and computers so that actors appear to be hanging in space, moving in slow motion while the camera circles around them.

What Do I Read Next?

F. Scott Fitzgerald died just one day before West in 1940 and before he could finish *The Love of the Last Tycoon: A Western*. It is the story of a young Hollywood film executive and an exposé of the Hollywood studio system in the 1930s. In 1995, Scribner released an edition that restores the 1940 version (published as *The Last Tycoon*) and includes Fitzgerald's manuscripts, drafts, and working notes.

Horace McCoy's 1935 novel, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They*, presents a picture of 1930s Hollywood every bit as cynical as the view West offers. A couple who take part in the depressionera craze for weeks-long dance marathons, in hopes of earning some money, become pawns in a Hollywood publicity stunt.

John Steinbeck's 1940 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), gives a very different picture of 1930s California than the one seen in West's *The Day of the Locust*. The story chronicles the journey of the Joad family from Oklahoma, where the bank has foreclosed on their farm and the wind has carried away most of the topsoil, to California, where they hope to start a new life picking fruit.

A Cool Million, published in 1934, was West's third book. It is a satiric rags-to-riches story about a young man struggling to fulfill his American Dream, set during the Great Depression.

Further Study

Bergman, Andrew, *We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films*, Ivan R. Dee, 1992.

This books looks at how Hollywood films in the 1930s helped support various American institutions and myths, such as individual success and capitalism.

Perelman, S. J., *Acres and Pains*, Burford Books, 1999.

The humor writer S. J. Perelman was West's brother- in-law and financially supported West during some of his leaner years. In this book, originally published in 1947, the author pokes fun at himself and his attempts to adjust his city-boy ways to life in the country.

Sklar, Robert, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, Vintage Books, 1994.

When this book was originally published in 1975, critics hailed it as the ultimate source on the history of American films and how films have shaped American values. The author has revised and updated the content for this edition.

Terkel, Studs, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, New Press, 2000.

Originally published in 1970, Studs Terkel's book chronicles the effect the Great Depression had on dozens of ordinary people (and a few famous ones), using their own words.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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