"But where is what I started
for so long ago?
And why is it yet unfound?"

-- Walt Whitman
Chapter III

CALIFORNIA, THE JOURNEY’S END

This chapter is an attempt to trace the journey through life of Lemuel Pilkin in A Cool Million. This simple rural boy undertakes the journey from rural America to the city's heart and in the process undergoes such bitter agony that it transforms him into an idiot. The very title of the novel The Day of the Locust is ominous, in its suggestion that the day of wrath is near. The protagonist Tod Hackett assumes the role of a prophet of doom. The dreams of Americans collapsed when the Open Frontier vanished. It is Los Angeles in California which is depicted as symbolizing bitter disappointments lost dreams and missed opportunities.

A Cool Million seen in the context of Nathanael West's career, represents his progressive generalization from the self-doubt of the artist to an understanding that this provides an important insight into a personal and national malaise. It may be noted that whenever Nathanael West has a new and deepened perception, his first instinct is to parody it. Therefore A Cool Million bears the same relationship to The Day of the Locust as The Dream Life of Balso Snell does to Miss Lonelyhearts.

A Cool Million reminds us of two European works in which a young hero's wanderings have the form of an education in pessimism. The first name of Nathanael West's hero is clearly taken
from the name Lemuel Gulliver from Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. His encounters with irrationality in life, resemble those of Swift's hero. Besides this Voltaire's *Candide* or *Optism* is also brought to mind by Nathanael West's novel. Lemuel Pitkin, like Voltaire's hero, is a naive youth who leaves his sheltered world to enter the great one. Then he is subjected to a series of harsh shocks that work against any possible affirmative views of life. Besides, the three principal characters in *A Cool Million*, Lemuel Pitkin, Shagpoke Whipple and Betty Prail have counterparts in *Candide* - Candide, Panglosso (his mentor) and Cunegende. They travel about and encounter disaster after disaster. So the novel, like *Candide* is a ceaseless attack on optimistic beliefs.

As the 1930's wore on, Nathanael West became increasingly concerned about his failure to gain either artistic recognition or a steady income from his writing. So in *A Cool Million* he vents his bitterness about the Great Depression by satirizing the myth of success portrayed in Horatio Alger novels. Historically, *A Cool Million* is important as the first complete disavowal of the American Dream of Success and also one of the first suggestions of fascism. However, what Nathanael West has to say about a fascist America he says with greater power in his last novel, *The Day of the Locust*. *A Cool Million* is more than a mock melodramatic burlesque of the American success dream. It is in fact a sad commentary upon the confident faith of the founding fathers;
the concept of America, the land of the free and the home of the brave. Just like the previous novels, A Cool Million offers no real solutions. It mocks the American way, derides the International Jewish Bankers and attacks bitterly the American fascist movement, and so what could really be the Promised Land, sought in the novels of Nathanael West. But it is an interior land, and the search is for interior security and order. We shall also notice how some of America’s most pessimistic contemporary fiction is set in California, the dead end of the Westward movement - the Frontier - where American possibilities seem to have run out: notable examples are Joan Didion’s Plays it as it Lays, Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 (1966), Sam Shepherd’s play Angel City besides Nathanael West’s The Day of the Locust.

Like all Nathanael West’s hero’s, Lemuel Pitkin belongs very much to the past. His naive desire to win back the home he was born in gets translated into a career of artifice, illusion and deceit, ending in his apotheosis of a martyred hero for a new political regime controlled by Shagpoke Whipple.

Pitkin undertakes the archetypal journey, like Melville’s Pierre before him, from rural America to the heart of the city. Following these events Pitkin’s roles are constantly changing - from hero to booby. It is as if one man were playing Miss Lonelyhearts and Willie Shrike simultaneously. However by the end of the novel the simple
soul of the beginning has become an idiot. Besides, throughout the novel, Nathanael West has shown America as straining for violence. Even its stereotypes are sadistic.

Nathanael West's original title for *The Day of the Locust* was *The Cheated* indicating its lines of continuity with *A Cool Million*, as an anatomy of a society betrayed by its illusions. However, the focus of the title shifted from satire to the apocalypse. In O.T. Exodus 10; 1-11, Moses threatened the Pharaoh that the Lord shall cover the face of the earth with locusts, unless he allows the Hebrews to worship Yahweh. In N.T. Revelation 9: 3-10, the locusts threaten only these men who have not the seal of God upon their foreheads. These scriptural allusions are seen to threaten men and land alike. Here, the end has been revealed, and the violent disruption of natural forces serves as a prelude to that end: "Out of the smoke there came forth locusts upon the earth". But unlike St. John's vision, Nathanael West's does not contain a promised new world to counter balance the destructive upheaval of the old: there is no potential divine order to replace actual secular chaos.

In the American Westward Movement, California symbolized the logical conclusion of America itself. Not only had the continent been crossed, but in the West lived a new breed (perhaps endowed with a higher consciousness) that had sloughed off the past with its stale traditions and built a civilization more uniquely
American than anything in this valley. But, if at the trails end, fulfillment failed to come up to their expectations, then what follows must be despair, first mute, then violent, according to the extent of hope originally proffered.

If it is legitimate to trace the Westward movement to its logical end in California, and if the whole incremental symbolism of the movement can be given a California setting, then the work of Nathanael West must be read as a profound interpretation of how the great myth of the West comes to an end. His *The Day of the Locust* brings the Frontier to a tragic close as does no other American novel.

In *A Cool Million*, written after his 1933 visit to Hollywood, Nathanael West sends his deluded protagonist Lemuel Pitkin on a journey that literally costs him his teeth, an eye, a thumb, his scalp, a leg and finally his life. It might appear comic, but the underlying seriousness concerns Nathanael West’s devastating treatment of American capitalism and his complete renunciation of the Frontier Myth, the cause of much despair.

There were no easy answers to the problems created by the Depression. Nathanael West perhaps felt he could offer no solution. Light quoting from Nathanael West remarks:

I believe there is a place for the fellow who yells fire and indicates where some of the smoke is
coming from without actually dragging the hose to the spot. (117)

*A Cool Million* was published well before American fascism has reached full cry. Subtitled *The Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin* it describes the adventures of a young country bumpkin and his girl Betty Prail. Light discusses the American Dream in Nathanael West:

According to The American Dream - one sedulously mythologized by the American education system, one fervently preached not only by Horatio Alger but also by Franklin and Jefferson and Whitman, one symbolized by Lincoln and his progress from log cabin to White House - according to this dream, by honesty and industry the road to fame and fortune is magically opened. (118)

However, the progress of Pitkin is quite different. He is a mockery of the Alger theme. The novel reveals not how Pitkin wins his way but how he gradually sinks rather than swims. On his pilgrimage through life, he loses such physical accouterments as his teeth, an eye, a leg a thumb and his scalp. Likewise, the progress of Betty Prail is a feminine counterpart of Pitkin. It is made for the most part, while she is still flat on her back. The novel appears to be shifting back and forth between the adventures of Pitkin and Betty. It is in this novel that we shall find Nathanael West dramatizing
the lie that for him, the American success dream had become. Such lies were the cause of great bitterness.

At the opening of the novel, lawyer Slemp comes to tell widow Pitkin that the mortgage on her home will soon be foreclosed. Since they have no hope for money, they search for a way to keep the roof over their heads. This is when Pitkin goes to see the President of the Rat River National Bank, Nathan "Shagpoke" Whipple, about a loan. But he advises Pitkin to "go out into the world and win your way" (CM 149). To help him, Whipple advances thirty dollars and takes in lien the family cow as security, after deducting 12 per cent interest in advance.

However, before he sets off on his journey, Pitkin has to prove his mettle. While on his way home he sees his girl-friend Betty Prail being chased by a dog. He goes to Betty's defense. As the dog lies dying, she admires his courage. However, the next moment, they had to confront the town bully, Tom Baxter. He demands five dollars payment for the death of his dog and refuses to listen when Pitkin pleads that the dog was mad. Then the two boys prepare to fight. As Pitkin is about to overcome Tom, he uses a trick to throw him down while pretending to shake hands. Soon Betty screams and faints. Soon after, Tom looks at Betty while, "His little pig-like eyes shone with bestiality" (CM 154). The race could not certainly be for the industrious and the honest but for Tom and people like him.
Afterwards, Tom Baxter rapes Betty and then she is captured by white slavers, who take her to New York. Meanwhile, the Italian slavers force her to "serve a severe apprentice ship to the profession they planned for her to follow" (CM 167) Finally, she is sold to a Chinese brothel keeper, Wu Fong. The brothel keeper is depicted as an artist in his trade. When she faces her first customer, a pock-marked Armenian. Nathanael West comments:

> It is lamentable but a fact, nevertheless, that the inferior race greatly desire the women of their superiors. This is why the Negroes rape so many white women in our Southern States. (CM 169)

Nathanael West describes the effect of the Depression on Wu Fong's brothel Like other merchants Wu Fong feels he is over-stocked. He then decides to cater to the new fashion of "Buy American". Wu Fong makes a decision

> . . . to get rid of all the foreigners in his employ and turn his establishment into a hundred per cent American place.

Although in 1918. it would have been exceedingly difficult for him to have obtained the necessary girls, by 1934 things were different. Many respectable families of genuine native stock had been reduced to extreme poverty and had thrown their female children on the open market. (CM 202)
Nathanael West describes the decorations in their rooms, the costumes of the girls and the food and drink appropriate to the region represented. Nathanael West also goes on to speak of the American Dream. The American Dream, when used by opportunists, could be the stepping stones to a dictator.

In *A Cool Million* many of the male characters have been given Hebraic or Old Testament first names. Whipple’s is Nathan. Squire Bird’s is Joshua. Warden Purdy’s name is Ezekiel, District Attorney Berne’s is Elisha, Bank President Underwood’s is Levi. Even the American Indian, Israel Satinpenny has a Hebraic first name. Perhaps, Nathanael West might have had in mind an implied analogy with the tribes of Israel. We shall see that these people’s lofty covenant with God has been breached, and their high heritage has been despoiled, just as the American Dream has been despoiled in the Depression. Likewise, the Israelites, in their frustration, nurture the idea, of vindication, of throwing off a foreign yoke, of restoring the promised land. Besides Nathanael West’s characters, in their frustration at the failure of the American Dream, harbour a great yearning to vindicate that dream, even though in Nathanael West’s terms it had never been real in the first place.

The most interesting character of the novel is Shagpoke Whipple who is a miser. After having been president for four years, he becomes a simple citizen again. It is he who preaches the
American success dream to Pitkin. He is also the flag-waving, America for American's, leader. He is against sophistication, all things European, all that which is not good white Protestant culture. He points out Abraham Lincoln and Henry Ford as embodiments of the success dream. Using them as examples, he preaches a rugged individualism. Whipple's sermon is as follows:

"America . . . is the land of opportunity. She takes care of the honest and the industrious and never fails them as long as they are both. This is not a matter of opinion, it is one of faith . . .

. . . The story of Rockefeller and Ford is the story of every great American . . . Like them, by honesty and industry, you cannot fail to succeed. (CM 150)

These Americans who believe in sermons such as these preached by Whipple are just the ones who may accept blindly any number of other simple-minded ideas. They do not find it difficult to believe in the bogeyman of international conspiracies. Danger lurks in all things strange to them.

Opportunists such as Shagpoke made use of these simple-minded people in their ambition to become dictators. Shagpoke goes on to form the American fascist Party, (Called the National Revolutionary Party in the novel) making full use of the dreams and fears of the simple-minded. They are given mass identity and
individual suicide. In fact, the intellectual appeal of the party is based on the cliche of rugged individualism. In fact its mass appeal is ensured in the fears and hatreds of the simple and the unemployed. He arouses his followers through their fear of the Capital (under the spectere of the international Jewish bankers) and Radicalism (under the nightmare of the Bolshevilli) This is his argument:

There was enough work to go around in 1927, why isn't there now? I'll tell you, because of the Jewish International Bankers and the Bolshevik labor unions that's why (CM 187)

It is when travelling with the "Chamber of American Horrors" that Whipple's Revolutionary Party first begins to take hold. Whipple visits the Southern Bible Belt. His speech extolling the earlier pristine America takes place in a town ironically called Beulah, after the land of heavenly joy described by John Bunyan in The Pilgrims Progress. His speech provokes the crowd which vents its anger on 'alien' scapegoats. Then the mob marches towards the opera house and looks at the Indian Jake Raven, sees his dark complexion and puts a rope around his neck. Then barricades are thrown up in the streets. Then the heads of blacks are paraded on poles. A Jewish drummer is crucified and nailed to the door of his hotel room. Next, the house-keeper of the local Catholic priest is raped. It is this episode that provides the big push that sweeps Whipple to
power. However, his accession to power is rather ironic, since his regime makes the meanness, avarice and hypocrisy of Ottsville a venerated national ideal. While Pitkin perishes, Whipple succeeds even beyond the wildest dreams of the Alger hero. He advances himself and fulfills the American Dream through skillful manipulation. At the same time however, his success reveals how empty that dream is.

Many tricksters are found in the novel. There is Sylvanus Snodgrasse who is shown having the free-flowing mane of hair and the high broad forehead of the nineteenth century American orators. His poetic gift has an eminently patriotic cast. He has seen Pitkin escorting an old man and his daughter from bolting carriage horses. While Snodgrasse eulogizes him in public, declaring that national monuments should be raised to him his agents nimbly pick the pockets of the crowd. Snodgrasse's appearance underscores the fraudulence of Whipple.

At the heart of the book there is a romance-fable dimension. It reminds us of Scott Fitzgerald's *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz* (1922) a bizarre fable that is concerned with the American Dream. The events here take place in a middle region between realism and extravagant fantasy. Like Pitkin, its hero is a naive American youth. He too has been instructed by an elder figure, his father, that if he keeps faith with the ideals espoused by his native
town of Hades he will find success and happiness. He journeys out into the world like Pitkin to make disturbing recognitions, one of which is that his father is not all he has seemed and that he had betrayed him.

The idea of the father as betrayers is compounded by the hero's nightmarish meeting with Braddock Washington, who has the lineage and name of the father of the republic. Washington lives in garish splendour, designed by Hollywood film people who can neither read nor write. This hideaway is atop a mountain that is a huge solid diamond. His existence is the fulfillment of the American Dream. It consists of avarice beyond conception and the deepest callousness to every human value. The detonation of the mountain near the end signals the explosion of the dream in which the hero, John Unger is alone and bitterly disillusioned. A Cool Million too, illustrates the spuriousness of the national myth, and is an explosion of that myth causing great disappointment.

As a corollary, the N.R.P. evinces a heightened praise of Americanism, flag idolatry and a hatred of all foreigners and foreign countries. As Shagpoke expresses it, every true American must, "be made to realize that the only struggle worthy of Americans is the idealistic one of their country against its enemies, England, Japan, Russia, Rome and Jerusalem" (CM 243). He tells them that an American must continually be on guard against the foreign tricks of
Jews and Catholics, Communists and Orientals as well as sophisticated Englishmen. He declares, "We must purge our country of all the alien elements and ideas that now infest her!" (CM 188) Dreams, fears, and hatreds form the appeal of Shagpoke's party. He soon marches towards the "foreign" city of New York. Commander Lemuel Pitkin is a stooge in a comedy. He has by now been deceived, deluded and dismantled over most of America. He has had his teeth pulled out in a jail, where the warden believes that all criminals are really sick and that the cause of their sickness usually lies in faulty teeth. Pitkin, of course, has lost an eye while rescuing a rich man and his daughter from stampeding horses. Besides he has lost a leg in a bear trap and has been scalped by Indians. Then he accepts a stage role in New York, where he is physically belaboured, until, "His toupee flew off, his eye and teeth popped out and his wooden leg was knocked into the audience" (CM 250) The audience, of course, convulses with laughter at his agony.

Lemuel Pitkin, unlike Lemuel Gulliver, learns nothing and remains gullible to the very end. He never loses faith in the cliches preached by Shagpoke. As he gives an N.R.P. speech before the audience, where he is performing, he is shot and so becomes a martyr to the NRP cause.
The epilogue speaks of a parade on Pitkin's birthday, a national holiday in memory of the All-American boy. Marching for Pitkin, thousands of American fascists sing the Pitkin song of martyrdom. We see Whipple, the leader of the American fascists praising Pitkin:

Of what is it that he speaks? Of the right of every American boy to go into the world and there receive fair play and a chance to make his fortune by industry and probity without being laughed at or conspired against by sophisticated aliens... But he did not live or die in vain. Through his martyrdom the National Revolutionary Party triumphed, and by that triumph this country was delivered from sophistication, Marxism and International Capitalism (CM 255)

We must realize that the danger lies in the triumph of Shagpoke. The Pitkins go forth in their way, believing in honesty and industry, hoping to reap the rewards of fame, fortune and the girl. But the American Boy instead receives, jail, poverty, violence and death.

We see that the All American Boys' become quite bewildered. They need a dream, and soon, under people such as Whipple, are ready to accept any new fantasy. Shagpoke condemns all sophisticated thought as foreign and un-American. He proclaims that the rewards of industry are kept from reaching him
by the twin bogies of International Jewish Bankers and the Bolsheviki. They are now allies in their common fight against the American way. They also employ a mysterious spy and terrorist. Their cultural representative is S. Snodgrasse who conducts the subverse, "Chamber of American Horrors". Whipple makes them understand that the I.J.B. and the Bolsheviki are constantly conspiring. We realize that this is to keep away the country bumpkin from the fame and fortune and girl which are his due. As Pitkin believes, he follows. Nathanael West believes that American fascism was being born in Whipple's lies and Pitkin's fears. What Nathanael West has to say is an object lesson for America. Nathanael West depicts clearly the purpose behind the fantasies.

Nathanael West is merely re-stating his constant theme in a contemporary context. The quest for something to believe in is continuous and again and yet again ends in despair: where The Dream Life of Balso Snell indicts the folly of the quest of art, where Miss Lonelyhearts mocks man's dreams of Christ, A Cool Million attacks the American success dream.

Like the earlier novels, A Cool Million offers no real solutions. It mocks at the American way. It also derides the "conspiracies" of the Bolsheviki and the International Jewish Bankers, while attacking the American fascist movement. The novel apparently seems to suggest that life was better in an earlier time. This, was when the
complexities of existence had not led to the falsities exhibited in the "Chamber of American Horrors," described below:

A Venus de Milo with a clock in her abdomen, a copy of Power’s "Greek Slave" with elastic bandages on all her joints, A Hercules wearing a small, compact truss.

In the center of the principal salon was a gigantic hemorrhoid that was lit from within by electric lights. To give the effect of throbbing pain, these lights went on and off.

All was not medical, however . . . Paper had been made to look like wood, wood like rubber, rubber like steel, steel like cheese, cheese like glass, and finally, glass like paper. . . . The visitors saw flower pots that were really victrolas, revolvers that held candy, candy that held collar buttons and so forth.

This is what is supposed to represent the progress of man. It is no wonder that the Indian Chief Satinpenny looks backward longingly to a simpler time when America was "a fair, sweet land," uncontaminated by the "White Man's civilization, syphilis and the radio, tuberculosis, and the cinema". (CM 232) Light points out in Nathanael West . . . "As Spengler and Valery had suggested man's 'progress' is leading to the end of Western civilization." (127-128)
We will find that nothing tragic marks Pitkin as a character, because he, in fact, realizes nothing about himself or his world. Then, he dies a martyr for a cause he neither understands or upholds. Likewise he dies a spokesman for the same forces of destruction that hail him as a martyr. These are the very same forces that are intent upon making America again American - the kind of fascism that will have its American Dream, come fire or brimstone. Even though Nathanael West has never created a character of fully tragic dimensions, he did portray what can be called a tragic society. In actual fact, his creative insights focus more sharply upon masses than upon individuals. His concern is what happens to a society whose collective dream contradicts reality, whose only way of confronting a Closed Frontier is by dreaming it is still open. That is why his tragic insights are peculiarly American. In A Cool Million the society is unmistakably American and by the time he wrote The Day of the Locust he concentrated all his vitriol upon a single place Hollywood, and upon a single Dream, the Frontier. Although Nathanael West's cynicism, anger, mockery and disgust cover the general malaise of modern man, it is to the twentieth century America that he brings his full creative attention. Although his three earlier novels have their own artistic integrity, they serve nevertheless, as a long prelude to his final master piece. Simonson remarks in The Frontier:
All that is in the earlier novels is to be found in The Day of the Locust, and the powerful concentration is well-nigh overwhelming. No angrier book in American literature has been written since The Confidence Man and The Mysterious Stranger. And few American novels can surpass it for what it depicts as the American Tragedy. (119)

No solution is to be found to Pitkin's dilemma. The agony implied in Pitkin's inability to break through into life is ultimately what connects A Cool Million with The Dream Life of Balso Snell and Miss Lonelyhearts. Here Tod Hackett will attempt to find order in the nightmarish fragmentation of Hollywood. The vaudeville of apocalypse in A Cool Million is, in a sense, a dress rehearsal for the apocalypse of Nathanael West's last novel, in which the dream life of the masses erupts into orgiastic violence, and the work, like a classic horror story, ends with a scream.

We shall observe that an inevitableness distinguishes Nathanael West's last novel, as if, by fate, it was indeed to be his final work. In it, the assumptions of the earlier works are not only elaborated, but carry eschatological importance. For the masses in The Day of the Locust are waiting for the end. They are now the "locust" with "wild, disordered minds" and "awful anarchic power" to destroy civilization.
The novel's title, *The Day of the Locust* may have been suggested by Gilbert Felde's book on the Great Depression, *The Years of the Locust* (1932). In any case, Nathanael West's title seems apt in its implication of a day of wrath and apocalypse as prophesied in the Bible. The novel opens with the sound of thundering hoofs. Its chaos is a foreshadowing, at the very opening, of the novel's final scene.

The image of the persecuted human fleeing from his tormentors is an archetype deep in the collective unconscious. For the Jews the image will take them back to a period preceding even the flight of the Jews from Egypt. The image was unusually pertinent in Nathanael West's time—because of Hitler's persecution of European Jews. This image may have formed the source of insecurity for Nathanael West who was a Jew.

The second generation of Jews in America (of whom Nathanael West was one) had the problem of finding their own identity. Therefore, to change one's name, as many second generation Jews eventually did, was often an affirmation of the Americanism which these Jews wished to display. But, as an answer to their insecurity, such name changing was woefully inadequate. Indeed, the change in name only led to contempt from other Jews, to suspicion on the part of most gentiles, to increased knowledge
that one must forever dangle between two worlds and never really be a full member of either.

The need for order that is present in Nathanael West’s fiction is also at the centre of much modern Jewish fiction. Although the rage for order is hardly a Jewish monopoly, it is certain that Jewish artists in America have worked well with it. It may be that their preoccupation with the theme (and Nathanael West’s) has some relationship to their bicultural status in America.

Like the earlier novels The Day of the Locust shows a deep need for something worth believing in and searching for. In this novel however the narrative is more complex than in the other novels. The viewpoint of the novel shifts between Tod Hackett and Homer Simpson. Simpson is one of the searchers of the universe. Seeking Paradise he has found in Hollywood only a place to die. Tod Hackett attempts to satisfy the emotional needs of the searchers of the world. The novel is dominated by the twin elements of search and its frustrations. The searchers are cheated by Hollywood and also by life. The cheating is suggested by repeated images of falsity. Nothing is what it seems. All things are in essence, lies. The need for order and security makes the search go on, and if same super Hitler can promise such security, the cheated of mankind will destroy and burn, because of their need to achieve it. The action of the novel, with a kind of Grecian inevitability,
moves towards increasing violence, towards the mass destructive orgy in which the novel hysterically ends.

The characters that Nathanael West uses, in this nightmarish novel are grotesques, and they are similar in the cause of their grotesqueness, the need for conditional life. These emotional needs leads to the architectural monstrosities built formlessly of plaster and paper. It leads, to brothels and cockfights and pornographic movies and endless attendance at funerals, to vicarious lust and violence furnished by movies and newspapers, to violence even in the Hollywood premieres. Nathanael West expresses their boredom in the following lines:

The sun is a joke-oranges can't titillate their jaded palates. Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing. (DL 412)

Nathanael West, along with Baudilaire agrees that the destruction of the universe may occur because of man's ennui. In the world of Nathanael West, for some men, this boredom can never be alleviated. However, their search for a way to realize some kind of emotional life effects actions that, slowly lead towards the supreme shock of violence. In America, Nathanael West felt, that such destruction was waiting only for a forceful leader and his demagogic promises. For Germany had already found such a
leader filled with hatred (Adolf Hitler). The bitter and cheated of America await a new messiah of violence.

The world of The Day of the Locust is a limited world excluding the ordinary working man completely. The half-world can be divided into spectators (the cheated whose emotional needs demand satisfaction) and performers (the cheaters who are attempting to satisfy the emotional needs of others) But the roles occasionally shift—the men are both performers and spectators. As an example Faye Greener serves as a performer in her screen roles, but off the screen she attempts to satisfy her emotional needs by thumbing through a pack of mental dream-cards until she finds one on which to dream.

The spectators occupy the fringes of the novels excepting Homer Simpson who functions as a living symbol, for all of them. They have no life in themselves. They seek life elsewhere, and often their search leads to Hollywood The aged have come to Hollywood to die physically the death they have already experienced emotionally. These embittered spectators fascinate Tod Hackett who draws numerous pictures of them for his picture, "The Burning of Los Angeles". He watches them as they frequent religious temples which are monstrosities which serve only to mock true religion. Tod appreciated their "awful anarchic power . . . aware that they had it in them to destroy civilization." (DL 366) Singly, these people are
barely noticeable, "almost furtive," but when they join their own kind, as in the mob scene, which ends The Day of the Locust, they become "arrogant and pugnacious". (DL 411) Through mass violence they may for a brief period fulfill themselves, become performers in the drama called life, and it is in this revolutionary transformation from spectators to performers that Tod Hackett envisions in his painting of "The Burning of Los Angeles".

At the centre of the novel are the performers. The most important of these, Abe Kusich and Faye and Harry Greener, Tod Hackett is painting in his series of lithographs called "The Dancers". Abe Kusich is a performer partly because he is a race-track tout who sells lies and dreams to all who will buy. He is a Jew, a dwarf who talks loudly and aggressively. Abe is painted with more compassion than any other character in The Day of the Locust. And in his struggles and suffering he is comparable to the cock he handles in a horrible cock fight. Abe parallels in his physical monstrousness, the distorted mentalities of the other grotesque characters. Because of his physical monstrousness, Abe belongs among the performers. It is his physical grotesqueness that titillates the sensibilities of the onlookers.

Called "Honest Abe Kusich", he is a shrunken parody of "Honest Abe Lincoln", the tall Presidential prophet of American democracy. Abe Kusich is made to seem dubious in his aspirations,
as a sexual combatant and as a racetrack tout. His presence in the work implies that Lincoln's vision of brotherhood is deceptive too. Abe's life consists exclusively of brutalization. At the party in Homer's cottage, he viciously attacks Earle Schoop, squeezing his testicles until the cowboy collapses with pain. But Abe himself is then assaulted by Miguel who seizes him by the ankles and dashes him against the wall. It is at this point that Nathanael West makes his vulnerability touching. At another point in the novel, Abe acts as the chief handler for 'Big Red', the bird that is destroyed in a cock fight by a stronger adversary. Abe is shown stroking the strong but inadequately equipped bird tenderly. The reader is made to understand that what exists between them is a kinship of the disabled in a remorselessly cruel world.

Harry Greener is a comic character and a complete failure. He puts on a burlesque act consisting of violent kicks in the belly and falls on the back of the neck. Like another performer Lemuel Pitkin, Harry occasionally gratifies his insatiable audience by the extremity of his agony. The violence of Harry's routine approaches the purgative function of Tragedy . . . "The pain that almost, not quite, thank God, crumples his stiff little figure would be unbearable if it were not so obviously make-believe." (DL 283-284)

Harry acts the comic even in the everyday world. His role is mostly a matter of defence, for he has learned that people do
like to hurt a comedian. So involved is he in the stage world that in his real illness, from which he dies, he groans, "skillfully, a second act curtain groan, so phony that Tod had to hide a smile." (DL 336). His acting seems to continue even beyond death. In his coffin, waiting for his final curtain, he is "newly shaved, his eyebrows shaped and plucked and his lips and cheeks rouged. He looked like the interlocutor in a Ministerel show." (DL 344)

Harry has begun with the aspiration of becoming a Shakespearean actor. But hardship follows and his dreams go unrealized. He comes to California because he is out of work, hoping to find work in films, but is never employed. So the strange laugh he practices is called "a vicious laugh." Harry has a large assortment of unsettling laughs. His favorite one,

began with a sharp metallic crackle, like burning shrieks, then gradually increased in volume until it become a rapid bark, then fell back again to another obscene chuckle. After a slight pause it climbed until it was a nicker of a horse, then still higher to become a machine-like screech." (DL 307).

This insane laugh is a medley of degradations - of sounds like the inarticulate ones of dogs and horses, the chuckling of cheep, leering lust; and the mechanical screech of dehumanization. Like Harry's life, the medly of sounds is incoherent. A superb moment
occurs in the novel when he appears in the doorway of the living room in the imagery of a clown. "His nose was very red," Nathanael West writes, "but the rest of his face was drained white and he seemed to have grown too small for his clothing." (DL 310)

Faye Greener is the most important of the performers. She is a movie extra who speaks an occasional one-sentence role badly. Her father-simplified the subtleties of humour into the violence of the slapstick and she has simplified the complexities of love into the horror of lust. She has learned this from the screen like the other falsities that dominate her existence, the artificial voice, the elaborate gestures, the lustful suggestiveness. She can become a whore to gain money for her father's funeral and yet remain unaffected by the experience. In Nathanael West Light remarks:

Nothing can harm her, for, like Mary Shrike, she is the eternal virgin, capable of giving pain, but incapable of giving herself. She, therefore, cannot really gain herself, and so, like the celloid cliche's on which she dotes, she never really comes alive.(160-61)

In her falseness, she suggests the whole Hollywood lie, and her promise, like that of the Hollywood dream products, leads not to satisfactions, but only to increased frustration. What Faye becomes is the grotesqueness of the screen made into real flesh.
Here is the lure of self-destruction, but in the nightmare world of Nathanael West, the death wish lures men as meat attracts flies.

Just like Harry, Faye too is always acting. His acting indeed, deprives him of any real self. Faye, like him is over-projected and without personal identity, so that there is literally nothing about her that can be called real. She is so conscious of herself, even to her smallest gestures, that it is as if she were aware of cameras upon her, or were practicing for them. But, in actual fact, she is not posing for anyone in particular. Her provocative movement is automatic, part of a repertoire of gestures that may be produced at any time. A few moments later, she breaks into her rendition of "Jeepers Creepers", jerking her buttocks and shaking her head from side to side. However, all her gestures are equally without meaning since they are merely coy overtures to sex or forms of sexual enticement.

Violence and dehumanization seem to follow Faye wherever she goes, as can be seen in the mountain camp scene. This scene is set in the height of spring. Nature is presented as bright and inviting, yet ominous, suggesting absolute heartlessness. The canyons give an eerie feeling of emptiness. The bright poppies along the path seem oddly artificial, their petals, "wrinkled like crepe." In the sky overhead a blue jay is pursued swiftly by its natural enemy the humming-bird. Their darting movement bursts the
air apart into glittering particles "like metal confetti", an image that
suggests the celebration of a wedding, but of some strangely
inhuman kind. The scene is built up with a number of motifs—of
dancers, song and birds. A quail calls and is answered by a quail
in Miguel's trap, a sound that is full of hopelessness and melancholy.
Miguel and Faye exchange sexual glances. They become drawn
into a sexual ritual that centres upon Faye. The mountain camp
scene is linked with a later episode set in Homer's garage. The
cockfight staged at the garage, is attended not only by Tod, but
also by Claude Estee, whose presence there implies a connection
between what happens and Hollywood itself. The bird's are let loose
in combat, and at the end, one of them is destroyed. Hermano (a
name that in Spanish means brotherhood) has its beak torn off and
its eye picked by Juju's gaff. And even when dead, Juju pecks
obscenely at its remaining eye. The fight has been mindless,
dictated by the nature of the cocks to compete for the female of
the species. What is witnessed between them is like Faye's
invitation to pleasure, "closer to murder, than to love".

The cockfight scene prepares us for the party at Homer's
cottage. Here Faye "peacocks" for the men. Faye starts talking
about wanting to get a start in films to Claude Estee. She is full of
gestures - she wets her lips, smiles, laughs, shivers, crosses and
uncrosses her legs etc. Her gestures are an anthology of countless
films, that although vacant, exert a sexual fascination. This is soon
followed by an outburst of violence prompted by Abe who has been excluded. In the course of the scene Faye is progressively stripped. She wears a pair of green silk lounging pajamas, but as the men compete for her, the garment becomes torn. A sleeve is ripped off and the trousers are shredded. She then, steps out of her trousers, so that she is wearing only her tight black lace drawers, announcing that she is going to bed. In the bedroom she is naked and Miguel mounts her. When Earle appears later, there is violence. Faye screams and pulls a sheet over her face. In this final stripping, Faye horrifies even herself.

Homer Simpson and Tod Hackett are lured by Faye. Homer is a representative of the timeless suffering man. He is a simple creature, kindly, passive, humble and resigned. But he is doomed to a life without hope. His is the misery of all those whose anguish is basic and permanent.

Homer is a symbolic representative of the spectators of life, forever cheated. He has come to Hollywood from a small city near Des Moines. His life before Hollywood has been lived between deep sleep and plant-like calm. For some time in Hollywood Homer exists in the same way. After Homer has met Faye he feels thoroughly awake, more completely alive than before. Light in Nathanael West however observes, "the living which Homer has achieved however, is painful, just as life for Nathanael West is basically
frustration and pain" (161) Homer’s new life is based on a lie, for Faye is no more a real woman than are the shadows on the screen. Although Faye comes to live with him, their relationship is totally sexless. This is like the love affair between screen lovers and the movie audience. Faye persecutes Homer. She lures him towards the destruction, which he had known he was inviting. Then Faye sleeps with another man and leaves Homer with his misery. It is a misery which can never be forgotten. It is the misery of the victims of life. Homer sobs, "like an axe chopping pine . . . repeated rhythmically but without accent . . . It would never reach a climax". (DL 398)

As there is no relief, the only thing Homer could attempt is escape. He goes to sleep to escape. Tod compares his sleep to uterine flight, the perfection of escape.

Better by far than religion or Art or the South Sea Islands. It was so snug and warm there, and the feeling was automatic . . . It was dark, yes, but what a warm, rich darkness. The grave wasn't in it". (DL 403 - 404)

Later, Homer awakens and wanders to the world premiere of a film and sits down near the mob. Adore Loomis, a child actor, is hidden behind a tree. He wants to play a game. Tying a purse to a string, he wants to attract Homer's attention. When Homer ignores the purse Adore makes a face and gestures at Homer. Then, to arouse Homer, he throws a stone in his face. This arouses Homer
from his trance. He chases Adore and when the boy trips and falls he jumps on him repeatedly. The mob surges violently towards Homer and the last sight of him shows him "... shoved against the sky, his jaw hanging as though he wanted to scream but couldn't." (DL 415)

The incident with Adore is symbolic. Adore is another Hollywood-created grotesque. He has been deprived of a normal childhood and true mother's love. He can sing a sexual song in a practiced blues voice with sexual gestures without the slightest idea of what he is doing on suggesting. His mother notes that he believes he is a Frankenstein monster. He appears a cheat, similar to Faye. And these are symbols of the larger lie which is Hollywood. And Hollywood itself is merely suggestive of life, the greatest cheat of all.

Nathanael West first called The Day of the Locust by the name The Cheated. The latter name is an accurate indication of the fate of Homer and those for whom he stands. Homer's story, is the story of all the innumerable cheated people who have come to die and of all people anywhere who are betrayed by life.

The novel is told from Tod's point of view. He is present in almost all of the scenes. Through him, we move back and forth between the dispossessed and the film Studios. We are shown the costuming, props and unreal sets of the sound stages. When Faye
leaves San Berdoo, Tod catches sight of her on the studios lots and goes searching for her. He is unable to find her, because she is an unreal as the sets themselves. Her fragmentation and loss of identity are imagined through, the meaningless sets. His search for Faye reaches its climax when he finds himself on the set of Waterloo.

Tod Hackett foreshadows events to come. He, along with Claude Estee and guests go to see a pornographic film, Le Predicament Marie at Mrs. Jennings call house. The film breaks down at a particularly enticing point. The guests stage a mock riot, stamping their feet and shouting, 'fake', 'cheat'. This episode points ahead to the crowd scene at the end, when those who have been cheated and deceived by Hollywood go on a rampage.

The foreshadowing role of Tod Hackett grows out of his peculiar situation as a culturally uprooted man and artist or 'seer'. He has been hired by Hollywood after finishing his undergraduate work at the Yale school of Fine Arts. But at Hollywood he comes increasingly to don the role of the prophet of doom like Jeremiah in the Old Testament. His fruitless pursuit of Faye is a long frustration. It is accompanied even at the opening by his imaging of destructions. His painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles", has affinities with the paintings of James Enson, but was probably inspired by Nathanael West's own early poem, Burn the Cities. Tod's conception of the painting evolves with each of his encounters with Faye.
When, at the end of the mountain camp scene, Tod chases Faye through the hills, and he intends to rape her. He stumbles, falls, but cannot find her. Then, he dreams of his revenge, in the form of a painting. Now the city of Log Angeles is shown on fire, but there will be a gay air, for it is a holiday crowd which will burn the city. The finishing touches are supplied as Tod pursues Faye through the fantastic labyrinth of the studio sets. She eludes him again and again. Then again Tod envisages the painting in the tortured baroque style of Salvador Rosa and other painters of decay and mystery.

The Savage and bitter people in front of the Palace Theater are suddenly transformed into a rampaging mob by the sight of Homer's attack on Adore . . . the great swarm of the locusts is released. They charge across the street. Tod himself is jostled and pushed about by the surging rabble. In one moment he finds himself facing a girl whose clothes have nearly been ripped off and who clings to him, pressing one of her thighs between his legs, while from behind an old man is hugging her and reaching inside her shredded dress. No sooner, however, as she is freed by Tod from her attacker than she is thrust along into the clutches of another man and hears her scream for help. Great spasms of delirium pass through the mob sweeping it into first one and then another obscenity. And in another moment, the people are heard jabbering about "one of them pervert fellas," who ripped up a girl with a pair
of scissors. "Yeah", they say, "this is a regular free-for-all". (DL 418) And as a woman catches him round the waist and sobs rhythmically, Tod, his leg now broken, realizes that here indeed is, "The Burning of Los Angeles" come to life. Tod is finally delivered by a police car, whose departure from the scene is accompanied by the screaming music of the siren.

With the scene of the premiere, Tod's painting becomes "realized." It is painted in his mind in the same sequence in which the mayhem takes place before the theater. In this vision of the holocaust, the city is in flames, its incoherently designed houses are all burning. In the middle foreground, a mob of cheated ones, who had expected fulfillment in their lives, surge forward, carrying baseball bats and torches, intent an purifying the world with destruction. Formerly spectators, they become performers or participants. Fleeing from the crusading mob are Faye, Harry and Homer. In fact, we find that the reader is forced to respond to the crowd scene as if it were a part of Tod's painting.

The final scene suggests a theme that The Day of the Locust has in common with Miss Lonelyhearts. Both novels deal with entrapment of people within media illusion. The marginal people in Miss Lonelyhearts write to Miss Lonelyhearts for deliverance from their misery. Whereas in The Day of the Locust the wretched people look to Hollywood. However, nothing can save these people or the
protagonists of these novels. In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Betty and Pete Doyle converge on Miss Lonelyhearts as he stands at the stairway landing, blocking his escape. If Betty represents an unthinking acceptance of the given, Peter implies rebellion that is incoherent and destructive. Caught between the two, Miss Lonelyhearts can achieve no identity and must die. Something similar happens to Tod in *The Day of the Locust*. His immersions in the Hollywood illusion permits him no identity, but there is no escape for him, for at the end he confronts the frenzied disorder of the crowd, rebellion that is merely chaos.

If Tod does not actually die at the end, his continued existence is in effect extinguished. Fittingly, Tod's name in German means "death", and it is worth noting that the mob scene is set in motion by the death of Adore. The rumour that a pervert has attacked a child excites an unnatural craving for excitement in the people who have come to the premiere and are themselves the living dead. Only the most lurid excitement can bring them to a semblance of life. The actual impression that is given by the scene is one of absolute dehumanization. And Tod's final gesture, his imitating the "wail" of the police car siren, signals if not his actual death then at least his psychic withdrawal from the world.

In closing out the world, Tod, returns to the womb - an idea anticipated in Nathanael West's conception of other characters.
Abe Kusich, for instance, is first seen sleeping blissfully in the bundle of the prostitute's bathrobe, which swallow's him within its folds and suggests a womb. The idea is insinuated later, when Faye retreats into the darkness under the sheet that she pulls over her face. However, it is presented most memorably in Nathanael West's depiction of Homer, who, in his dreams crawls down a tunnel towards a patch of darkness at the end. After the savagery of the party he goes into a catatonic state, recolling into a fixed position with his knees drawn up to his chin, so that he resembles a fetus. Just like Homer, who is appalled by the horror of life, Tod withdraws at the end, into a pre-conscious state.

Nathanael West, reveals to us the power of violence beneath Hollywood's facade. It is a surging force, not to be placated by swimming pool, fast cars, and movie premiere's and emphatically not by Hollywood's bizarre churches, such as "The Church of the Christ, Physical", or the "Tabernacle of the Third Coming," on the "Temple Moderne". Throughout all Nathanael West's novels the ominous force of violence, closely followed by the consequent suffering, lies just under the surface. This sometimes breaks out as in Balso's dream of murder. In Miss Lonelyhearts it may be the violence accompanying the stories of gang-rape. And American success-at-any-price accounts for much of the violence and despair in A Cool Million. In The Day of the Locust violence and prophesies of violence shatter nearly every scene. Beneath the
physical acts of violence followed by suffering, Nathanael West probes for causes. These causes relate to the fact that Americans have broken with their cultural heritage. Rather than merely sloughing off their old-world traditions, they have rebelled against them.

The new order is the Frontier and inevitably Southern California. The American who saved his dollars and rejected his heritage, journey's Nathanael West to the land of sunshine and oranges, accepting the desperate wager to unite with this order celebrated by mystics such as Walt Whitman and cultists like Maybelle Loomis, The "raw-foodist" follower of Dr.Pierce, whose motto was know-All, Pierce-All.

Having dreamed the Great Dream and found it fraudulent, having gone to California, and found even the sun a joke, the people feed on violence leading to misery. For they can find nothing else to titillate their boredom. They are observed to devour the newspapers and movies, the endless suppliers of sex crimes, explosions, murder and war. Yet this fare is found insufficient, because theirs is a deeper sickness than just boredom. Not only do they feel cheated, but more importantly, they feel lost. They no longer know who or where they are, so successful has been their masquerading. Their anonymity breeds fear, and their fear, hate. These are the dark powers too voracious to be satisfied by a
cockfight or a staged Waterloo. What Nathanael West sees is the collapsing American myth of the Open Frontier. It is indeed the tragedy of a society too proud to accept the disparity between promises and realities. The artificiality of Hollywood productions and of the people who aspire to populate these cinematic microcosms only reflects the greater sham of the macrocosm. The movies will be found to be continuous with Los Angeles itself.

Nathanael West’s sense of the betrayal of America’s promise is quite apparent in the very setting of The Day of the Locust. Faulkner presents vestigial and veiled memories of the unspoiled past of the virgin lands implicitly casting the present degeneration in terms of what might have been. Although Nathanael West also invokes what might have been, his presentation, of lost dreams and missed opportunities, is neither vestigial or veiled. Los Angeles, the city of angels, Hollywood, heart of the glamour and wealth of the movies and California, named by Corté’s after an imaginary utopian island, are ironically inverted by Nathanael West into a 1930’s wasteland of despair and ultimately of holocaust. Natural phenomena are described by lurid analogies to the inorganic and the mechanical:

The edges of the trees burned with a pale violet light and their centers gradually turned from deep purple to black. The same violet piping, like a Neon
tube, outlined the tops of the ugly, hump-backed hills . . . (DL 262)

The world displayed to us is to be rendered not by Winslow Homer or Thomas Ryden great painters of healthy American landscapes and people of the past, but by Goya and Daumier, masters of distortion and caricature, of irrational and bizarre worlds of pain and destruction. By means of allusion, but more directly by means of demonic imagery, Nathanael West allies his fiction to the tradition of the grotesque in Goya and Daumier and Alexandre Magnasco, painters of decay and mystery whose art conveys their rage at human injustice and stupidity. However, in these artists paintings, as in Nathanael West's fiction, rage gives over to a vision of hopeless absurdity, of cosmic pointlessness: behind their specific criticism is an overwhelming sense of despair at the very possibility of any belief, any future.

Zamora in his Vision observes:

To return to Northrop Frye's terms, theirs are portrayals of worlds that desire rejects, realms of 'perverted or wasted work; ruins and catacombs, instruments of torture and monuments of folly'. (128)

In the final scene of the novel, a frenzied mob enacts Tod's artistic rendering of mass violence in his painting, "The Burning of Los Angles". The scene is specifically related by Nathanael West to
Biblical visions of the apocalypse. Tod dons the role of the prophet Jeremiah, predicting civil war not only in Los Angeles but in all America. He spends his nights in Hollywood churches, sketching the worshipers. In the "Tabernacle of the Third Coming" - the name is a parody of the apocalyptic expectation of Christ's second coming - Tod comes to understand the latent violence of the people. Their typically American pursuit of a New World in the Nathanael West has ended in betrayal and futility. He listens to the messianic rage of a man who stands up to speak.

The message he had brought to the city was one that an illiterate anchorite might have given decadent Rome . . . He claimed to have seen the Tiger of Wrath stalking the walls of the citadel and the Jackal of Lust skulking in the shrubbery . . . (DL 366)

Zamora points out again:

The reference to the myth of the apocalypse, with its dual vision of cataclysm and millennium, makes the fiery finale of the novel the more horrendous, for the constructive counter vision of apocalypse is starkly and irrevocably absent from the novel. After all, even Jeremiah predicted doom, to that his listeners might reform before it was too late, so that Israel might yet be accomplished. However, the novel's bloody culmination is presented as the
inevitable fulfillment of the prophesies of doom, the only end possible. (129)

Nathanael West here suggests that the mindless violence of the masses is due in large part to what here comes to be called the mass media. The mob is well acquainted with violence and seeks violence.

Every day of their lives they read the newspapers and went to the movies. Both fed them on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, War. This daily diet made sophisticates of them. (DL 411-412)

Nathanael West specifically states in Miss Lonelyhearts that the cause of the despair of the Californians lies precisely where they search for its cure.

Men have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio and newspapers. Among many betrayals, this one is the worst. (LH 115)

Zamora in his Vision aptly observes:

If Henry Adams found in the technology of the dynamo the source and symbol of the entropic decline and ultimate annihilation, Nathanael West locates it in the technology of the mass media, for
these media have perverted language itself, turning man's most important tool for social order into a source of chaos and destruction". (129)

What Nathanael West sees is the collapsing American Myth of the Open Frontier, the tragedy of a society too proud to accept the disparity between promises and reality.

We shall discover that it is in Nathanael West's description of passages analysing mob violence in The Day of the Locust that he makes" . . . a real attempt to give universal significance to his personal agonies, to his own deep fears." (28) in the words of Josephine Herbst in Nathanael West:

The novels offer no solutions. Lemuel Pitkin, at the end of his many trials and sufferings realizes nothing about himself. Nathanael West projects a tragic society, concentrating upon masses rather than individuals. He attempts to describe what happens to a society whose only way of confronting a Closed Frontier is to dream it is still open. The people of twentieth century America, on discovering that their dreams had deceived them, marched to California to die. Not only did they feel cheated but also lost. They discovered to their dismay that the artificiality of Los Angeles, California, paralleled the artificiality of the world they lived in -- their suffering therefore became inescapable.