WILSON, ASHBY S., JR. Nathanael West's Vision of the End: The Apocalypse as Ludicrous. (1976) Directed by: Dr. James Ellis. Pp. 53.

Nathanael West is regarded generally as a deeply pessimistic artist whose dark vision finds nothing but destruction and death in store for humanity. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the implications of Nathanael West's vision of the apocalypse and to argue that his dark warning is tempered by his ironic comedy.

The failure of the dream, the futility of the quest, the denial of the wish -- these are the central themes in each of West's novels. West tells us that since modern dreams have failed humanity there is no alternative but apocalyptic violence. Throughout West's fiction there is created a pervasive mood of impending doom, a clear sense that the world is fast approaching the ultimate disaster of apocalypse. Each novel culminates in an act of violence which promises to initiate the apocalypse.

However, in American literature there is an apocalyptical tradition which describes the apocalypse as essentially humorous. This thesis argues that West joins this tradition by bringing a comic spirit to his evocation of the coming apocalypse.

Through his humor Nathanael West reveals the coming end to be the ultimate joke, a vast cosmic joke played on an

unsuspecting humanity. West's ironic comedy mitigates the onslaught of apocalypse and brings a sense of compassion to his satiric portrayal of what he saw to be the absurdity of human life.

NATHANAEL WEST'S VISION OF THE END:

THE APOCALYPSE AS LUDICROUS

by

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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Arts

Greensboro
1976

Approved by

Thesis Adviser

APPROVAL PAGE

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April 16, 1976
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to express appreciation to James Ellis, thesis adviser, and to Kelley Griffith and Robert Watson for their invaluable assistance.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The apocalyptical imagination, the foreboding that the end of the world is near at hand, has been a compelling and tenacious theme in the literature and art of the last fifty years. The world of the present has become so chaotic, so fragmented, so unpredictable, that this response is to be expected. As the British critic Frank Kermode, in an essay about modern literature writes, "If there is a persistent world-view it is one we should have to call apocalyptic."[1] One of the progenitors of this cataclysmic mood is Nathanael West, a once-obscure American novelist of the nineteen-thirties.

Nathanael West was born Nathan Weinstein in New York City on October 17, 1903, the son of German-speaking, Russian born Jewish emigrants.[2] His father was a successful building contractor, and West seems to have enjoyed a happy childhood. An indifferent student who never finished high school, West eventually graduated from Brown University. After college he officially changed his name and spent a short time in Paris. Upon returning to New York he took a job managing a hotel owned by an uncle and began his writing career. During the depression his father suffered heavy losses and West could no longer depend on his family for

support. Then, as did so many novelists of the time, he found his way to Hollywood, where he worked as a script writer. Although he was disturbed by the relative failure of his writing career, West seemed to be finding a modicum of happiness in his personal life. In April, 1940, he was married to Eileen McKenny. He hoped to save enough money to return East and continue writing fiction, but it was not to be. West, always known as a careless driver was killed with his wife in an automobile crash on December 22, 1940.

Nathanael West was neither a prolific novelist nor a facile writer, and he spent much time, up to four years in some cases, reworking and polishing his prose. He published altogether only four short novels and a few stories. His first novel, The Dream Life of Balso Snell, a satiric attack on art and aesthetics, was privately printed in 1931. Miss Lonelyhearts, the story of a Christ-like newspaper reporter, was released in 1933, but unfortunately the publisher, Liveright, went out of business and the novel faded from the public view. A Cool Million, a comic vision of the coming of fascism, was published in 1934, but West was too early with his prophecy and the book was not successful. For what was to be his final novel, West drew on his hatred of Hollywood to write his satiric attack on the film industry, The Day of the Locust, which was published in 1939.

West's two best-known novels, Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust, received many enthusiastic reviews, but

neither sold well. West's sardonic, bitter approach to life did not appeal to depression-stung America. As he himself commented in a letter to Edmund Wilson, the reading public did not seem to care for his "particular form of joking."[3] At first West was almost completely ignored by the literary and academic worlds, but in the post-war era his grim but comic vision touched a sensitive nerve and he has since become known as one of the finest novelists of the depression years.

The shock of recognition has led to lavish praise. Stanley Edgar Hyman, for example, has named Miss Lonelyhearts as one of the three finest American novels of the century, his other choices being the more predictable The Sun Also Rises and The Great Gatsby.[4] In recent years there has been a Westian boom. Since 1961 five books of criticism and one biography have been published, along with numerous scholarly articles. James F. Light's Nathanael West: An Interpretive Study, helped to spark this critical revival.[5] Although somewhat hampered by the relatively few biographical facts at his disposal, Professor Light reveals much about West's life and undertakes an astute criticism of the fiction. The definitive biography of West is Jay Martin's Nathanael West: The Art of His Life.[6] By using recorded interviews, private papers, the records of the movie studios, Martin gives a well-rounded life study mixed with judicious criticism and even some of West's film scripts. Perhaps the two best critical

works are Victor Comerchero's Nathanael West: The Ironic Prophet, and Randall Reid's The Fiction of Nathanael West.[7] Comerchero presents West as a devastating satirist whose grim irony strips modern life of its protective façade, while Reid sees West as a brilliant artist who used parody as "a diagnostic instrument. He used it to identify the familiar themes of our culture, expose their characteristic weaknesses, and express the fact of their decadence."[8]

The flow of scholarly articles continues unchecked. Two which should be cited are W.H. Auden's "West's Disease,"[9] and "Late Thoughts on Nathanael West" by Daniel Aaron.[10] Both short pieces contain a literary comprehensiveness we have come to expect from both men. All students of West must acknowledge also their debt to William White's continuing bibliography.[11]

Although this criticism is markedly favorable to West, he is generally seen as a minor novelist,[12] a radical pessimist, and a corrosive cynic whose dark vision can find no hope for humanity. Marcus Smith, expressing the consensus viewpoint, writes: "I am unable to find anything in West which can be called positive, or as indicating a belief in man or hope for the future. Everything is black, hopeless, doomed."[13]

West is a pessimistic writer to be sure, but his themes are far richer and more complex than this limited viewpoint allows. Throughout his fiction there is a persuasive mood of impending doom, a clear sense that the world is teetering

on the edge of time, moving closer and closer to the final apocalypse, the ultimate disaster. Yet there is also created a counteracting sensibility which off-sets this stark despair. Moving and working against the darkness of West's apocalyptic vision is his ironic humor, an odd, off-center comic sensibility much like that of Herman Melville when he writes in Pierre: "In the hour of unusual afflictions, minds of a certain temperment find a strange, hysterical relief in a wild, perverse humorousness, the more alluring from its entire unsuitableness to the occasion."[14] On one level, then, West's mordant comedy can be seen as a form of the laughing despair called "black humor"; it works to dramatize and intensify the horror of the coming apocalypse. Nevertheless, on another and more important level, the humor serves to blunt the drive toward apocalypse and acts as an outlet for the resultant tension.

This paper will argue that Nathanael West follows in the American tradition of what R.W.B. Lewis calls the "savagely comical apocalypse,"[15] a comic vision which regards the end of the world as being not awesome, but ludicrous. Within this tradition West explores the roots and sources of human suffering; his humor paradoxically leads him to a compassionate response to this suffering. The horror of apocalypse is muted, even altered, by the comic tone, and comedy becomes an ironic defense against West's vision of what the future holds in store for us all.

This thesis will first present a brief history of apocalyptical writing in America and a summary of the critical dialogue concerning the apocalyptical modes in American literature. This discussion will not deal extensively with Christian ideas of apocalypse, for West's version is manifestly secular, and there will be no attempt to define critically the various and capricious aspects of humor and comedy. There next follows an overview of Nathanael West's artistic world, and a discussion of the various ways his themes move relentlessly to an apocalyptic, yet ludicrous ending. Although a version of the ludicrous apocalypse is present in all four of West's novels, it is most acutely and artistically expressed in his two major works, Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust. Therefore, this thesis will be restricted to a discussion of these two novels. A conclusion will present a final summary position.

CHAPTER II

THE APOCALYPTIC TRADITION IN AMERICA

To fully understand just how Nathanael West becomes a part of the apocalyptical tradition we must first look at the sources and conventions of apocalyptical literature, and, in particular, the form which that tradition has followed in America. David Ketterer writes, "The word apocalypse now often functions as a somewhat Delphic critical counter...";[1] therefore it is necessary to return to the traditional sense of the word. The word apocalypse, which is from the Greek, basically means to uncover, or reveal.[2] Apocalyptical literature generally has a definite form: there is esoteric symbolism; exotic, dream-like imagery; and a clear sense of urgency to fit the mood of impending doom.[3] The apocalyptic author presents a world separated from God, a world gone mad with sin, a world beyond redemption. In this fallen world lives a small community of true believers, a group such as the early Christians. The writer addresses this group of true believers; he reveals his secrets, his supernaturally-gained knowledge which predicts the time and method of the end of the world. In this apocalyptical world-view, the majority of people have fallen under the domination of Satan, or the anti-Christ. In the near future, says the apocalyptical writer, God will engage in a cosmic war with the forces

of evil, overthrow them, and go on to establish a new kingdom. The faithful community will live eternally in this earthly paradise.

This basic theme is followed in most early apocalyptical writing, which stems from the Old Testament. It is first found in the Book of Daniel and is continued in the most well-known piece of apocalyptical literature, the Revelation of Saint John the Divine. There is an abundance of apocalyptical thought in the writings of the early Christian sects, for their religion was founded on the idea that the end of the world was imminent. The emphasis in this apocalyptical writing is on the future, on the promised millennium or Golden Age on earth which would begin after Christ's climatic, final war with Satan and the forces of evil.

By the time of the Protestant Reformation the theological emphasis had shifted from these visions of the future to warnings and threats of the past. This particular strain of thought held that man had become so wicked and so corrupt that the anti-Christ would win the ultimate cosmic war, and man-kind would face extinction from a vengeful God. The word apocalypse gained the connotation it still retains today -- it is the final, ineluctable catastrophe.

The Romantic poets, on the other hand, took a secular view of the Apocalypse. As M.H. Abrams expresses it, "Faith in an apocalypse by revelation had been replaced by faith in

an apocalypse by revolution,..."[4] He goes on to say:

> ...they present a panoramic view of history in a cosmic setting, in which the agents are in part historical and in part allegorical or mythological and the overall design is apocalyptic; they envision a dark past, a violent present, and an immediately impending future which will justify the history of suffering man by its culmination in an absolute good and they present the French Revolution (or else a coming revolution which will improve on the French model) as the critical event which signals the emergence of a regenerate man who will inhabit a new world uniting the features of a restored paradise and a recovered Golden Age.[5]

Thus the Romantic era developed its own conception of the apocalypse, what Martin Buber calls an "inverted, optimistic apocalypse,"[6] an apocalypse which envisions an abrupt change in human nature and human fortune, and which does not depend on a force outside of human history. The word apocalypse meant not a vision of darkness and catastrophe, but a vision of the glory that catastrophe could bring.

There have been two recent interpretations of the rather different manifestations of the apocalyptic mode in America. In a suggestive and influential essay, "Days of Wrath and Laughter,"[7] Mr. R.W.B. Lewis argues that apocalypse is an important literary form and archetype and that we must accept the word apocalyptic as an authentic and useful term for literary criticism.

After establishing this much Lewis goes on to the heart of his essay, which is to demonstrate the idea that there has been created in America a distinctive sub-genre he calls the

"savagely comical" apocalypse.[8] Eighteenth-century New England poets and clergymen, notably Michael Wigglesworth and Jonathan Edwards, began to use familiar images of apocalypse such as fire, death, damnation, and the anti-Christ, to stress to their readers and congregations the depth and enormity of their collective sins and corruption. These doom-sayers used apocalyptical metaphors of the future as a means of judging the present. This, says Lewis, is exactly what nineteenth-century poets and novelists began to do -- they appriopiated and reworded the traditional Christian concepts of apocalypse into secular metaphors to describe the world about them.[9] The damnation and ultimate demise of their society was viewed with an overtone of deriding laughter..

Central to this view is Herman Melville, whose later works share a mood of approaching catastrophe. In his last novel, The Confidence-Man, Melville jokes about the end and allows the devil to carry off the one Christian in his book. This point of view is echoed by Mark Twain's The Mysterious Stranger, where Philip Traum, Satan, reveals to the young narrator that the only thing real is nothingness. As he says, "There is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a dream. Nothing exists but you."[10] But Satan admits that there is one way to defeat this apocalyptical vision of nothingness, and that is through laughter:

> For your race, in its poverty, has unquestionably one really effective weapon -- laughter. Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution -- these can lift at a colossal humbug -- push it a little -- weaken it a little, century by century, but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast.[11]

Mr. Lewis argues that Twain and Melville are the progenitors of an American literary tradition he calls the "ludicrous apocalypse," the idea that the end of the world will be a joke played upon humanity. This tradition is continued in this century by Nathanael West, "who established for contemporary American writing the vision of the ludicrous apocalypse, and who searched out and bodied forth some of its human sources."[12] Lewis credits West with influencing such disparate writers as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and Ralph Ellison. After brief discussions of several of these authors, Lewis goes on to say, in a vital conclusion:

> For if there is a large portion of bitterness in the laughter, and if laughter sometimes seems the only possible response in a radically graceless world, it has served to reveal its sources and make visible its shape. To do this is to reassert the human. The apocalyptical visions indeed are offered as weapons for averting the catastrophe.[13]

Another important study of the apocalyptic tradition in America is David R. May's Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel.[14] In his opening chapter May states that his purpose is "To derive from literary and theological sources a typology representing the various eschatological language traditions in their successive historical phases."[15]

"Apocalypse," says May, "is a response to cultural crisis. It grows out of that sense of lose that results from the passing of an old world view."[16]

In the following chapters May discusses twelve novels arranged in four groups. Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain represent a reaction against the easy optimism and liberalism of nineteenth-century thought, whereas Faulkner, West, and Flannery O'Conner indicate the "...continuing concern of our great apocalyptical novelists for exposing the perennial weaknesses of man."[17] Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright present an "Afro-American view of loss of world,"[18] while Barth, Vonnegut, and Pynchon are said to be "Humorist Apocalyptists." In the last chapter, "Types of Apocalypse in American Literature," May summarizes his argument and places each novel in the apocalyptical tradition.

Although David May generally agrees with R.W.B. Lewis concerning the over-all significance of the American apocalyptical vision, he does differ in his conception of the traditional comic apocalypse. May defines humorous apocalypse, quite reasonably, as "imagined catastrophe which nonetheless provokes laughter."[19] In doing so he denies that Twain, Melville, or even Nathanael West can be placed in this catagory. He writes:

> There is a tradition for whimsical apocalypse in American literature that, according to R.W.B. Lewis, goes all the way back to The Confidence-Man.... Yet to consider The Confidence-Man, The Mysterious Stranger, and Miss Lonelyhearts humorous apocalypse, as Lewis does, is to focus too narrowly on the world rather than on total effect.[20]

"Humorous" may not be the precise word for the disturbing effect engendered by Nathanael West's powerful and complex vision of the modern apocalypse, but it is clear that West views the apocalypse as essentially ludicrous, a vast cosmic joke played on unsuspecting humanity.

CHAPTER III

THE APOCALYPTIC VISION OF NATHANAEL WEST

Many novelists of the thirties were profoundly affected by the mass discontent and misery of the depression years. These writers, as Alan Ross remarks in his introduction to West's collected novels, were, in the main, pessimistic and despairing: "It was a despair born from being witnesses to a suffering enormously outside their control."[1] Some of the more committed writers sought an economic solution and turned to left-wing politics, believing that the new world-order would eliminate mass suffering by attending to material needs. Although Nathanael West was personally drawn to the left he was careful to keep his political feelings separate from his fiction. His artistic integrity and the strength of his peculiar vision would not admit the ability of any political system to alleviate the ills of the world.[2]

West understood that the depression was just a symptom of a deeper malaise and there is a truer source of human misery beyond economics. In his view dreams and wishes, things which give meaning to our everyday acts, have failed us. Throughout history man has sought to give meaning to his life on earth. Art, religion, myth -- all are expressions of a

fundamental desire to supply answers, to attribute some worth, some justification to the workings of the everyday world. These dreams evolved into powerful fantasies of escape, in which man actually seeks to separate himself from the world so as to protect himself from the intrusion of reality. These same dreams have been retained by the modern world, but West felt they had lost their strength. The once-powerful dreams have been vitiated by the rationalism, raw commercialism, and vulgar spirit of the age. West believed that the newspapers, radio, and movies act as cheap narcotics, but their easy sentimentalism can not satisfy man's basic desires; the debased dreams are exposed as illusions, empty promises which can give no sustenance to those truly in need.

The failure of the dream, the futility of the quest, the denial of the wish -- these are the central themes in each of West's novels. Stemming from these themes is the dominant motif of violence. Each novel is saturated with an underlying violence which threatens to erupt at any time, and finally culminates at the end. The violence is all the more terrifying because it is casual and seemingly meaningless. Frederick Hoffman observes that violence is a result of a distortion of the "mental and imaginative functions."[3] He writes, "One may explain modern culture by saying that the relationship between the two functions responsible for forms has broken down, that as a result of this failure of balance it has become extremely difficult to comprehend life and

death formally."[4] The forms, the things which provide a basis for life, have broken and can no longer "contain the force."[5] Hoffman concludes that "Man has arrived at the point in his history where he regards force as an autonomous evil, available only occasionally and not predictably to human controls."[6]

Nathanael West presents something very much like this in his fiction. In his world the functions of the intellect and the imagination are indeed out of balance; the forms -- dreams, wishes, desires -- have been destroyed. In West's fiction, says Edmund L. Volpe, "the human being has reached a time in history where he can no longer delude himself. None of his philosophies or dreams has ameliorated or accounted for the pain, the suffering, the misery of human existence."[7] Paradoxically then, we must have our dreams, but the dreams have proven false and destructive and they must be denied.

Victor Comerchero says that "West's brilliance as a novelist proceeds from his ability to generalize frustration."[8] It is this frustration, the denial of the dream, which typically leads to violence. James Light writes, "For West, the implied cause for the omnipresence of American violence is the fact that mass man has deep within him a rage against the trick that life plays on man."[9] Man is cheated, betrayed by the deception of the dream, and in his frustration strikes out violently. The violence presented in West's novels is painfully logical. After creating this tension between the

desire and the reality, West tells us there can be no real resolution except through violence, a violence which is of course no resolution. West's vision then is seen to be inherently and irrevocably pessimistic: his apocalypse would seem to promise nothing but destruction and death.

Several critics, however, have objected to this viewpoint. Thomas M. Lorch argues that West should not be considered totally pessimistic because "the mere act of shaping such unpromising material into meaningful form and organic unity is in itself an affirmation."[10] Others have looked to West's satire for evidence of affirmation. Daniel Brown says that "much of West's satire is inherently optimistic, for only someone who believes in the possibility of change can ridicule so angrily."[11] A more insightful point is made by David D. Galloway when he says that West "is not attacking but reflecting a side-tracked world of sorrow and despair."[12] While mocking the futile dreams and destroyed illusions of humanity West remains sympathetic to the mixed forces which produce them. Our dreams and wishes are ultimately misplaced and unattainable, yet their very existence affirms the basic impulse generating them, and reveals the web of humanity existing behind them.

West's sympathy is marked by his humor. Galloway says, "As a humorist who approaches the levels of comic poetry... West is able to see life and human progress as a prankster's deceit of cosmic -- not earthly -- proportions."[13] The

persistently comic tone of West's novels and the ludicrous nature of his imagined apocalypse expose the banal absurdity of man's situation. In this vision life is a cruel joke. The awesome power and range of the apocalypse is brought from the cosmic and restored to the human; the comedy provides another perspective, a different way of apprehending symbolic and human events. Through his comic vision West provides a measure of relief from the oppression of apocalypse.

This comic perspective and presentation of the ludicrous apocalypse is manifested in all four of West's novels, even in the lesser works. But for what is perhaps his finest and most complex expression of the ludicrous apocalypse, we must turn to his second novel, Miss Lonelyhearts.

CHAPTER IV

THE APOCALYPSE OF THE LONELYHEART

Miss Lonelyhearts, Nathanael West's second novel, is a sharply etched portrait of a man who attempts to become a Christ in twentieth century America. The title character, a reporter who writes an Advice to the Lovelorn column for a New York newspaper, is profoundly affected by the unsolvable problems of the tortured people who write to him. Miss Lonelyhearts (we are never told his real name) finds that he can not forget the letters, letters "stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife,"[1] and his inability to respond meaningfully threatens his sanity. In his role as advice columnist Miss Lonelyhearts has become a priest-like figure to his correspondents; he is an oracle, the keeper of the word. The suffering people look to him to give them dreams they can believe in, to offer some justification for the sordid misery of their lives. But there is no answer, for Miss Lonelyhearts can offer them nothing. His world is fragmented; the forms have been broken and man's most cherished dreams have been exposed as meaningless.

Miss Lonelyhearts is tormented by his inability to provide answers, and he can not respond to the merciless rhetoric of his editor, a man named Shrike. Yet he can not escape. He soon finds that the traditional methods of escape

--sex, alcohol, a trip to the country--will not suffice. He can not separate himself from the ineluctable reality of suffering and pain. He concludes that the only solution is Christ, a Christ who can shoulder the burden and offer humanity some promise of salvation. But Miss Lonelyhearts is cut off from the Christ dream by his intellect, his human pride, and the cruel gibes of Shrike. This personal conflict leads to what he correctly calls his "Christ complex," his obsessive desire to live the Christ dream.

In a final, frantic attempt to save himself Miss Lonelyhearts enters a mystical, trance-like state -- he finds his body slowly changing into a rock, a rock of a church of his own making, a rock which can repel the gibes of Shrike. But this is insanity, and Miss Lonelyhearts is very ill: Miss Lonelyhearts becomes feverish, visionary, and begins to hallucinate. The crucifix that he has spiked to his wall begins to spin, and finally turns into a fly. In his vision, his religious experience, he begins to identify with God: "His heart was the one heart, the heart of God. And his brain was likewise God's" (p.129).

As he has this religious experience, the doorbell rings. Peter Doyle, a cripple whose wife has seduced Miss Lonelyhearts, has come up the stairs. Although the cripple is seeking revenge, Miss Lonelyhearts does not understand: "It was a sign. He would embrace the cripple and the cripple would be made whole again, even as he, a spiritual cripple, had been

made whole" (pp. 139-140). As Peter Doyle, a man who is said to represent "humanity" (p. 123), struggles to escape the saving embrace of Miss Lonelyhearts, his gun goes off and the would-be saint is killed. The modern Christ is dead, killed by his first petitioner in the church of his own making. Miss Lonelyhearts is dead along with his dream.

Most critics of the novel agree that this stark ending is a fitting climax to the anguished pessimism running throughout the story. As Randall Reid says: "The terrible paradox of Miss Lonelyhearts is that it accepts the saint's definition of this life but denies the saint's alternative to it. The world is indeed, corrupt, dead, and irreconcilably evil, but this world is all there is."[2] Miss Lonelyhearts's plight is seen to be unsolvable; he is a man trying to respond to a world which does not seek compassion but the fulfillment of dreams. James Light writes: "But there is no miracle. Instead Miss Lonelyhearts is shot by Doyle, destroyed, like Christ, by the panic and ignorance of those whom he would save. Doyle, and in him suffering man, shatters the only solution to the intolerableness of man's pain,..."[3] This world will not accept a Christ; there is no promised salvation either for the hapless columnist or suffering humanity. The Christ dream is dead along with the dreamer.

Although differing in their interpretations, R.W.B. Lewis and David May are the only critics to recognize the apocalyptical thrust of the novel. As both critics have seen, the world of the novel is a world concerned with last things. There is an almost palpable aura of death and damnation, a pervasive atmosphere of impending disaster. The ever-present misery, the complete absence of values, and the lack of any form of sustaining faith serve to make this world ripe for the final catastrophe. Mr. Lewis writes,"The world of Miss Lonelyhearts is one under the "dominion of a contemporary anti-Christ,"[4] the editor Shrike, and Miss Lonelyhearts is a symbol of the Christ doomed to lose the final battle.

David May takes a traditional yet trenchant view toward the apocalyptical vision of Miss Lonelyhearts. As he observes, the book is "full of key symbols of chaos and order that are fundamentally apocalyptic in meaning .... The symbolism of chaos is composed of the concrete images of unseasonable nature, uncontrollable artifacts, and rampant human misery."[5] These images of chaos are particularly evident in the setting of the novel; the threatening landscape of New York, the urban wasteland, looms in the background like a hard-edge abstract painting. Nature itself is out of control and unpredictable; even the little park to which Miss Lonelyhearts often repairs is arid and bleak: "As far as he could discover, there were no signs of spring. The decay that covered the surface of the mottled ground was not the kind in which life generates" (p. 70).

The people of this nightmarish society are the forerunners of the long awaited locusts -- they prey on the land and darken the sun. They have the faces of men but the mark of the beast upon them. The garish imagery reduces them to objects, bizarre objects hanging alone in a space with no relationship to living human beings. One man has cheeks "like twin rolls of smooth pink toilet paper" (p. 77); his arm is like a "deadfall". A woman has "legs like Indian clubs, breasts like balloons, and a brow like a pigeon" (p. 97). Her "massive hams" look like "two grindstones" (p. 101). Miss Lonelyhearts's girlfriend Betty is described as simply a "party-dress" (p. 136).

It is no wonder that in this world human relationships are dislocated and perverted. There is no love or even passion, rather the atmosphere is one of frustration and deadness. The most compelling relationships are based upon violence -- eros and passion are so far removed that only violence can spark a flame of desire. When Shrike seduces a Miss Farkis he concludes by "burying his trianglar face like the blade of a hatchet in her neck" (p. 74). Miss Lonelyhearts tugs sharply at a woman's breast, hoping she will strike him and arouse him from his deadness. Later, "he kneaded her body like a sculptor grown angry with his clay, but there was too much method in his caresses and they both remained cold" (p. 95). Miss Lonelyhearts reflects at one point that "only violence can make him supple" (p. 79) and

lead to heat; his passion leads only to frustration, a frustration which is never relieved.

Miss Lonelyhearts's quest for order and peace in this world of chaos is an impossible one; he must eventually turn to the Christ dream. This immediately opposes him to his editor, William Shrike, the anti-Christ of the coming apocalypse. David May feels that Shrike is a demonic figure, a "loosed Satan," a "traditional warning sign of impending disaster," whose natural adversary is Miss Lonelyhearts, the "deluded Christ."[6] Shrike is a "cosmic joker," a "diabolical con man who tries each day to sell Miss Lonelyhearts on some new principle of order for this life, without even a hint of sincerity."[7] Shrike is, says May, "literally a secular refraction of the Christian Satan,"[8] and Shrike's intellectual seduction of Miss Lonelyhearts is compared to the Biblical temptation of Christ by the devil.

Miss Lonelyhearts is properly skeptical of Shrike's promises of easy escape and simple solutions to the problems of the letters, yet he eventually submits to the fantasy of becoming the rock, of becoming one with God. The penalty for this unforgivable presumption, according to May, is death:

> He is judged for yielding to the ultimate temptation of making himself God; death is his ironic reward for succumbing, against his intentions, to Shrike's joke. Just as the words of his column were empty and meaningless, so were his deeds. He has presumed to do what no man can do.[9]

May concludes then that death is West's apocalyptical symbol of the end; "It is the end not only for Miss Lonelyhearts, but also, predictably, for all self-appointed saviors of men.[10] The novel is couched in terms of apocalyptical Christianity, yet there is no "future projected or imagined for Miss Lonelyhearts or humanity."[11] It is purely secular apocalypse an apocalypse of despair.

David May's uncompromising analysis takes astute note of the apocalyptic symbolism and impulses of the novel, but he does not admit the implications of the ironic comedy that prevails throughout. As Victor Comerchero remarks:

> What is important about Miss Lonelyhearts is the superimposition of comedy upon its tragic structure. It can not be insisted too strongly that if one is to use such terms, in a sense inappropriate ones, Miss Lonelyhearts is a comedy with tragic overtones, rather than a tragedy with comic overtones.[12]

The humor prevailing in the novel is compounded of incongruity, discontinuity, and an overall sense of the absurdity of the human situation. The apocalypse so starkly presented becomes, eventually, a ludicrous joke.

The ever-prevailing sense of absurd humor is most sharply presented in the complex figure of Miss Lonelyhearts himself. The would-be Christ is such an ambiguous character that he has provoked many divergent critical readings. Some writers see him as hopelessly insane; Arthur Cohen believes that Miss Lonelyhearts is a psychotic, fixated on Christ, who "misrepresents the world and is martyr to his misrepresentation."[13]

James Light, however, thinks the reporter attains something close to sainthood; in his view Miss Lonelyhearts becomes a Christ-like man who "perceives that love and faith are the only answers to man's pain in a universe he cannot understand."[14] Marcus Smith, attempting to reconcile these conflicting critical positions, reminds us of West's admitted debt to William James, and concludes that West "did not view his protagonist as either saint or psychotic; instead he suggests that these two catagories, in the twentieth century at least, far from being exclusive of each other, are perhaps identical."[15]

Leslie Fiedler seems closer to the point when he calls Miss Lonelyhearts a "comic butt who takes upon himself the sins of the world: the schemiel as Everyman, the skeptical and unbelieved in Christ of a faithless age."[16] Miss Lonelyhearts is West's version of the holy fool, an inept yet compassionate man who believes he can save the world. Miss Lonelyhearts will not admit that life has played a trick on mankind: he will not accept the idea that the universe is stacked against humanity. And his attempts to respond become ludicrous comedy.

The many comical aspects of Miss Lonelyhearts foolish quest are evident throughout the novel. The whole premise of the lovelorn column is, in fact, a joke that has gone sour. As Miss Lonelyhearts explains to his girlfriend, Betty:

> Let's start from the beginning. A man is hired to give advice to the readers of a newspaper. The job is a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke.... He too considers the job a joke but after several months at it the joke begins to escape him. He sees that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are painfully inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. He also discovers that he is forced to examine the values by which he lives. The examination shows that he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator (p. 106)

Miss Lonelyhearts is indeed the victim of the joke for he finds that he can not forget the letters, graphic images of pain and suffering.

The letters which, in the words of Norman Podhoretz, "make the fact of evil a concrete presence,"[17] are nonetheless presented in a distinctly comic vein:

> Dear Miss Lonelyhearts --
> I am sixteen years old now and I don't know what to do and would appreciate it if you could tell me what to do. When I was a little girl it was not so bad because I got used to the kids making fun of me, but now I would like to have boyfriends like the other girls and go out on Saturday nites, but no boy will take me because I was born without a nose -- although I am a good dancer and have a nice shape and my father buys me pretty clothes.
> What did I do to deserve such a terrible bad fate?.... Ought I commit suicide.
> Sincerly yours,
> Desperate (p. 67)

The cruelty of the young girl's grotesque deformity is withheld until we are made to see, after a long subordinate clause, that her desires are trivial and misplaced. In all of the letters the misspellings, the bad grammar, the

incongruity of the situation and above all, the trite, cliche-ridden quality of the correspondents's dreams intensify the humor which seems so out of place in these pathetic outpourings of humanity. The letters are indeed genuine expressions of tragic reality, but it is clear that the reader is expected, however reluctantly, to laugh.[18]

At the same time any attempt by Miss Lonelyhearts to respond to these anguished questions must become parody; when he tries to write his column, he sounds like Walter Pater: "Life is worthwhile, for it is full of gentleness and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar" (p. 66). The joke is still on Miss Lonelyhearts, for he finds that his answers become meaningless fatuities.

The apocalyptical joke is extended to the clash between Shrike and Miss Lonelyhearts, which becomes an exercise in parody and satire. As R.W.B. Lewis writes: "The central image of the novella, indeed, is a parody of the Gospel encounter between Christ and the Devil -- in this case a man, on the one hand, whose soul is sickened by a humanity he cannot assuage, and, on the other, the spokesman of an ice-cold and yet witty and intellectually brillant humanity."[19]

The relationship between the two men, so essential to the apocalyptical structure and the comic aspects of the novel, is developed at the very beginning. In the opening chapter Miss Lonelyhearts is reading a mock prayer Shrike has placed in his typewriter, a parody of the Anima Christi:

Soul of Miss L, glorify me.
Body of Miss L, nourish me.
Blood of Miss L, intoxicate me...
Help me, Miss L, help,me, help me.. (p. 66)

At once Shrike is established as a mocker and soon Miss Lonelyhearts is revealed as a Christ figure as he crosses through the park on his way to a speakeasy: "He walked into the shadow of a lamp-post that lay on the path like a spear. It pierced him like a spear" (p. 70). At the bar he is met by Shrike and his first response to the other's mockery is "For Christ's sake, let me alone" (p. 70).

Shrike, West tells us, is one of a group of newspapermen who once "believed in literature, had believed in Beauty, and in personal expression as an absolute end. When they lost this belief, they lost everything. Money and fame meant nothing to them. They were not worldly men" (p. 83). Like Miss Lonelyhearts, like any sensitive person, Shrike recognizes that the world about him is encompassed by pain and suffering. He has learned to conceal his sympathy and concern behind a smokescreen of jokes and low comedy.

A bitter, defeated man, Shrike is the epitome of frustrated intellectual cynicism. He is a "human joke machine" (p. 84), whose merciless rhetoric destroys each avenue of escape dreamed by Miss Lonelyhearts. A Shrike is also the "butcher-bird," a flesh-eater which impales its prey on thorns before eating it alive. Shrike's favorite prey is the Christ dream of Miss Lonelyhearts; he impales the hapless dreamer on

his own crown of thorns and then devours him with his mocking wit:

> My friend, I know of course that neither the soil, nor the South Seas, nor Hedonism, nor art, nor suicide, nor drugs can mean anything to us. We are not men who swallow camels only to strain at stools. God alone is our escape. The church is our only hope, the First Church of Christ Dentist, where he is worshipped as preventer of Decay. The church whose symbol is the trinity new-style: Father, Son, and Wirehaired Fox Terrier. (p. 101).

Shrike's satire is brilliantly comical yet his arguments are by no means subtle or logical. He is reduced to a master of ceremonies whose wit is presented as a parlor game rather than a figure of evil. The temptations he offers to Miss Lonelyhearts are not the insidious traps of Melville's Confidence-Man, and they do not promise the earthly glory Satan offers to Christ. Shrike's overblown rhetoric exposes man's, and his own, debased and depleted dreams. He mocks not only the Christ dream of Miss Lonelyhearts but himself as clown:

> "I am a great saint," Shrike cried, "I can walk on my own water. Haven't you ever heard of Shrike's Passion in the Luncheonette, or the Agony in the Soda Fountain? There I compared the wounds in Christ's body to the mouth of a miraculous purse in which we deposit the small change of our sins." (p. 74)

Shrike's malicious wit is but one aspect of the mordant comic apprehension that pervades the entire novel. When Miss Lonelyhearts effects his only escape, a trip to the country with Betty, a gas station attendant assures them that the

deer have been frightened away by the "yids." This feckless statement sets the tone for the entire sojourn with Betty, which becomes a parody of Edenic misadventure.[20]

Humor is extended to the elemental forces of sex and violence which drive the novel. Mary Shrike sexually teases Miss Lonelyhearts in a long comic sequence, then quits him in favor of her husband. Faye Doyle's seduction of the reluctant Miss Lonelyhearts is repellent yet very funny:

> "Don't," she begged.
> "Don't what?"
> "Oh, darling, turn out the light."
> He smoked a cigarette, standing in the dark and listening to her undress. She made sea sounds; something flapped like a sail; there was the creak of ropes; then he heard the wave-against-a-wharf smack of rubber on flesh. Her call for him to hurry was a sea-moan, and when he lay beside her, she heaved, tidal, moon-driven.
> Some fifteen minutes later, he crawled out of bed like an exhausted swimmer leaving the surf and dropped into a large armchair near the window. (p. 301)

The oppressive violence in the novel is shocking because it is so sudden and unexpected, yet it is these same qualities which at times make the violence comical. The ultimate set of unexpected violence, the death of Miss Lonelyhearts, far from being a judgment or punishment, as May contends, is symptomatic of the book's underlying comic absurdity. Peter Doyle, a pathetic man who "moves like a partially destroyed insect" (p. 122) yet stands for all humanity, shoots Miss Lonelyhearts, the one person who has befriended him. The mystical rock of Miss Lonelyhearts is shattered by Peter, the

rock of his church. The accidental killing, with its overtones of religion and insanity, is a cruel joke.

The death of the would-be Christ exacerbates the pessimistic despair permeating the novel -- the Christ dream can be only a dream. Nevertheless, the pathetic ending, with its many elements of comedy, gives the last laugh to the cosmic joke. The end of the world, as marked by the death of the modern Christ and the victory of the devil, becomes not a tragedy, but in Walter Allen's phrase, a study in "farcial irony."[21] There is the realization that the coming apocalypse need not be a devastating catastrophe, but, rather, a savage joke, a final comic statement of what West saw to be the absurdity of human life and human dreams.

CHAPTER V

THE APOCALYPSE OF THE LOCUSTS

Nathanael West's striking portrayal of the modern apocalypse, The Day of the Locust, is set in Hollywood, the "Sargasso of the imagination" (p. 353). Here West follows the American dream, moving from the compressed, dead world of Miss Lonelyhearts to the lotus-land of Southern California. Again, his theme is the inability of twentieth-century dreams to satisfy and sustain humanity, and the apocalyptical violence which is released as a result. In The Day of the Locust, West is interested in the power of the mob, the latent power of mass discontent. James Light writes, "Even a superficial examination of the novel reveals that the dominating effect is that of fear, fear of the great beast, the mob."[1] And this fear is fully justified. The novel turns on the idea that the apocalypse will not come from an outside or supernatural force, but at the hands of the cheated people who have come to California in a vain attempt to escape the harsh monotony of their lives. These people have been betrayed by their need for dreams and excitement, and the novel ends, inevitably, in a paroxysm of mob violence.

Central to this apocalyptical setting is Hollywood, the "dream dump," the very symbol of the fraudulent and the artifical. In Hollywood nothing is as it seems, nothing is real.

A walk through a studio lot reveals plastic rocks, a paper Sphinx, the "Battle of Waterloo," and a Greek temple with the key image of Eros, the god of love, lying "face downward in a pile of old newspapers and bottles" (p. 352). This Hollywood fraudulence is reflected and repeated in the bizarre architecture of the city. It is a fantastic mixture of "Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination" (p. 262).

There is no love in this decadent society; the only genuine emotions expressed are hatred and sexual desire. Love is seen as simply a clever way of marketing sex: "Love is like a vending machine,eh?...You insert a coin and press home the lever.... You receive a small sweet,..and then walk away, trying to look as though nothing has happened" (p. 276). Titillation and perversity are celebrated and exploited. A twelve year old boy sings a blues song with "suggestive gestures and a "voice top heavy with sexual pain" (p. 364), and a female impersonator croons a lullaby with real emotion which is rendered false when he turns into a man. The men in the novel are caught up in a mad dance of frustrated sexually revolving around Faye Greener, a beautiful young starlet. But Faye offers, instead of love, a deadly promise of violence:

> Her invitation wasn't to pleasure but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love. If you threw yourself upon her, it would be like throwing yourself from the parapet of a skyscraper. You would do it with a scream. You couldn't expect to rise again. Your teeth would be driven into your skull like nails into a pine board, and your back would be broken. (p. 271).

The novel is centered on Tod Hackett, a painter who designs stage sets and costumes for one of the film studios. Ted seems lethargic and rather passive, but as West tells us, "despite his appearance, he was really a very complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside the other like a nest of Chinese boxes" (p. 260). As an artist Tod is fascinated by Hollywood; he is particularly obsessed with the sullen people lurking in the background, those who "loitered on the corners or stood with their backs to the shop windows and stared at everyone who passed. When their stare was returned, their eyes filled with hatred" (p. 251). Tod has been able to find out little about these people except that they "have come to California to die" (p. 261). Later he understands that their lives are consumed by boredom:

> It was a mistake to think them harmless curosity seekers. They were savage and bitter, especially the middle-aged and the old, and had been made so by boredom and disappointment.
>
> All their lives they had slaved at some kind of dull heavy labor, behind desks and counters, in the fields and at tedious machines of all sorts, saving their pennies and dreaming of the leisure that would be theirs when they had enough. Finally that day came....Where else would they go but California, the land of sunshine and oranges?

> Once there, they discover that sunshine isn't enough. They get tired of oranges,... Nothing happens. They don't know what to do with their time.... They watch the waves come in at Venice. There wasn't any ocean where most of them came from, but after you have seen one wave, you have seen them all. (p. 411)

Set in opposition to the thrill seekers are the performers, those who try to fill this desperate need for excitement. In The Day of the Locust the performers do not come from the glamorous world of producers, directors, and movie stars, but from the underworld of Hollywood, a sordid world made up of extras, starlets, touts, failed comics, bit players, and the like. Tod's lust for Faye Greener, a beautiful young starlet, draws him into this world almost against his will. He tries to keep himself separate, to remain an observer, but he soon finds himself caught up in the same frantic gyrations as the others. In this world he meets many grotesque characters, such as Faye's father Harry, an ex-vaudvillian who can not stop doing pratfalls and ancient comic routines; Faye's lover Earle Shoop, a pseudo-cowboy who "worked occasionally in horse-operas and spent the rest of his time in front of a saddlery store on Sunset Boulevard" (p. 322); Miguel, a sinister Mexican who raises fighting cocks; and Abe Kusich, a pugnacious dwarf. They are the performers, the dancers, and the stare of the crowd, the spectators, makes them "spin crazily and leap into the air with twisted backs like hooked trout" (p. 264).

The one person Tod meets who is not from the Hollywood underworld is Homer Simpson, a former hotel clerk from Iowa. At once Tod realizes that Homer is "an exact model for the kind of person who comes to California to die, perfect in every detail down to fever eyes and unruly hands" (p. 285). A born innocent, Homer is a pathetic, empty man, who amuses himself by watching a lizard catching flies. He is "like one of Picasso's great sterile athletes" (p. 290); his latent power is expressed through his enormous hands. Like Sherwood Anderson's Wing Biddlebaum, Homer has successfully repressed desire but he has no control over his hands. He must take them through "elaborate tics," a form of "joint manipulation" (p. 389), whenever he is threatened or aroused. As a child Homer "used to stick pins into them and once he had even thrust them into a fire. Now he used only cold water" (p.289). Even cold water does not help Homer the first time he meets Faye Greener: "His hands began to bother him. He rubbed them against the edge of the table to relieve their itch, but it only stimulated them. When he clasped them behind his back the strain became intolerable. They were hot and swollen" (p. 310).

After her father's death, Faye asserts her power over Homer and moves in with him, bringing Earle and Miguel with her. After a cock fight and a wild party, Homer, naive enough to think Faye pure, finds her sleeping with Miguel. The shock of betrayal releases the full intensity of Homer's

latent violence, and the next day, in front of a crowd gathered at a movie premier, Homer murders a small boy who has been tormenting him. The crowd, excited by the prospect of seeing a movie star, and whipped into a frenzy by a thoughtless radio announcer, goes berserk, tearing Homer to bits and breaking Tod's leg.

The frustrated, bored people who riot are the locusts of West's carefully chosen, clearly apocalyptic title[2] with its reference to Exodus 10:14-15: "And the locusts went up over all the lands of Egypt,... Before them were no such locusts as they, neither after them shall be such. For they covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened,....and their remained not any green thing...." And of course there are the ominous locusts of Revelation 9:3-7: "And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth: and unto them was given power,... And their faces <u>were</u> as the faces of men."

The locusts have come forth and the beast is loosed; the apocalypse must begin. With their dreams having been exposed as illusions, the people will wait no longer:

> Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize that they have been tricked and burn with resentment..... Nothing can be violent enough to make taunt their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing. (p. 412)

Randall Reid says; "West's characters have been depraved as well as cheated. They do not even want love. They are victims but they will revenge themselves on other victims. Apocalyptic violence is their one remaining dream."[3]

The final riot, which is described in sex-ridden, eventually terrifying imagery, features the onslaught of the locusts and the advent of the apocalypse. West suggests, also, that this apocalyptic riot will not be confined to California but will spread across the country: "The Angelenos would be first but their comrades all over the country will follow.... There will be civil war" (p. 335). Jay Martin concludes that there will be nothing left: "There is no optimism in the book: its city and people are ravaged by the locusts of their fantasies. Only the stony perspective of the future remains."[4]

It would seem that there is no defense, no respite, from this murderous riot of locusts. But there is a saving grace offered by West. Against the "awful, anarchic power" (p. 365) of the mob, West, as R.W.B. Lewis says, "poses the allied powers of art and comedy."[5] Tod Hackett has an artist's eye for veracity and detail. Unlike the tortured, suffering Miss Lonelyhearts, Tod's perceptions are clear, undistorted; his vision renders an accurate picture of the bizarre world swirling around him. Tod sees himself as a prophet, a Jeremiah; he is the apocalyptic eye, the observer, and through his art he documents the dynamics of the coming

apocalypse. At the same time Nathanael West uses Tod's imagined canvas to paint a satiric portrait of the origins of the apocalypse and the ludicrous prospect of its culmination.

Tod is planning a large, prophetic painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles," which foreshadows the final riot:

> He was going to show the city burning at high noon, so that the flames would have to compete with the desert sun and thereby appear less fearful, more like bright flags flying from roofs and windows than a terrible holocaust. He wanted the city to have quite a gala air as it burned, to appear almost gay. And the people who set it on fire would be a holiday crowd. (p. 334)

His models for the holiday crowd, the celebrants of destruction, come from the ranks of the spectators, the displaced people of Hollywood. Tod seeks them out at their various churches. He visits, among others, the Tabernacle of the Third Coming, "where a woman in male clothing preached the Crusade Against Salt; and the Temple Moderne, under whose Caromium roof Brain-Breathing, the Secret of the Aztecs, was taught" (p. 365). Mr. Lewis writes, "The most terrible of the truths and prophecies disclosed is the organic connection in America between radical religiosity, an extreme Protestantism gone finally insane, and the organized impulse of hatred and destruction."[6] Nevertheless West undercuts this savage wrath with comic irony. Tod watches these "people writhe on the hard seats of their churches," and thinks about the "contrast between their drained-out, feeble bodies and

their wild disordered minds" (p. 365). Tod sees one angry man claiming to "have seen the Tiger of Wrath stalking the walls of the citadel, yet the man connects this image with "thirty dollars every Thursday and meat eating" (p. 366). West's humor exposed the various utopian movements and religious cults as legitimate targets for satire and comedy.

As Alvin Kernan writes, the "world of satire is always a fantastic jumble of men and objects. Whatever particular form human folly or viciousness may take in a given satire, it always moves toward the creation of messes, discordancies, mobs on all levels and in all areas of life."[7] Tod Hackett's projected painting of the final riot in The Day of the Locust manifests this "fantastic jumble" and at the same time dramatizes West's satiric version of the ludicrous apocalypse. We are given an "antic Armageddon,"[8] as Lewis calls it, an inane rendition of the coming of the end:

> Through the center, winding from left to right, was a long hill street and down it,..came the mob carrying baseball bats and torches. For the faces of its members, he was using the innumerable sketches he had made of the people who came to California to die;..all those poor devils who can only be stirred by the promise of miracles and then only to violence. A super "Dr. Know-All Pierce-All" had made the necessary promise and they were marching behind his banner in a great united front of screwballs and screwboxes to purify the land. No longer bored, they sang and danced joyously in the red light of the flames. (p. 420)

The incipient fascism and innate brutality of the mob is mitigated only by the power of art and comedy. The end of the world is turned into a joke, a cosmic joke that man plays on himself. Man must have illusions, West tells us; therefore, he will go on deluding himself. West does not say that the riot and eventual apocalypse will not take place. It probably will, given his premises and world-view, but when the end does come it will be as ludicrous and comic as the mad dance presented in The Day of the Locust.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The American novelist, John Hawkes, while answering a question concerning his own literary ancestors, makes a brilliant and telling statement about the art of Nathanael West. As he says, what these writers -- Celine, Flannery O'Conner, and West, among others -- have in common is

> a quality of coldness, detachment, ruthless determination to face up to the enormities of ugliness and potential failure within ourselves and in the world around us, and to bring to this exposure a savage or saving comic spirit and the saving beauties of language. The need is to maintain the truth of the fractured picture; to expose, ridicule, attack, but always to create and to throw into new light our potential for violence and absurdity as well as for graceful action.[1]

Walter Allen has stated that the only way Nathanael West could tolerate the absurdity of the human condition was "to translate it into the comic, when the comic absurdity, as it were, is clowned into further absurdity."[2] It would seem that this is exactly what West does in response to the inexorable onslaught of his personal vision of apocalypse. He orders what Hawkes calls a "savage or saving comic spirit" against the cosmic power of the ultimate disaster, and reduces it, through art and comedy, into human terms. In Miss Lonelyhearts the Christ dream is revealed as only another illusion and the would-be Christ must die; yet his death is

translated into a rude form of comedy, turned into a joke complete with puns and a punchline. In The Day of the Locust it is chillingly implied that riot will sweep over the United States, killing everyone in its path and destroying civilization. On closer examination, however, we find that the rioters have become "screwballs and screwboxes" (p. 420), ridiculous in their need for excitement and beastial in their need for violence.

Considering the new-found popularity of his novels, and the ever-growing number of scholarly articles and books concerning his fiction, Nathanael West is still very hard to classify, difficult to assimilate. As Randall Reid reflects, West is "still a curious figure. He repudiated social realism but focused on sociological themes, dismissed psychological novels but was an acute literary psychologist, laughed at art but was a conscious and dedicated artist."[3] Although some critics have tried to place West in the ranks of the surrealists, and others see him as a fore-runner of today's "black humorists," he resists catagorization, he remains unique.

It would be imprudent and unwise to attempt to assign Nathanael West to any one spot in the literary scheme; his art is too brilliant, too complex, too varied, for any such confinement. Yet it can be safely said, and should be stated, that West does indeed follow and enhance R.W.B. Lewis's astute conception of the American tradition of the "savagely

comical apocalypse." As Lewis says: "But at the heart itself of this tradition is a humane perspective rooted not quite in hope but in a hope about hope. The sense of the comic is at once the symptom and the executive agent of that root sensibility."[4] Nathanael West's dark vision will never be called affirmative, but he does entertain, through his comic spirit, a "hope about hope." As Professor Lewis reminds us, "These apocalyptic visions indeed are offered as weapons for averting the catastrophe."[5]

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER I

[1]Frank Kermode, "On Modern Literature," Encounter, 26 (March, 1966), p.53.

[2]I am indebted to Jay Martin's Nathanael West: The Art of his Life (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1970), for this biographical information.

[3]Martin, p. 334.

[4]Stanley Edgar Hyman, Nathanael West (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press [University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, no. 21], 1962, p.29.

[5]James F. Light, Nathanael West: An Interpretive Study (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1961).

[6]Martin.

[7]Victor Comerchero, Nathanael West: The Ironic Prophet (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1964), and Randall Reid, The Fiction of Nathanael West (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

[8]Reid, p. 163.

[9]Wystan Hugh Auden, "Interlude: West's Disease," The Dyer's Hand (New York: Random House, 1962), pp.238-45.

[10]Daniel Aaron, "Late Thoughts on Nathanael West," Massachusetts Review, 6 (Winter-Spring, 1965), pp.307-16.

[11]William White, "Nathanael West: A Bibliography," Studies in Bibliography, 11 (1958), pp.207-24, and "Bibliography of Nathanael West," Book Collection, 2 (Autumn, 1962), p.351.

[12]Reid, p.2.

[13]Marcus Smith, Jr. "The Art and Influence of Nathanael West," Diss. University of Wisconsin, p.242.

[14]Herman Melville, Pierre (London: Constable and Company, LTD., 1923), p.228.

[15]R.W.B. Lewis, "Days of Wrath and Laughter," Trials of the Word (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965), p.185.

CHAPTER II

[1]David Ketterer, New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1974), p.4.

[2]Lewis, p.194.

[3]Martin Buber, "Prophecy, Apocalyptic, and the Historical Reality," Pointing the Way. Trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p.200.

[4]M.H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism:Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1971), p.334.

[5]Abrams, p.332.

[6]Buber, p.204.

[7]Lewis, pp.184-235.

[8]Lewis, p.203.

[10]Mark Twain, "The Mysterious Stranger," The Portable Mark Twain, Ed. Bernard DeVoto (New York: The Viking Press, 1946), pp.743-44.

[11]Twain, p.736.

[12]Lewis, p.185.

[13]Lewis, p.235.

[14]David R. May, Toward a New Earth: Apocalpyse in the American Novel (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973).

[15]May, p.2.

[16]May, p.19.

[17]May, p.202.

[18]May, p.146.

[19]May, p.173.

[20]May, p.216.

CHAPTER III

[1]Alan Ross, "Introduction," The Complete Works of Nathanael West (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957) p. IX.

[2]Aaron, p.316.

[3]Hoffman, Frederick, The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p.141.

[4]Hoffman, p.141.

[5]Hoffman, p.141.

[6]Hoffman, p.141.

[7]Edmond L. Volpe, "The Waste Land of Nathanael West," Renascence, 13 (Winter, 1961), p.71.

[8]Comenchero, p.184.

[9]Light, p.169.

[10]Thomas M. Lorch, "The Peculiar Half-World of Nathanael West," Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Yale University, 1965,p.8.

[11]Daniel Brown, "The War Within Nathanael West: Naturalism and Existentialism," Modern Fiction Studies, 20 (Summer, 1974), p.187.

[12]David D. Galloway, "A Picaresque Apprenticeship: Nathanael West's The Dream Life of Balso Snell and A Cool Million," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 5 (Summer, 1964),p.119.

[13]Galloway, p.118.

CHAPTER IV

[1]Nathanael West, The Complete Works of Nathanael West (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957), p.67. All subsequent page references are to this editor.

[2]Reid, p.84.

[3]Light, p.75.

[4]Lewis, p.213.

[5]May, p.211.

[6]May, p.212.

[7]May, p.212.

[8]May, p.212.

[9]May, p.217.

[10]May, p.218.

[11]May, p.218.

[12]Comerchero, p.64.

[13]Arthur Cohen, "Nathanael West's Holy Fool," Commonweal, 64 (June 15, 1956), p.277.

[14]Light, p.87.

[15]Marcus Smith, "Religious Experience in Miss Lonelyhearts," Contemporary Literature, 9 (Spring, 1968), p.173.

[16]Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, Rv. ed. (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1966), p.626.

[17]Norman Podhoretz, "Nathanael West: A Particular Kind of Joking," Doings and Undoings: The Fifties and After in American Writing. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), p.70.

[18]Comerchero, p.89.

[19]Lewis, p.214.

[20]Martin, p.197.

[21]Walter Allen, The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1964), p.169.

CHAPTER V

[1]Light, p.167.

[2]Martin, p.318.

[3]Reid, p.318.

[4]Martin, p.315

[5]Lewis, p.216.

[6]Lewis, p.216.

[7]Alvin B. Kernan, The Plot of Satire (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965), p.68.

[8]Lewis, p.217.

CHAPTER VI

[1]John Hawkes, quoted in Tony Tanner, City of Words: American Fiction, 1950-1970 (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p.204.

[2]Allen, p.169.

[3]Reid, p.5.

[4]Lewis, p.235.

[5]Lewis, p.235.

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