

THE HOLLYWOOD DREAM: A NIGHTMARE
IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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English

by
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my husband,

Darrell Christensen

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For sticking with me during the long process that was my thesis, I express gratitude to my thesis committee chair Professor Matt Brown. I sincerely admire his knowledge and insight. I also appreciate Professor Christian Fosen for being interested in what I have to say. To other important faculty at Chico State such as Dr. John Traver, Dr. Geoff Baker, Dr. Judith Rodby, and Dr. Kim Jaxon, who encouraged, guided, mentored, taught, pushed, and made me feel like something special, I am deeply indebted.

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the nightmarish and destructive side of the American Dream as portrayed in literature about the Hollywood film industry, namely *Play it as it Lays* by Joan Didion, *The Last Tycoon* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and *The Day of the Locust* by Nathanael West. While each novel approaches the topic in a different way, all three suggest that the American Dream is not attainable in the Hollywood culture of greed, inauthenticity, and devoid of God.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Linton Weeks said, “The lifelong tension between American dreams and nightmares is found on shelf after shelf of our national literature, from Horatio Alger's mid-19th-century novels to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run* (1941) and Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*.” While the definition of the American Dream is ever changing and individual to each person depending on his or her own aspirations, initially it was founded on principles of thrift, ingenuity, freedom, self-sufficiency, hard work, and on the frontier ideals of land ownership and unlimited opportunity. For many it was also founded upon a protestant work ethic or a combination of religion and economics wherein one could realize one's dreams with perseverance and uprightness before God. Westward expansion was not without its evils, however, and the consequences of the dream were numerous for not only the landscape, but for the native inhabitants as well. Nevertheless, the dream itself was an assemblage of values and ideals developed out of hope for a better future—a future free from tyranny and oppression. John F. Callahan states:

Naming the “pursuit of happiness” an unalienable right confirmed the newly declared American nation as an experimental, necessarily improvisational society dedicated to the principle that every human personality is sacred and inviolable. Yes, blacks, women, Native Americans, and even indentured servants were excluded, but excluded *then*, not forever. (379)

Nevertheless, much of American literature portrays an alternate dream, one that has evolved to have a more material focus beginning with the gold rush, and fortified by the

Hollywood Studio System. Therefore, the virtues that were once associated with the dream have all but disappeared from the societies depicted in American literature as the quest for fame, fortune, and power has replaced them.

Like the novels listed above, *Play it as it Lays* by Joan Didion, *The Day of the Locust* by Nathanael West, and *The Last Tycoon* by F. Scott Fitzgerald suggest the American Dream has changed into a nightmare. The difference between these and the novels that Linton Weeks lists is that all three of these take place amidst the movie industry of southern California. Further, each of these novels suggests that the American Dream is not attainable in a society that has rejected the values that once formed a nation. For example, the hero theme in *The Last Tycoon* associated with frequent references to past American presidents is telling as it suggests such values can only be found in American history. Those references include men whose dreams were key in establishing the Declaration of Independence, which has significantly sustained many of those dreams. Matthew J. Brucoli said, "By means of these presidential associations Fitzgerald tried to place Stahr in the tradition of the American leaders, to endow him with a largeness of character that goes beyond the movie industry" (Brucoli 9). That "largeness of character" is what Fitzgerald suggests is missing among the leaders in the film industry during the Golden Age of Hollywood.

K. Edington discusses the Hollywood Dream phenomenon as portrayed in literature saying, "Literature about Hollywood has focused on the nightmarish aspects of a highly competitive culture in which career success determines one's sense of self and self worth, and pursuit of the dream becomes self-destructive for both individual and

society” (Edington 64). He further states, with regard to novels focused on Hollywood, “Characters become so enmeshed in pursuit of career success that they lose any sense of their own identities; the dream proves unachievable even for the successful; and moral disarray prevails, anticipating the fall of America” (Edington 64). We see that loss of identity in characters like Faye and Harry Greener in *The Day of the Locust* as they treat even the most serious of situations as a vaudeville act, and in Maria Wyeth in *Play it as it Lays* as she takes on the identity that others determine for her. We also see Monroe Stahr, with all his success, unable to achieve the happiness that American culture equates with such success.

For this thesis, I will focus on the three novels mentioned above drawing from the texts to explore the themes associated with the American Dream. Further, to help establish an idea of how the dream was once framed and to highlight the evolution of that dream I will use sources from American history with an emphasis on authors like Emerson and Thoreau. Theirs, and other versions of the dream will function as a lens to examine the shape the American Dream has taken and to show the negative influence Hollywood has had on the dream. For example, chapter two looks at how Joan Didion uses nature to represent that shift. Her narrative in *Play it as it Lays* portrays the Hollywood landscape as barren, destructive, and poisonous, and reveals Los Angeles in the 1960s and 70s as an other-directed society focused on wealth, fame, drugs, sexual promiscuity, and experiencing a spiritual famine, of sorts. The picture she paints is in opposition to Emerson and Thoreau’s lush, agrarian landscape of whose ideas also helped shape the American identity. Chapter three will look at Hollywood as presented by

Nathanael West in *The Day of the Locust*. West's version of Hollywood is based on the individual dreams of those who came to California to find a better life, only to find disappointment and bitter resentment. West uses biblical references to suggest an apocalyptic end to the film industry, Hollywood, and even, perhaps, the American Dream, as a result of the shift in American values. Finally, chapter four will study similar themes in *The Last Tycoon* by F. Scott Fitzgerald who suggests that men like those who fought for the establishment of an ideal based on hard work, self-reliance, virtue, and freedom, and where equality was a goal, no longer exist. Rather, success is measured not in happiness, but in wealth and power and, as James Truslow Adams said, "Just so long as wealth and power are the sole badges of our success, so long will ambitious men strive to achieve them" (Adams 415).

The conclusion of this thesis is that American literature focused on Hollywood suggests that the Hollywood Dream is a corrupted version of the American Dream and, therefore, the dream is not attainable. I further conclude that Hollywood's influence in a mass mediated society is far reaching and, as such, it is merely a microcosm of the larger culture of dreams based on the desire for instant gratification, instant success, and instant wealth that extends across the continent. Furthermore, American literature highlights the absence of God and spirituality in American culture and suggests a spiritual famine and an eventual apocalypse.

CHAPTER II

NATURE AND THE AMERICAN DREAM:
HOLLYWOOD AS A BARREN LANDSCAPE

The Shift

For Maria Wycliff, the protagonist of Joan Didion's 1970 novel *Play it as it Lays*, nature is the "pygmy rattler in the artichoke garden this morning" or "a coral snake... with two glands of neurotoxic poison" (Didion 1). Joan Didion begins her novel with images of dangerous snakes to suggest that a society like Hollywood, focused solely on material gain and lacking the values and morals that once contributed to the American Dream, is toxic and destructive, and that the promises of the dream posited by earlier generations, do not exist among the glitz and glitter of Southern California. Additionally, as snakes pursue Maria everywhere, "in her dreams, on the highway, even in the coiled shape of her food" (Geherin 68) we see that Maria recognizes the evil of her society, is adversely affected by her participation in it, is always in danger, but seems unable to break away. Certainly, Maria's mother warned her about the danger saying, "overturning a rock [is] apt to reveal a rattlesnake" (Didion 200). Hollywood, it seems, is a nightmarish place where one is always in danger of being bit.

K. Edington, author of, *The Hollywood Novel: American Dream, Apocalyptic Vision*, describes Hollywood as "a highly competitive culture in which career success determines one's sense of self and self worth, and pursuit of the dream becomes self-destructive for both individual and society" (64). We see that self-destruction in Maria's

life and, because she views life as a game of chance, she is unable to partake of promised benefits of the American dream such as prosperity through hard work, and the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”—values that are inherently part of American culture. Didion suggests that the dream has changed and focuses her claim in Los Angeles where she suggests that the pursuit of happiness has become a mass mediated pursuit of shallow pleasure resulting in a moral and spiritual death. To symbolize the destructive nature of this shift, the American landscape that Didion describes of barren desert and endless freeways, punctuated with an artificial Hollywood scene, offers nothing in the way of renewal or rebirth and proves, in fact, to be an obstruction rather than a source for the realization of dreams. Furthermore, Hollywood provides nothing wherewith Maria can take control of her own destiny. Thus, as Emerson describes it, she is left, “a phantom walking and working among phantoms... to find [her] solid universe growing dim and impalpable before [her] sense” (Emerson, *Essays*).

Emerson’s ethics of self-improvement influenced generations of Americans, including his friend Henry David Thoreau, who believed that a person’s destiny was self-determined. They present a striking contrast to Maria’s nihilism. Emerson and Thoreau lived in New England during a “peak of... agrarian splendor” (Foster xi); therefore, unlike Didion’s Los Angeles of freeways, the landscape was beautiful, and fruitful, “The shows of the day, the dewy morning, the rainbow, mountains, orchards in blossom, stars, moonlight, shadows in still water, and the like” (*Nature* III). While Maria viewed her landscape as barren, lifeless, and even destructive, Emerson and Thoreau were witnesses to the constant renewal of nature. They subscribed to the idea of man’s renewal *through*

nature with Emerson suggesting that nature repairs all and that it is through nature, and by taking up the productive elements of nature, that man is able to realize his highest potential. Thoreau condemned much of what humanity generally values, in particular the quest for material gain and the rush to California to find gold. He asks, “Of what significance the philosophy, or poetry, or religion of a world that will rush to the lottery of California gold-digging... to live by luck... without contributing any value to society?” (*The Writings* 266). Maria, it seems, is left with the gold seeking, but little else.

Perhaps Joan Didion is rephrasing Emerson’s question as Maria is caught up in the Hollywood lifestyle during the 1960s, a California still subscribing to an American Dream associated with westward expansion and the promise of “striking it rich” but devoid of the redeeming qualities that were once its foundation. Didion uses nature throughout *Play it as it Lays* to highlight the shift in American culture, specifically in southern California, from one of hope and rich with promise, to one driven by status, power, and greed. By focusing on the barren and even destructive nature in *Play it as it Lays*, Didion beautifully highlights the differences in how Thoreau and Emerson viewed society in contrast with the one she describes in the novel. Though Maria represents that part of American society that is desperately trying to reclaim some of the old Emersonian ideals, the place itself may no longer sustain them.

A Barren Landscape

The American Dream of Jefferson and the Founding Fathers was conceived out of a desire for freedom from tyranny, and freedom to achieve success, without class boundaries, and by the sweat of one’s brow with the labor of one’s own hands, in a

landscape rich with life and abundant in hope. It was rich, virgin soil and the dreams were as new as was the land to those who sought after them. While the American Dream means something different for everyone, generally, it has long held promises of a better life for all those willing to work for it. Those who came to the New World with dreams of freedom experienced a sort of rebirth and a chance for a new life; but, for Maria in 1960s Los Angeles, those promises are empty, and, consequently, her life spirals to a point of despair. Her career is going nowhere, her marriage is failing, and her daughter is institutionalized. To further complicate things, she is pregnant, presumably with her lover's baby, and is forced by her husband to have the baby aborted; thus, just like her career and marriage, her baby's life is cut short and never develops to its full potential. In addition, she feels she has no control over her own life, because, as her father taught her, "life itself [is] a crap game" (200); therefore, she must rely on luck versus a self-determined destiny.

In the midst of her despair, Maria attempts to find some kind of rhythm or purpose to life by participating in a ritual, of sorts. The summer after her husband left, she would get up every morning and drive the freeway. She had no destination, except the freeway. This ritual temporarily gave her control and "a greater sense of purpose than she had felt in some time" (13). In his article, "Nothingness And Beyond: Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*," David Geherin suggests that "the automobile becomes an appropriate symbol of her escape; self-contained and womb-like... Ironically, the only source of the rhythm of life is mechanical; nature, the natural source of natural rhythms, is depicted as polluted, sterile, and lifeless" (64). As Maria drives she is seeking for some kind of

fulfillment that both Emerson and Thoreau suggested could be found in nature. Instead, there are, “great pilings, the Cyclone fencing, the deadly oleander, the luminous signs” (15). The landscape that Maria sees, lacking God, spirituality, and even life, does not contain the same things that Emerson and Thoreau saw in theirs; therefore, Didion suggests that southern California doesn’t offer the same promises that a new America did, or, if those opportunities are there, Maria is blinded by the dreams of her day that are founded in the pursuit of wealth rather than the pursuit of happiness. As a result, Maria keeps driving in search of some kind of order or reason that could offer her peace.

Lovein suggests, “In this moment, Maria is the embodiment of what the Existentialists referred to as the ‘other-directed personality.’ If indeed there is a plan, Maria does not know or care what it is. For her the freeways are a surrender, a way of allowing someone else to make her decisions for her” (27). It is evident that Maria and most everyone around her is, in fact, influenced by mass culture like, “the women with the silk Pucci shirts and periodically tightened eye lines” and “BZ and the masseur, their bodies gleaming, unlined, as if they had an arrangement with mortality” (45) and also Carter who dropped his friendship with Sidney Loomis because the show Sidney had been writing was “cancelled in mid-season and he did not pick up another” (51). However, I would suggest that Maria’s ritual, and even her despondency, were actually attempts to escape from the greed, drugs, debauchery, and sexual promiscuity that pervaded her world, rather than a surrender as Lovein suggests. Driving the freeway was her way of trying to achieve autonomy, a characteristic valued by the original dreamers of the American Dream. And because spatial mobility has long been associated with

social mobility in conceptions of westward expansion and the American dream, Maria thinks she can “move” her way out of her situation. The freeway was her escape plan—a plan that she carried out every morning at ten o’clock. It represented freedom where Maria, as Lovein contradicts himself in saying, “could go anywhere, be anyone, and you didn’t need other people to do it. In fact, other people only got in your way” (28). For Maria, it was one area where she felt like she was in control of her life.

In her ritual, Maria seems to be taking up the ideals that Emerson and Thoreau put forth, wherein individuality and freedom were valued; moreover, Maria’s ritual is reminiscent of Thoreau’s in *Walden* when he said, “I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise and one of the best things which I did. They say that characters were engraven on the bathing tub of King Tchingthang to this effect, ‘Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again’” (*Walden – Where I Lived*). The ritual of bathing in Walden Pond is like a daily baptism, which symbolizes rebirth and also suggests that Nature has restorative elements. For him nature is nurturing and spiritual and, as part of that renewal, there is an awakening to that which Thoreau calls a “higher life”, which meant a life “of equal simplicity and... innocence, with Nature herself” (*Walden – Where I Lived*).

Maria’s world full of vipers, however, is anything but innocent and simple; thus, the rhythm of her ritual gave her some sense of order and control that she couldn’t find elsewhere, or so she believed; therefore,

Again and again she returned to an intricate stretch just south of the interchange where successful passage from the Hollywood onto the Harbor required a diagonal move across four lanes of traffic. On the afternoon she finally did it

without once braking or once losing the beat on the radio she was exhilarated, and that night slept dreamlessly. (16)

When Maria ended up somewhere unplanned, where “the freeway ran out,” “she would keep in careful control, portage skillfully back, feel for the first time the heavy weight of the becalmed car beneath her and try to keep her eyes on the mainstream” (17). Next to her on the seat she kept a hard-boiled egg so she wouldn’t have to stop for food and ruin the rhythm of her drive: “She could shell and eat a hard-boiled egg at seventy miles an hour” (Didion 17). At least here, she had some sense of control and self-responsibility. However, while eggs represent life, birth, and renewal, Maria’s egg cannot reach its full potential and neither can the baby she aborted, or her marriage to Carter. Due to a brain disorder, even her living child is unable to develop to her full potential. Maria is haunted by these truths, as well as by the untimely death of her mother and the mysterious events surrounding it. In these things she feels she has no control, and so she drives. Eventually, however, she finds herself in Baker, only sixty miles from where Carter is shooting his latest film, and she considers calling him and going to see him. The scenario between them that plays out in her head turns ugly and she realizes she has lost control as “the rhythm was lost” and “she did not know what she was doing in Baker” (30). She then realizes that driving isn’t the answer and she ends her ritual.

She again loses control when she drinks too much at a party and ends up going home with Helene and BZ. The text suggests a violent sexual encounter between the three of them that she cannot completely recall. Following that incident, she goes to Vegas looking for her godfather in order to hopefully find some kind of connection to who she is apart from her current life. She is unsuccessful, and “by the end of a week she

was thinking constantly about where her body stopped and the air began, about the exact point in space and time that was the difference between *Maria* and *other*. She had the sense that if she could get that in her mind and hold it for even one micro-second she would have what she had come to get” (172). Again, we see her searching for the freedom that she longs for—the backbone of the dream as Thoreau and many of the writers of his time saw it, wherein self-government, morality, and independence were valued. “What she had come to get” was her American dream—one of simplicity, family and happiness, wherein she is independently herself, not the person that the *other* sees.

Thoreau proposes that his readers look to nature for those ideals that Maria seeks saying, “Let us first be as simple and well as Nature ourselves, dispel the clouds which hang over our own brows, and take up a little life into our pores” (*Walden - Economy*). Likewise, for Emerson nature was very spiritual, and in nature he saw science and God as one saying, “In the woods we return to reason and faith. There I feel like nothing can befall me in life... that nature cannot repair. Standing on bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air – and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes” (*Nature*). For both Emerson and Thoreau, nature is the vehicle by which man’s divinity can be established. Didion’s nature aptly signifies the emptiness of Hollywood, and American life in general and so when Maria looks to nature for the things Thoreau describes, she is unable to find them. For example, in a passage where “She drove to the beach, but there was oil scum on the sand and a red tide in the flaccid surf and mounds of kelp at the waterline. The kelp hummed with flies. The water lapped warm, forceless” (Didion 65), we see that even the ever-renewing ocean has become a polluted cesspool.

In the weeks on the desert with Carter, and leading up to BZ's suicide, Maria repeatedly stares at the dry wash outside her motel room, even noticing how "in the late afternoon light... its striations and shifting grains seemed to her a model of the earth and the moon" (203). When BZ tells her Carter is sleeping with Helene, rather than responding as one might expect, she says nothing, but decides "she will borrow a camera and station it on the dry wash for twenty-four hours" (204) to record the changes in the light. Her study of the light on the wash is much like how Thoreau observed nature, but his observations included things like "a slight and graceful hawk...soaring" (*Walden*). Like the American Dream, Maria's dry wash once held life-giving water, and has the potential to do so again, but is now desolate. Furthermore, if morality, justice, spirituality and truth are elements that are crucial to human development and the realization of one's potential and value in society, Didion proposes that those things cannot be found in Los Angeles; therefore, Maria cannot be renewed or repaired as Thoreau suggests.

Looking at the text from an existential point of view, we see that Maria exhibits the type of irresponsible behavior indicative of what Sartre calls "bad faith." For example, initially when the bell-hop at the Sands hotel questions her about whether she is alone or not, she tells him her husband is meeting her, and to "Go away." (166). But, when the desk clerk denies her request for directions to an opening in "Lenny's suite" and tells her to "Freelance somewhere else," and when the boy from room service suggests, "I could make an introduction," (174) (both assuming she is a prostitute) she agrees to a meeting. In this example, and others like it, she allows others to determine her identity and doesn't seem to recognize that she is free to make her own choices. For

example, “She did not decide to stay in Vegas: she only failed to leave” (170). Similarly, when asked by the woman in the desert if she had ever made a decision Maria replies, “No, I never did that” (201). Rather, Maria’s decisions have always been made by someone else—her parents who made her go to New York even though she told them, “I don’t want to go back” (87); and Carter who made all the decisions regarding her career, put her daughter in an institution, and forced her to get an abortion even though she said, “I’m not sure I want to do that” (54); and the other men in her life who used even though she told them “no” and “shook her head” when they insisted on sex (153). In all of these situations, although she mildly resists, she never seems to know what she really wants; therefore, she lives an inauthentic life in a culture of inauthenticity. Consequently, she did not exist distinct from the other people around her, and her anxiety was directly related to that fact.

Soren Kierkegaard, who is widely considered to be the father of existentialism stated, “What matters is to find a purpose, to see what it really is that God wills that I shall do; the crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die” (Kierkegaard 35). In addition, Geherin acknowledges that Maria’s condition; her “confrontation with the void” as he describes it, is directly related to her existence in the modern world, one that lacks the purpose and the truth that Kierkegaard claims is crucial. Moreover, Didion’s focus on Nothingness as discussed by Sartre, Camus and the like, asserts that Maria’s angst and dread are a product of the destructive culture in which she lives. Further, while Geherin suggests that Hollywood is merely a setting, inconsequential, he also aptly describes Maria’s world as, “bleak,

sterile, and hostile – where houses fall into canyons, where men seeking God are killed by rattlesnakes, where towns are replaced by missile ranges... a nightmarish burning world where fire and destruction always threaten... a world void of natural beauty” (74). Emerson tells us, “The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty, is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye” (Emerson - *Nature*). As such, the harsh landscape that Maria identifies symbolizes a society being destroyed by greed, lust, decadence that pushes Maria to near destruction as well. Likewise, the imagery of the desert symbolizes the aridity of the spiritual climate of southern California. Consequently, I suggest that Hollywood isn’t just a setting for Didion, but a representation of a failed American Dream disassociated with God and nature, and driven by desire in unhealthy proportions.

The Dream

In spite of Maria’s involvement in the film industry of Los Angeles, and the prevailing climate of movie premiers, booze, and meaningless sex, her idea of the American Dream more closely resembles Thoreau’s where nature is nurturing and life is simple. She says:

EVERY NIGHT she named to herself what she must do: she must ask Les Goodwin to come keep her from peril. Calmed, she would fall asleep pretending that even then she lay with him in a house by the sea. The house was like none she had ever seen but she thought of it so often that she knew even where the linens were kept, the plates, knew how the wild grass ran down to the beach and where the rocks made tidal pools. Every morning in that house she would make the bed with fresh sheets. Every day in that house she would cook while Kate did her lessons. Kate would sit in a shaft of sunlight, her head bent over a pine table, and later when the tide ran out they would gather mussels together, Kate and Maria, and still later all three of them would sit down together at the big pine table and Maria would light a kerosene lamp and they would eat the mussels and

drink a bottle of cold white wine and after a while it would be time to lie down again, on the clean white sheets. In the story Maria told herself at three or four in the morning there were only three people and none of them had histories, only the man and the woman and the child and, in the lamplight, the opalescent mussel shells. (114)

In her dream, there are no films, no abortions, no institutions, no drugs, no snakes, no destruction, and nature is wild grass, sunshine, and tidal pools. However, what she envisions is in contrast with her reality where, “all around the pretty women were putting on perfume and enameled bracelets and kissing the pretty children goodnight” all the while an actress is, “admitted to UCLA Neuropsychiatric with her wrists cut” (22). Her reality is that Les Goodwin is married to someone else, Kate is institutionalized, and Hollywood is a highly competitive society where a person’s value is determined by money and success. Furthermore, since she lives life *as is*, hoping, as her father did, that things will get better with the next deal, she has no control of her destiny. That lack of control haunts her at every turn because even though she is unhappy, she doesn’t make any decisions that will repair her life. Therefore, Maria is in a perpetual state of indecision and depression, never “contributing any value to society.”

Emerson and Thoreau would each refute the idea that one’s destiny is left completely to chance. Thoreau eloquently submits that one has the ability to determine his/her own fate. He says:

As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God... and draws, at his need, inexhaustible power. Who can set bounds to the possibility of man? Once inhale the upper air, being admitted to behold the absolute natures of justice and truth, and we learn that man has access to the entire mind of the creator is himself the creator in finite. This view, which admonishes me where the sources of wisdom and power lie, and points to virtue as to “The golden key which opens the palace of eternity,” carries upon its face the highest certificate of truth,

because it animates me to create my own world through the purification of my soul. (Thoreau)

Thoreau's ideals are focused on the divinity of man's destiny and one's ability to be as a god if he/she is able to recognize and tap into the power that is available to him/her.

Thoreau is not speaking of material success, but of the individual development of the soul. Emerson too recognizes the individual's potential and posits that what God has created is for the purpose of achieving that potential. For example, he says, "We are taught by great actions that the universe is the property of every individual in it. Every rational creature has all nature for his dowry and estate. It is his, if he will" (Emerson *Nature*). In Emerson and Thoreau's models, each person is responsible for his or her own development and their tools are those that God has placed in nature on their behalf. In Thoreau's journals he offers an answer to the greed prevalent in the Maria's society. He tells us that in nature we can find real value that can be used as a standard by which to measure our conventional evaluations, which in Maria's society seem based on wealth, status, and success. For example, "it's not its intrinsic beauty or value but its... arbitrarily attached value that distinguishes gold" (*The Writings* 637). Thoreau talks in length about his experiences planting seeds and discusses the fruits of his labors to suggest, once again, that therein is where true value lies, and that we reap the rewards of our individual effort.

A State of Nothingness

In Maria's world, however, "Nothing applies" (2). She doesn't feel that she has any control over her destiny, and in her current state of depression and hopelessness,

she doesn't value anything or anyone except her daughter. Like Thoreau suggests, however, she recognizes that Kate is like those seeds, and that in order to have Kate, she must put forth that effort to realize the fruits of her labor. As Rhodes explains it, "her love of Kate remains her one powerful motive, one that requires no defense and knows no boundaries" (Rhodes 134). When she is in the hospital, she attempts to give agreeable answers to the doctor even though she believes that there are no answers. She says, "Why bother, you might ask. I bother for Kate. What I play for here is Kate. Carter put Kate in there and I am going to get her out" (Didion 2).

Because she knows that Kate can offer her fulfillment that cannot be found in other areas of her life, the stark contrast between her dedication to Kate and her disconnect with everyone else is striking. She tells Carter and her friends, "I don't like any of you. You are all making me sick" (Didion 190). She is tired of the lifestyle and lashes out at those who share it with her because she realizes that it is responsible for her pain; still, she doesn't know how to change the course of her destiny. In fact, she slips further into the void with careless and dangerous sexual encounters and drug abuse. Chabot describes her world as one where "truth and concern have been displaced by pleasure as the norm for discourse" (Chabot 55). Then, in a society driven by pleasure, "desire tends to require elaboration if it is to be satisfied; its old objects no longer serve, and gratification slides into boredom. New arrangements must constantly be sought; sex becomes a group activity with new players in new positions, amplified, as in BZ's menagerie, by sadism and voyeurism" (Chabot 55). But, just as California is the end of the line for westward expansion, there is a point where an avaricious desire can no longer

be satisfied. Chabot suggests that BZ is emblematic of such a society where social values have been narrowed to only include the receipt of pleasure. As such, BZ preferred suicide to ennui, because nothing remained that could redeem his tireless days (55).

For Maria, not only was the future bleak with no apparent worthwhile prospects in her career, but she had also experienced some traumatizing events that could lead her to the same conclusion as BZ. Neither her social world, nor her natural world offer her any answers, and so she can find nothing to ease her pain. When Carter asks her what she wants, she responds with “Nothing” (205). When he asks her what she is feeling, she says “Nothing” (205), and she tells BZ that “nothing matters” (204). This state of nothingness is a result of her inability or unwillingness to take responsibility for her choices, and ultimately the one thing that represents the good in her world has been taken from her. In fact, numerous times throughout the story she feels nothing, says nothing, or nothing is her answer because disassociation offers her a kind of self-defense. If nothing matters, how can anything hurt her? Still, when it comes to Kate, she is very different. She loves Kate and is passionate and even obsessed with Kate’s well being and with getting her out of the institution where Carter put her. Her visits to Kate are so frequent that the staff at the institution has started to complain and have asked her to only come for the scheduled visits. As she is leaving from one of her visits to Kate, “on the way to the parking lot she twice invented pretexts to run back, kiss Kate’s small fat hands, tell her to be good” (72). When she can’t be with Kate she finds some comfort in Kate’s things. She “clutched Kate’s baby pillow to her chest to fight off a wave of dread”

(3). Maria feels great sadness in her separation from Kate to the point where nothing applies for her anymore.

Moreover, that sadness is intensified by the abortion. Although the pregnancy is unwanted, she is initially repelled by the idea of an abortion. However, once again she feels she has no choice as Carter threatens to take Kate away if she doesn't have the abortion. Geherin points out, "her guilt, her complicity in the suffering of the innocents which she detests, only serves to strengthen her growing awareness of... the irrationality and absurdity of life" (70). That guilt, "moral and psychological," causes her so much anguish she is haunted in her dreams by children on their way to the gas chamber and tormented by tragic stories of the innocents that leapt out at her from the pages of the newspaper:

The four-year-olds in the abandoned refrigerator, the tea party with Purex, the infant in the driveway, rattlesnake in the playpen, the peril, unspeakable peril, in the everyday. She grew faint as the processions swept before her, the children alive when last scolded, dead when next seen, the children in the locked car burning, the little faces, helpless screams. (Didion 100)

She notes that in each of these stories "the mothers were always reported to be under sedation" and because she feels powerless in saving any of these children, let alone her own, she also "thought of herself as under sedation." Her sadness is emphasized when she breaks into uncontrollable sobs on the due date of her aborted baby. All that was contributing to her sadness and feeling of nothingness came together at once, and:

She cried for her mother and she cried for Kate and she cried because something had just come through to her... she had deliberately not counted the months but she must have been counting them unawares, must have been keeping a relentless count somewhere, because this was the day, the day the baby would have been born. (Didion 141)

Thoreau says, “a seed, which is a plant or tree in embryo, which has the principle of growth, of life, in it... is more important... than the diamond of Kohinoor” (*The Writings* 334); then, too, the development of human potential is like the ripening of a seed, and the value of the human soul is limitless. Furthermore, while birth usually represents life and renewal, and there is something so powerful, spiritual, and fulfilling in motherhood, Maria has been robbed of those things. Now she sees the “dead still center of the world, the quintessential intersection of nothing” (Didion 67), and upon BZ’s suicide, her breakdown is realized and she is admitted to the hospital.

In Maria’s desperate search for meaning, Geherin suggests, “she soon discovers she can find no relationship between cause and effect, no meaningful explanation for the way things are” (71). In an attempt to make sense of it all, she contemplates God. She tells Carter, “about the man at the trailer camp who told his wife he was going out for a walk in order to talk to God,” was bitten by a rattlesnake, and died (77). She asks Carter, “I mean do you think God answered? Or don’t you?” (204). But Carter did not answer her; instead, he just “walked out of the room” (204). Here we see that she wants to believe that life is not meaningless. Emerson posits that God is everywhere in the landscape saying, “Is not the landscape, every glimpse of which hath a grandeur, a face of him?” (*Nature* Ch. 7), but even in her attempt at spirituality, the nature she experiences is the ominous snake. Religion seems to lead to the same dead end as the freeway did because in Maria’s secularized world, God is dead. She then reaches to her past for comfort and meaning, but her mother and father are dead as well, and her home has become a missile testing ground. Silver Wells no longer exists and so, it seems,

neither does her past; thus, her foundation is like that of the house that fell into the Tujunga wash and she finds herself back to a state of nothingness.

Lost Identity

Frequent incidences of Maria's mistaken identity throughout the novel confirm that because of her role in a mass-mediated society, her dysfunctional marriage, and her other-directed personality, Maria doesn't have a clear identity. Chip Rhodes, author of *The Hollywood Novel: Gender and Lacanian Tragedy in Joan Didion's Play it as it Lays*, points to Maria's lack of self, saying, "When Maria is objectified for her beauty, her value belongs entirely to her husband: 'The look he gave Maria was dutifully charged with sexual appreciation, meant not for Maria herself, but for Carter Lang's wife'" (Rhodes 138). When BZ and Carter discuss the film, *Angel Beach*, they talk to each other about Maria as if she isn't even in the room. Maria likes the film because she doesn't recognize the girl on the screen as herself. Actually, she admired the fact that "the girl on the screen seemed to have a definite knack for controlling her own destiny" (20), something that Maria *didn't* have a knack for. Similarly, "she studied an old issue of Vogue... her attention fixed particularly on the wife of an Italian industrialist. The Italian seemed to find a great deal of purpose in her life, seemed to make decisions and stick by them, and Maria studied the photographs as if a key might be found among them" (75). Maria recognizes in both of these examples the qualities that she seeks; qualities that she lacks. She has no identity of her own separate from her role as actress or Carter's wife; therefore, she is often mistaken for someone she's not; "In each case, she has an identity bestowed upon her through recognition over which she has no control" (Rhodes 139). The woman at

the supermarket to whom she shows compassion calls her a “whore,” the woman at the post office believes she is a foster mother seeking a cut of some insurance money; the people at the hotel, bellhops, entertainers, etc. think she is a prostitute; and the boy at the hot springs is sure she is the wife of a star.

James Truslow Adams described the American dream as, “a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (Adams 404). Those ideologies are a part of our nation’s identity. However, when Maria leaves a party with the actor Johnny Waters, he mistakenly calls her Myra, mistreats her, and later as an excuse for that mistreatment he says, “You never told me who you were” (62), inferring that position does matter in how one is viewed (and treated) by others. He too, like the lady in the grocery store or the bellhops at the hotel, mistook her for someone of a lower social standing and then supposed that it was okay to abuse her based on that belief. In this respect, the dream fails Maria when she is not valued and respected as a human being, aside from whom she is or is not in society. Johnny Waters’ assumption about Maria’s human worth is material for another discussion that is not the focus of this thesis, but we can see her lack of self-worth reflected in her actions of bad faith, as well as in the way she is perceived by others.

We can also see that the American ideal of equality is elusive in a society where people, like material things, are commodities. In addition to Maria’s being bought and sold as a commodity, BZ and Helene allow themselves to be bought by BZ’s mother

and live in a artificial marriage to cover up BZ's homosexuality. Maria asks BZ, "Don't you ever get tired of doing favors for people" to which BZ replies, "You don't know how tired" (38), yet he continues to do it. Both he and Helene are miserable with their marriage, as well as with their artificial world. Helene tells Maria, "It's all shit" (129), and BZ tells her, "Someday you'll wake up and you won't feel like playing anymore" (214) right before his overdose.

In desperation Maria trying to find herself—is searching for a purpose in her life like the Italian woman seemed to have. She also desires to be in control of her own destiny like the character she played in the film. Maria wants to make decisions for her life, like the woman in the desert who sweeps the sand away only to have it blow back because therein is a glimpse at some meaning, even if it is small, in the effort. The woman could, metaphorically, watch the sand bury her just like Maria is letting the circumstances of her life destroy her, but she doesn't. She takes action and steadily keeps the sand at bay.

The Answer

Emerson and Thoreau each created similar models by which one could be redeemed simply by the development of the essential self through nature; that by so doing, one could be at peace, be closer to God, and know his/her purpose. Individual effort is valued above luck or chance, and according to Emerson, "The Supreme Being does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of a tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old" (*Nature* VII). He saw the development of man as a combination of the spirit and nature. Emerson also equated nature with freedom saying, "Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us"

(*Nature* VI). With the frequent representations of a barren landscape, Didion clearly suggests Los Angeles is a city of inauthenticity and that, as such, “Maria lacks the fundamental tools to successfully navigate the existentially perilous Los Angeles” (Lovein 100). Furthermore, Didion uses nature to represent the contrast between the values of Emerson and Thoreau’s time to now to exemplify the change in American culture from one focused on freedom, responsibility, and self-direction, to one of mass-mediated desires. In Maria’s society, occasionally there are flowers, but they are “a bowl of dead roses,” “a wilted gardenia,” dirty tulips on Park Avenue, or “the deadly oleander.” As for trees, “there were two trees in the town, two cottonwoods in the dry riverbed, but one was dead” (188). The two trees, like BZ and Maria are not receiving the living water that they need and, like BZ, one is dead. While Emerson describes the river as “a perpetual gala” (*Nature* III), in Maria’s world the river is described as a dry riverbed, or the freeway as a river, or the East River carrying fetuses “translucent as jellyfish, floating past the big sewage outfalls with the orange peels” (116). Maria fears the destructive elements of nature as there are many references to fires, earthquakes, floods, and a house sliding “into the Tujunga Wash” (103). Then there are the snakes, which pervade her dreams and seem to lurk everywhere waiting to strike. She tells of a couple on their honeymoon “found dead in their Scout camper near Boca Raton, a coral snake still coiled in the thermal blanket” (3), a news story of a “rattlesnake in the playpen” (100), and the man who was bitten by a rattlesnake (77). The nature Maria knows in the artificial world where she lives is destructive, tragic, and dangerous, killing all that gives life meaning like marriages, and babies, families, relationships with God,

and homes. Even her mother was torn apart by coyotes. In this world God is dead, and nature and the landscape that Emerson and Thoreau describe as part of their ideal don't exist.

The California myth, a mixture of the remnants of the gold rush and westward expansion combined with Hollywood, romanticizes an idyllic setting of beaches, sun, and new beginnings, where anyone can strike it rich or become a star. For Maria, that dream became a nightmare; thus, for her nature was empty. In the end, she says she knows the answer, and that it is "nothing." For some reason that offers her some peace and for the first time we see her making plans. She says:

Now that I have the answer, my plans for the future are these:
 (1) get Kate, (2) live with Kate alone (3) do some canning. Damson plums, apricot preserves. Sweet India relish and pickled peaches. Apple chutney. Summer squash succotash. There might even be a ready market for such canning: you will note that after everything I remain Harry and Francine Wyeth's daughter and Benny Austin's godchild. For all I know they knew the answer too, and pretended they didn't. You call it as you see it, and stay in the action. (Didion 210)

Here we see Maria reinventing her American Dream as her strength overcomes her dread. Lovein submits that "Camus's program for sublimating the angst that naturally accompanied the realization of one's mortality, and the absurdity that it implied, was metaphysical rebellion" (130), which, as a result of BZ's death, seems to be Maria's path. She is rejecting the cultural ideals and the people that have thus far controlled her and, while the reader doesn't know the extent of Maria's condition, it seems that in her attempt at self-discovery she is finally able to find a purpose. For example, she decides to take control of her own destiny by making plans for her daughter and herself, something we have never seen her do before. Furthermore, no longer does she allow circumstance to

dictate her fate (at least as much as she can in her situation). Additionally, where she couldn't see beauty or redemption in nature before, now she is canning fruit and, she "concentrate[s] on the way light... strike[s] filled Mason jars on a kitchen windowsill" (84). Where the natural elements around her used to cause her distress, now she basks in the sunlight, listening to the sea and watching a hummingbird. Whereas she seems to be subscribing to ideals reminiscent of Emerson and Thoreau's, she also seems to be turning away from the belief that life is a crap game when she refrains from looking at the coins that she tosses in the water (84). Furthermore, we see that she has discovered an identity that she is comfortable clinging to as "Harry and Francine Wyeth's daughter and Benny Austin's godchild" (210) that is not her identity as an actress, prostitute, porn star, or as a director's wife, but separate from those things that have been so destructive to her soul. So, what brings about this change in Maria? Has she finally figured out how to make the American dream, and all that it represents, work for her? I would suggest that she has not; rather, I suggest that she has simply figured out how to "play it as it lays" and work with the hand she has been dealt. Didion suggests that there is no other ideology that can save Maria in a culture devoid of the morals and values that originally framed the American Dream, a dream that in Maria's world no longer applies. In a society based on material gain versus individual development, she is playing a game wherein the winner gets Kate, and she realizes that in order for her to win in this highly competitive society of which she is a part, she must cling to that one thing that gives life meaning. She claims that she knows what "nothing" means, and, theoretically, with the absence of God, nothingness prevails, but, as Victor Hugo wrote in *Les Miserables*:

To sum up, no path is left open for thought by a philosophy that makes everything come to but one conclusion, the monosyllable 'no.' To 'no' there is but one reply; 'yes.' Nihilism has no scope. There is no nothing. Zero does not exist. Everything is something. Nothing is nothing. Man lives by affirmation even more than he does by bread. (Hugo, pt. 2, bk. 7, ch. 6)

Perhaps, because she cannot find the happiness she seeks in a culture focused on material gain and unmediated desire, Maria has resigned herself to a nihilistic viewpoint where indeed, as Sartre suggested, she believes that her existence is meaningless. Consequently, since it is intolerable to stop living or to continue living, perhaps she decides that she might as well do the latter for Kate. On the other hand, I assert that she realizes that it is the Hollywood lifestyle that can offer her "nothing," and so she determines to disassociate herself from that destructive element, refusing to talk to Carter or Helene, and focusing her attentions on getting Kate. Again, she attempts to take up the ethics of Emerson who said:

Live no longer to the expectation of these deceived and deceiving people with whom we converse. Say to them, O father, O mother, O wife, O brother, O friend, I have lived with you after appearances hitherto. Henceforward I am the truth's. Be it known unto you that henceforward I obey no law less than the eternal law. I will have no covenants but proximities. I shall endeavor to nourish my parents, to support my family, to be the chaste husband of one wife,--but these relations I must fill after a new and unprecedented way. I appeal from your customs. I must be myself. I cannot break myself any longer for you, or you. If you can love me for what I am, we shall be the happier. If you cannot, I will still seek to deserve that you should. (Emerson – *Self Reliance*)

Either way, Maria is finally making decisions and, as Kierkegaard suggested, found a truth that she is willing to live and die for, and that truth is that while she may not be able to find meaning in her society, she can find meaning in her love of Kate.

CHAPTER III

HOLLYWOOD – THE AMERICAN

DREAM GONE AWRY

A New Eden

If Emerson and Thoreau believed in man's renewal through nature and of the promise of the American Dream, in contrast, Nathanael West used the destructive side of nature as a metaphor for the potentially deceptive attraction of that dream. *The Day of the Locust*, by Nathaniel West, takes place during the heyday of the big movie studio era known as Hollywood's Golden Age, when Americans, caught up in the American Dream, romanticized the west, the film industry, and the ascribed opportunities for success and stardom. After all, California was what dreams were made of. Hollywood, with its 320 days of sunshine, its sandy beaches, and lush citrus groves, stood for prosperity, wealth, fame, and leisure, all within the grasp of whomever came to bask in the glitz and glitter. Its own rapid transformation from rural farming community to the center of the filming industry, within a few short years, while much of the world was experiencing an economic depression, was symbolic, and held a message of promise for those who believed in the American Dream. Captain John Smith expressed those American ideals and the supposed promise of a "New Eden" saying:

So freely hath God and his Majesty bestowed those blessings on them that will attempt to obtain them, as here every man may be master and owner of his labor and land, or the greatest part, in a small time. If he have nothing but his hands, he may set up this trade and by industry quickly grow rich, spending but half that time well which in England we abuse in idleness, worse or as ill. (Smith 28)

From Smith's statement we see that for many the American Dream meant blessings from God, riches even, but it had conditions – desire, hard work, and virtuous intentions. It seemed that Hollywood might be the New Eden with its glittery expanse. It also seemed immune to the economic poverty that the rest of the country was experiencing; however, while Hollywood was the epitome of success, it was experiencing a spiritual poverty, which, if left unchecked, could ultimately destroy it. As such, West's novel suggests destruction of biblical proportions for a society and an industry fixated on material wealth, fortune, and success, all the while lacking the God that "so freely... bestowed those blessings on them" (28). His critique of Hollywood, and of western society in general, of which Hollywood is merely a microcosm, is focused on the manipulation of mass society by the Hollywood dream factory. Where spiritual faith once offered hope during times of struggle, and struggle represented growth and refinement as a part of some greater plan, Hollywood and the American film industry now promised relief from those struggles in a sparkling, utopian, albeit make-believe, society. As such, Hollywood represented a new religion to fulfill the longings of the downtrodden. The apocalyptic end suggests that this shift has left society spiritually famished.

West's critique somewhat resembles that of theorists like Horkheimer and Adorno, who criticized the culture industry in works such as "The Culture Industry, Enlightenment as Mass Deception." According to Douglas Kellner, these theorists, along with others associated with the Frankfurt School, called attention to "the industrialization and commercialization of culture under capitalist relations of production" and believed that popular culture promoted the interests of American capitalism and commodified

American values and lifestyles (1). To them, capitalism and mass culture were forms of social domination. Some of their criticism was aimed at The Enlightenment, which rejected tradition and faith for reason and science. We see much of the same in *Locust*, but while I do believe West comments on mass mediated culture, his message is less political. Rather, in *Locust* we see increased corruption and moral decay in a culture focused on and motivated by unrestrained desire, versus an American dream founded on faith, freedom, and religion. Among other things, West uses art in *Locust* as a symbol of that moral decay, but also to suggest a lack of creativity in a mass-produced society. And while The Enlightenment represented revolutionary thought, there is no revolution in *Locust*; rather, there is an ineffectual and violent uprising that is born out of disillusionment and disappointment due to a spiritual poverty. Matthew Roberts states, “*Locust* marks the point at which the revolutionary avant-garde confronts the spectre of its own impossibility in the Hollywood dream factory of the late 1930s, as a newly perfected and fully consolidated apparatus of mass-mediated desire” (63). Roberts suggests “For West... Hollywood signified not the apotheosis but the final impasse of his own critical-aesthetic tradition: for where was the possibility of mobilizing revolutionary desire when all desires, all social aspirations of whatever type or intensity could be instantly reprocessed as the empty commodities of the Dream Factory?” (Roberts 63). I agree with Roberts’ assertion that Hollywood symbolized the cultural implications of mass media for the avante-garde, and that West comments on the political significance of that confrontation, but, in my opinion, West’s critique is more about the spiritual implications. *Locust* is about dreams and what Roberts doesn’t address is Hollywood as a

symbol of how American dreams have changed as a result of the culture industry. West suggests not just the destruction of a movement or era, but of societal ideals and morals, of the individual, and of the American Dream.

That destruction is ever present in West's depiction of Hollywood. Unlike the idyllic model the American dream is supposed to embody, the proverbial "city on a hill," West's model represents an apocalypse with dominant themes of the outsider, violence, and destruction all resulting from greed, decadence, and from the counterfeit lifestyles of those seeking the success of Hollywood—the American ideal gone awry. This chapter will deal with those themes and ideas, as well as uncover the symbolism, rich imagery and, in particular, the significance of the biblical allusions that West uses to portray the dichotomy of the American Dream—an archetype based on the idea "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," and American reality, based on consumerism, greed, lust, and unrealistic expectations of wealth and fame, wholly missing God.

The Prophet

West's main character, Tod Hackett, represents that incongruence as he is a Yale-trained artist employed as a Hollywood set designer who fixates his art on Hollywood and the maladaptive people who "had come to California to die" (West 3). Rather than "strike it rich" as California and the West have long symbolized, these people have seen nothing but disappointment and disillusionment. Since the Louisiana Purchase in 1805 and the California gold rush beginning in 1848, Americans have dreamed of

prosperity and wealth in the West. The birth of Hollywood only renewed that dream. But instead of painting the stars, the exemplifications (at least outwardly) of the Hollywood ideal, Tod is drawn to the people who are of the underbelly of Hollywood—the outsiders, the ones who weren't successful in achieving the prosperity that Hollywood promised. K Edington discusses those outsiders and the reason for their disillusionment. He claims that their “visions have been inflamed by the sensationalism of the Hollywood film they grew up viewing. But reality fails to meet the false expectations these average Americans have of the Promised Land” (66). Tragically, these outsiders, “their eyes filled with hatred,” represent lives that have been destroyed by the dream. These are the ones that Tod “felt he must paint” (West 3). Their destructive and grotesque lives parallel the works of Goya and Daumier, artists “who satirized man's foibles, corruptions and diseases, with pens and brushes dipped in acid” (Pisk 65), and from whom Tod draws his inspiration.

By choosing to associate with, study, and paint these societal outcasts, because of “his race, training and heritage” (West 3) Tod is an outsider as well. He assumes that he is above them, but already we see the effect Hollywood is having on him. Meyer suggests that the “the Italian paintings show Tod's increasingly dark vision as he changes from naive and idealistic to bitter and disillusioned” (54). He also suggests that the succession of paintings parallel Tod's increased, “fury with Faye, the studio, religion, and the city he would like to burn to cinders” (54). Alternately, I would argue that if indeed it is fury that Tod is feeling, it is not with Faye, or the studio, or religion; rather, it is frustration born out of the unrealized dreams of the people he has met, as well as his

own unrealized dreams. To further the biblical theme, Tod has a prophetic role and from his vantage point he sees an inevitable uprising. The narrative style also supports that role as we experience the story as if we are watching it through Tod's eyes. From the stares he sees, the strange people he meets, and the disturbing and even violent things he experiences in Hollywood, Tod determines, "He [will] never again do a fat red barn, old stone wall or sturdy Nantucket fisherman" (West 3) because those images don't represent the reality of the corrupt world he sees. His experiences and interests are better related to Goya's work whose "satire was a matter of satanic hate and morbid revery" (Phillips 28).

Like the spectators he sees, Tod becomes increasingly disenchanted, first with the American masters and realists like Homer and Ryder whose work didn't express what he recognized in the spectators expressions. Consequently, he wanted to separate himself from his classmates who were going "toward illustration or mere handsomeness" (West 3), which to Tod did not depict reality. Therefore, there is violence in a set of lithographs he painted called "The Dancers" where Abe Kusich, Faye Greener, and Harry Greener are dancers being watched by an audience of "uneasy people" (West 5). The audience is the same people that Tod observed on the street staring, "at everyone who passed" (West 2). In these lithographs the performers "leap into the air with twisted backs like hooked trout" (West 5). Rather than the audience being "hooked" by the performance, as would usually be the case, "it was their stare that drove" the dancers to a state of certain destruction. The dancers are forever doing the dance, trying to achieve the American Dream, but they are drawn in like fish to bait, and their audience drives the hook deeper into their skin. The imagery of the lithograph depicts, symbolically, the ruin of the

idealist, rather than the realization of their dreams. It also comments on the role of the spectators, who largely determine the fate of the performers – and who, like the locusts, are the cause of that destruction. George M. Pisk observes:

[The spectators] are... the locusts. Like seventeen-year locusts they remain dormant for long periods of time, almost as if in a larval state. Furthermore, their numbers are astronomical and they represent a latently powerful force for destruction just like the locusts that plagued Pharaoh and 'covered the face of the whole earth so that the land was darkened and they did eat every herb of the land' (Exodus 10:15). (Pisk 65).

In Pisk's example, Pharaoh and his people didn't know the Hebrew God and, instead, worshipped idols of stone while building their empire on the backs of the Hebrew people. God sent the locusts to remind Pharaoh of His existence and power, and to cause Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people, who were enslaved by the Egyptians, go free (KJV Exodus 10). Perhaps West's locust metaphor suggests that the American people also worship material wealth and power at the expense of the spectators, who are cynical and angry because of their position. Contrary to the promise of equal opportunity and upward mobility, which is the American Dream, they are stuck in the mire trying to make bricks without straw. What once was considered a cohesive American ideal has transformed into a divisive model of inflated expectations, which then cultivates a society of disillusioned and dissatisfied. In *The Day of the Locust* that disillusionment manifests itself in violence throughout and, ultimately, in destruction of biblical proportions, as West's chosen title suggests.

Napoleon's Mistake

Such violence shows up in the very beginning of the novel with the chaotic *Battle of Waterloo* movie set Tod observes from his office window. His view from his window immediately establishes Tod's position as an outsider and prophet with a vantage point not shared by the other characters in the novel. He describes "An army of cavalry and foot" and compares them to a "mob... fleeing from some terrible defeat" (West 1). West's reference to a mob scene foreshadows the end of the novel, and characterizes the Hollywood atmosphere of mob-like fans, and the infamous riotous mobs in the streets of Los Angeles. From the very beginning, West alludes to an apocalyptic event, which will mark the end of not only an era, but of a place also. This first scene also seems to warn Tod that he too should be fleeing. But the significance of this scene goes even further as the Battle of Waterloo marked the defeat of Napoleon and the French Army. Napoleon's rapid rise to power parallels the rapid transformation of Hollywood and the rise to stardom that so many dream of, and his final defeat at Waterloo, his exile to St Helena, and the loss of his family, suggest the eventual fall of the big movie industry and the ruin of that dream. In addition, the destruction associated with the Napoleonic wars is vast. As Matthew White reports in his book *Atrocities: The 100 Deadliest Episodes in Human History*, in lives alone, from Piedmont to Waterloo, it is estimated that there were more than 4 million lost (326). Interestingly, the biggest death toll during the Napoleonic Wars isn't attributed to battle; rather, it is lives lost due to plague and disease (335), and as Robert Peterson points out, the source of those plagues and diseases is almost always associated with insects: bubonic plague from fleas, yellow fever and malaria from

mosquitoes, typhoid fever from lice, etc. (Peterson). How appropriate that West would choose *The Battle of Waterloo* to begin *The Day of the Locust* especially considering that France had undergone a period of secularization and dechristianization; thus, it is a consummate example of a society rejecting God and, as a result, suffering great destruction. Gliozzo explains:

In the [French] Revolution, dechristianization took the following forms: aggressive anti-clericalism, prohibition of any Christian practice or worship either in public or private life, closing of the churches, the formation of a revolutionary calendar to replace the Christian one, and the establishment of new religious cults – the Cult of Reason and the Cult of the Supreme Being. (Gliozzo 273)

During this Age of Reason, Atheistic views were on the rise as reason took the place of the supernatural, and while not all philosophes denied the existence of God (quite the contrary for many of them), they did all agree that the state should replace the church and be utilized to satisfy man's material needs, like the church had fulfilled his spiritual needs (Abstract). The Waterloo metaphor doesn't end there, however, because further into the novel, the Waterloo set collapses and we read of more destruction.

West uses the collapse of the Waterloo set to represent the future collapse of the Golden Age of Hollywood and the betrayal of the American Dream. As the French Army charges the unfinished Mont St. Jean set, and the set collapses ending (or at least postponing indefinitely) the shooting of that particular scene, we are reminded again of the Napoleon connection, particularly because Tod recognizes that the "man in the checked cap" was making a mistake by ordering his French army to charge Mont St. Jean, "the same one that Napoleon had made" (West 99). Napoleon's mistake was the "beginning of the end" for the French, and the end of Napoleon's dream, much like

Hollywood was the end of the line for many who had dared to believe in the American Dream. Here, again, Tod is in a prophetic position above the action, where his vantage point allows him to see what is about to happen before it actually occurs. He, unlike anyone else, is also able to see the whole picture.

Graveyard of Dreams

From that same vantage point, prior to the collapse of the Waterloo set, Tod finds a set “graveyard” that West likens to “Janvier’s ‘Sargasso Sea’” calling it a “dream dump” (97). Pisk suggests that the, “social evils” West highlights are “typical of the American scene,” but that in Hollywood it is in “undiluted form” (64). Hollywood and its “graveyard of broken dreams” is simply a symbol for America as a whole, and the idea that anyone can succeed, no matter who they are, or where they came from, and that there are no conditions to that dream. In Janvier’s novel, the Sargasso “was a history of civilization in the form of a marine junkyard” (West 97). However, the marine junkyard wasn’t just filled with ships, but also with people still clinging to those ships. Similarly, the dreams Tod speaks of still have people clinging to them as well, and much like the protagonist in Janvier’s story drifted to the Sargasso on the tide, they too were drawn in by the tide of the Hollywood dream and are stuck among the choking weeds. In his article, “The Day of The Day of the Locust” Tom Burke suggests, “that the industry that produced them would attract staggering multitudes of the psychotically vain and avaricious, the monumentally self-serving, who would finally destroy it” (Burke), much like a swarm of locusts.

The Destruction of Babylon

That destruction of the industry is also predicted in the painting that Tod plans to create called, *The Burning of Los Angeles*, which “served as a counter-representation to the Hollywood spectacle” (Blyn 24). Again, Tod is prophetic as he sees the final and inevitable scene in the novel before it actually happens. From his observations he understands that there is a seething desperation in the LA underbelly, and he sees himself as a “Jeremiah” (West 78). Here, we again see a biblical connection as Jeremiah, an Old Testament prophet, warned Jerusalem of destruction and captivity by Babylon because of their sins, which included idolatry and adultery. In Jeremiah 5:19, God tells Jeremiah, “And it shall come to pass, when ye shall say, Wherefore doeth the Lord our God all these *things* unto us? Then shalt thou answer them, like as ye have forsaken me, and served strange gods in your land, so shall ye serve strangers in a land *that is* not yours” (KJV). The painting is prophetic and apocalyptic as it portrays the final destruction of LA, much like the destruction of Jerusalem that Jeremiah prophesied, as well as the final destruction of Babylon as described in the book of Revelation. These biblical allusions are not accidental; rather, they suggest a godless society full of greed and corruption, doomed to destruction. Here the locusts, in addition to representing the destruction brought about by the plague, are symbolic of the apocalypse. In chapter nine of the book of Revelation the locusts come out of the smoke of a bottomless pit, and the smoke was “as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit” (KJV 9:2), much like the smoke darkened sky in Tod’s painting. The locusts in these verses were like scorpions, stinging all those who had turned away from

God; but, “to them [the locusts] it was given that they should not kill them, but that they should be tormented five months; [...] And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them” (KJV 9:5, 6). This scene parallels that of the faces in Tod’s paintings who have come to California to die and who are tormented by their failure to achieve success. They are like those spoken of in Revelation who “worship[ed] devils, and idols of gold, and silver, and brass, and stone, and of wood: which can neither see, nor hear, nor walk: Neither repented they of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication, nor of their thefts” (KJV 9:20, 21). Like idols of gold, they worshiped the Hollywood Dream of fame, stardom, and wealth believing that it could save them; instead, they realized they had been cheated, duped by a culture that emerged from their own desires, and they could not walk away – even in the midst of destruction.

Dreams Versus Reality

West depicts that counterfeit and fragile dream in his grotesque descriptions of the Hollywood architecture. As Tod surveys the houses of Pinyon Canyon, he sees “Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination of these styles” (3), but rather than being built with sturdy materials like “steel, stone and brick”, he notices that they are constructed of “plaster, lath and paper” (5), which gives them a “comic” appearance and suggests that they are ephemeral. These artificial and cheaply constructed houses show the incongruence of the Hollywood ideal, and reality. They also represent the American dream in its corrupted form, and the precarious position of a

society that has lost its focus on what the American Dream is supposed to embody. Like the Waterloo set and like the dreams of so many, these houses could conceivably collapse at any moment.

That theme of artificiality and insubstantiality is not only seen in the architecture, but in the people as well. “The evening crowd” that Tod sees as he is walking home from work are, as he observes, “masqueraders”—like actors on a movie set wearing the costumes appropriate for the roles they play. These people “belong to the alternative and (at least nominally) privileged class of ‘masqueraders’” (Roberts 66). Roberts describes them as “generally youthful professionals or would-be professionals of the entertainment industry, who have sufficient income, tenacity, or self-deception to pursue some version of the “Hollywood life-style” in their own lives” thus, “their lives allegorize the novel's larger concern with the pathologizing effects of the Dream Factory” (66). For example, Tod observes that, “the fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office; and the girl in slacks and sneaks with a bandanna around her head had just left a switchboard, not a tennis court” (West 2). Their clothes represent the superficiality of the mass culture of Hollywood and don't reflect who they really are as individuals. They have lost their identity as mass culture has replaced the individual.

Faye, Harry, and Abe, the dancers in Tod's lithograph, are masqueraders as well, each one continually performing for an audience. For example, on the outside Abe the dwarf is “truculent” and full of “pugnacity,” continually ready to fight and always

performing to drum-up business for his gambling gigs; however, Abe's hostility is "often a joke" (10) – a tough exterior that he has created to cover up his disappointment and pain. Likewise, Faye and Harry both present themselves as actors but neither one of them are any good at it, so, in reality, Harry sells shoe polish and Faye works as an occasional extra and, eventually, a prostitute. None of them can accept the fact that Hollywood has betrayed them, each one thinking that their big break is right around the corner, and so they keep up the façade. For Abe, his masquerade includes dressing in the latest Hollywood fashions in an attempt to fit in. Sadly, what was seen as fashionable for other men became comical on Abe. For example, "that year Tyrolean hats were being worn a great deal along Hollywood Boulevard and the dwarf's hat was a fine specimen" (7), but on Abe it looked more like a leprechaun's hat as, "It was the proper magic green color and had a high conical crown. There should have been a brass buckle on the front, but otherwise it was perfect" (7). His attempt, with his "double breasted suit", to fit into Hollywood culture was futile; therefore, Abe is confrontational, angry, and sometimes violent. Like many of the masqueraders, as West calls them, he has become part of the underbelly of society who participates in self-destructive behavior such as heavy drinking, cock fighting, paying for sex, and soliciting bets for his bookie business.

Faye, on the other hand, is the embodiment of the Hollywood dream. Likewise, Roberts sees Faye as "the living incarnation of mass-mediated desire" (66). He goes on to suggest that "her own consciousness is wholly structured by fantasies of stardom drawn from the cinema and trade magazines, while to her male admirers she herself embodies the absolutely fetishized and unattainable quality of the cinema star"

(66). Like Abe, Faye and her father Harry are performers as well as masqueraders. Even as her father is seriously suffering from heart failure, she takes on a “tragic expression” that he recognizes as acting. (48) In the pursuit of their dreams, they have forgotten reality. In response to her cruelty, in spite of his extreme pain, Harry also performs rather than expressing real emotion. In a grotesque scene between father and daughter, they exchange rehearsed vaudeville-like routines, and we learn that “their bitterest quarrels often took this form” (49). This time, however, Harry’s behavior is frightening to Faye because she senses real physical pain underneath his laughter. So, she responds with violence and “[brings] her hand down hard on his mouth” (50). To emphasize the deception, Tod determines that “Harry, like many actors, had very little back or top to his head. It was almost all face, like a mask” that “wouldn’t permit degrees of feeling, only the furthest degree” (80) and Harry wears his mask all the way until his death trying, with every rehearsed line, to escape his disappointment and despair.

There were others who were “scattered among these masqueraders” who “were people of a different type” wearing clothing that “was somber and badly cut” and who “loitered on street corners with their backs to the shop windows and stared at everyone who passed” (2). These are the “starers” that Tod painted in his lithographs. They represent the broader American culture that, not knowing the illusion of Hollywood, came to California assuming it offered something they couldn’t find in their Midwestern states. Therefore, California represented a renewal of the American dream that had been crushed by an economic depression, and the effects of the drought in the Midwest. Like the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, many were lured

there with handbills promising work and high pay in the fruitful state of California, only to find little hope of making a decent wage. That charade continues with temporary movie sets, imitation houses, and artificial people, and the spectators are angry, “their eyes filled with hatred” (West 3). They are left starving for substance, physically and spiritually, and as Steinbeck explains, “when a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed” (280).

Steinbeck chose the title of his novel “The Grapes of Wrath” in reference to a verse of lyrics from “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” by Julia Ward Howe, which reads:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on. (Campo)

Like West’s allusions to an apocalypse, the lyrics from this verse specifically point to section 14 in the book of Revelation that refers to (at least symbolically) a violent apocalypse, and the return of Christ who will free the oppressed and punish the wicked, the oppressed being those who came to California to realize their dreams of a better life. Those dreams were fed by the movies that depicted beauty, wealth, and excitement, things that didn’t exist in their depression era lives. In his novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, West describes this occurrence with the quote, “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” (39). That betrayal fuels the violent tendencies of the working class, or the spectators as West

describes them. Steinbeck explains, “THE MIGRANT PEOPLE, scuttling for work, scrabbling to live, looked always for pleasure, dug for pleasure, manufactured pleasure, and they were hungry for amusement” (“The Red Pony” 325). Their “pursuit of happiness” was misguided and they blamed the Hollywood dream that had been manufactured for them, and those who were carrying on the charade. The pleasure they sought and found was based on frivolous amusement, sensual and sexual gratification, and proved to be fleeting, worldly, and destructive. Hicks explains, “*The Day of the Locust* was initially titled *The Cheated*, and it dealt with the hordes of people – especially those from the Midwest – who came to Southern California for breathy excitement but found that life was a numbing succession of perfect, empty, cloudless days” (543) and that those perfect days offered none of the success, fortune, and excitement that they had imagined.

Tod’s attraction to Faye, and the consequences of that attraction, parallel the attraction society has to Hollywood. He first sees her when Abe takes him to the San Berdoo to rent a room. Because of his immediate attraction to her, he rents the room on the spot “without hesitation” even though it is “small and not very clean” (11) just to be near her. There are countless warnings of the danger associated with his attraction to Faye, beginning with the description of her legs being “swordlike” (12). But the most disturbing example is when Tod looks at a picture of her where “She lay stretched out on the divan with her arms and legs spread, as though welcoming a lover, and her lips were parted in a heavy, sullen smile” (12). He ruminates, “She was supposed to look inviting...” (12), but Tod recognizes:

Her invitation wasn't to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love. If you threw yourself on 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. You wouldn't even have time to sweat or close your eyes. (12)

Tod sees the danger, but he can't seem to stay away. His obsession with Faye, for example, manifests itself in his drawings of her, which he eventually puts away in an attempt to divert the obsession. When he does this, his quest to find a model to replace her takes him to several "different Hollywood churches" because he "began to wonder if he himself didn't suffer from the ingrained, morbid apathy he liked to draw in others" (109). That "morbid apathy" was a product of the unrealized desires of the masses that had replaced spirituality with materialism only to find that it left them empty.

At Harry's funeral Todd noticed the music inviting "Christ to come," "with infinite grace and delicacy" (92). However, while the invitation is there, he also noticed "no one was listening..." (92). In fact, they are described as "busy inside themselves" (92). They are too preoccupied with their own greed and selfish desires to recognize that because the dream no longer includes God it is empty. Even in the churches Tod visits he only finds "fury" and an "anarchic power" that could "destroy civilization" and speeches filled with rage claiming that the "Tiger of Wrath" and the "Jackal of Lust" were "stalking the walls of the citadel" (110). Here West compares Hollywood to "decadent Rome" (110) and much like Thoreau and Emerson, he criticizes organized religion as it has also been tainted. The churchgoers came to California with dreams fashioned by the movie industry as well, and now their disappointment and anger fuel their caustic rhetoric.

Desires Unfulfilled

Faye, like the Hollywood Dream, is young, beautiful, “as shiny as a new spoon” (46), and tempting, but she is also empty and unattainable. Similarly, success and wealth were also unattainable for so many when Hollywood, “with arms and legs spread”, invited them in with what Blyn calls, “commodified libidinal satisfactions” (17). This invitation was unlike the dream that Emerson and Thoreau imagined wherein man could achieve intellectual and spiritual enlightenment through nature, and an awakening to life and moral reform that would allow, “effective intellectual exertion” (Thoreau 1757). Nor was it an invitation like the one that Captain John Smith issued based on hard work and moral uprightness. Rather, it was like Faye’s deceptive invitation, and her refusal of Tod because he had “neither money nor looks” (11), both of which were based on superficiality, greed, and material gain. Consequently, we see the American Dream in its corrupted form replete with desires unfulfilled, much like *La Predicament de Marie*. With each knock on Marie’s bedroom door, the character and the audience both experience thwarted desire, and another member of the family steps into the depravity. To express the depth of the corruption, we learn that Marie’s desires are for the little girl. With the family members all hidden in her room, there’s another knock at the door when instantly, “the machine stuck” (22). Again, the audience and the reader experience the discontent of desires unfulfilled. The film characterizes the corruption of society, as well as their base desires and the riotous behavior associated with disappointed expectations exemplified by the “mock riot” (20).

Tod is also increasingly corrupted. When Claude invites him to go to Audrey Jennings' he refuses saying, "I don't like pro-sport," however, Claude persists and reassures Tod that "she [Jennings] makes vice attractive with skillful packaging" (17). Claude champions the commodification of sex, or at least Jennings' way of doing it, by saying, "Her dive's a triumph of industrial design" (17). The conversation takes a twist and soon prostitution, love, and Faye are all being discussed as though they are interchangeable subjects. Love (which they compare to a vending machine), is tarnished by the idea that anything is attainable with the right amount of money, and marketable with the right kind of packaging. When the projector gets stuck, there's hope for Tod as it looks as though he leaves due to disinterest or disgust but, instead, he goes in search of Faye with thoughts of hiring her for sex. When he doesn't find her, he returns to finish watching the film. This scene is an indication of societal expectations of immediate satisfaction—like putting money in a vending machine, which then immediately dispenses the desired item. Thus, as Roberts suggests, "West makes male heterosexual desire paradigmatic for that larger complex of desires which the Hollywood dream factory generates in its captive audience and which will eventually destroy Hollywood itself" (Roberts 66).

This new dream "of instant wealth, won in a twinkling by audacity and good luck" is different from, "The old American Dream," which "was the dream of the Puritans, of Benjamin Franklin's "Poor Richard"... of men and women content to accumulate their modest fortunes a little at a time, year by year by year" (Brands 445). The dream was distorted first by a penchant for gold during the gold rush, followed by

the wealth and fame that Hollywood offered tainted with avarice and a lack of virtue. Faye, like unfulfilled desires, incites violence and destruction with her egocentric immaturity, her irresistible allure, and her flirtations and enticements that mean nothing. Tod's violent fantasies about Faye are expressed in *The Burning of Los Angeles*, his "apocalyptic vision of Hollywood, with the naked body of Faye Greener serving as its central figure and the object of the fury of the cheated masses..." (Blyn 24). Metaphorically, the agrarian landscape that Emerson and Thoreau described, and the ideals of that time, don't exist here, and neither does the American Dream, as the fire strips the landscape bare.

Besides the obvious reference to destruction, the title of Tod's painting is also significant as it suggests destruction for all of Los Angeles, not just Hollywood. And the novel suggests that it will spread even further as Tod contemplates, "The Angelenos would be first, but their comrades all over the country would follow. There would be civil war" (78). The microcosm that is Hollywood is not only indicative of the whole nation, but influences it as well. West clearly evokes powerful images with the descriptions of the painting to illustrate themes of "idealism and disillusionment, cruelty and violence, phantasmagoria and apocalypse" (Meyer 50). The spectators are once again important in that depiction, as they are responsible for the violence. In Tod's mind, the mob's faces in the painting were made up of the "innumerable sketches he had made of the people who come to California to die; the cultists of all sorts, economic as well as religious, the wave, airplane, funeral, and preview watchers – all those poor devils who can only be stirred by the promise of miracles and then only to violence" (West 165). Their hostility was fueled

by their boredom and their frustration because; “All their lives they had slaved at some dull labor... saving their pennies and dreaming of the leisure that would be theirs when they had enough” (156). The final scene is the ultimate display of that frustration and, “...Tod Hackett’s absentminded fantasy of painting the apocalyptic masterpiece, “The Burning of Los Angeles” becomes all too real when the cheated erupt in outrage at the showy vacuousness of another luxury theater grand opening and in turn on Hackett himself” (Hicks 543). But the people are to blame as much as Hollywood is with their inflated expectations and unrealistic anticipations, and then they realize that “sunshine isn’t enough” and that “after you’ve seen one wave, you’ve seen them all” (West 157).

Homer Simpson is also in the painting, “falling out of the canvas, his face half-asleep” (166). But, other than the fact that he comes from Iowa, he doesn’t really fit into either of these groups. He’s definitely not a performer; in fact, he “didn’t appreciate [Harry’s] performance in the least;” rather, “he was terrified and wondered whether to phone the police” (43). And although Tod initially thought he was “the exact model for the kind of person who comes to California to die, perfect in every detail down to fever eyes and unruly hands,” he later realizes that “he was mistaken” (27). Homer is shy, humble, sensitive, lonely, and tormented by unpleasant memories of a failed half-attempt at intimacy. Unlike so many others who had come to California for excitement, he was merely there for his health and was not interested in climbing any ladders of success because although “the forty years of his life had been entirely without variety or excitement,” “he was not bored” (39). But even Homer is not immune to Faye’s “siren like” call to “self destruction” (Blyn 24). To further his plight, “[Homer’s] hands seem to

have a life and will of their own” (39), which suggests that he had little control; rather, just as Faye manipulated him, Hollywood’s mass culture also manipulates society. Homer, whose movements are often described as “mechanical” (157), like “a poorly made automaton” (5) is representative of the broader American society beyond the microcosm of Hollywood who, in spite of their distance from Hollywood, are like robots controlled by the mass media and mass culture. For them the American dream has died as well, or at least it has strayed from that model “City on the Hill.”

The Apocalypse

West’s critiques of Hollywood and the societal ideals of his time mirror those that are expressed in *Walden* by Thoreau when he says, “The nation itself, with all its so called internal improvements, which, by the way, are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense” (1757). Similarly, West suggests that mass culture in the film industry, and throughout the nation, has replaced individualism, creativity, and imagination, leading to a society of people who are without individual thought. Both Emerson and Thoreau rejected a complacency of thought. In their view, there is always more to behold and always new ideas and new ways to look at things. Both men, too, took issue with the binding institution of property and debt. Debt, in Emerson’s view, “cripples and disheartens a great spirit with cares that seem so base” and property is like snow – “If it fall today, it will be blown to drifts tomorrow” (Emerson 1594). To Emerson and Thoreau, being self-reliant meant thinking for one’s self and being free from the burdens of the materialistic society they found themselves in.

It also meant retaining that “spirit of infancy”—a childish curiosity that gave them the ability to form their own ideas about the nature of God and spirituality, rather than conforming to traditional dogma or, in the case of *Locust*, conforming to the models of mass culture. Just as Homer has trouble thinking for himself, he also has difficulty waking and fears that once he falls asleep he might “never get up” (31). In his character is the everyman of a society unaware of the pending destruction, and unable or unwilling to do anything about it. Thoreau encouraged an awakening to life and moral reform that would allow, “effective intellectual exertion” (1757). He wrote:

Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius, but by the mechanical nudgings of some servitor, are not awakened by our own newly-acquired force and aspirations from within, accompanied by the undulations of celestial music, instead of factory bells, and a fragrance filling the air – to a higher life than we fell asleep from. (Emerson 1757)

Furthermore, John Smith believed, “If he has nothing but his hands...” blessings would come from God. But Homer’s hands betray him rather than provide him with the tools he needs to achieve the happiness, the companionship, and the intimacy that he so desires. He seems impotent in his ability to connect and as a result, he is lonely. That is the irony, that among the masses and surrounded by multitudes of people, he is lonely. He is lonely because Hollywood cannot fulfill his longings.

Where Emerson and Thoreau champion creation, nature, fertility and renewal, and where the American Dream was based on hard work with one’s own hands, in contrast, West suggests that Hollywood is destruction and impotence. We again see these characteristics in Homer who sits on his back porch looking at a “sooty, brick incinerator and a pile of rusty cans,” watching a lizard as it stalks and kills flies; all the while, “there

was a much better view to be had in any direction other than the one he faced. By moving his chair in a quarter circle he could have seen a large part of the canyon twisting down to the city below” (West 39). But, like other ineffectual moments, Homer doesn’t change his view, as easy as it would be to do so. As a result, his daily entertainment includes either watching a lizard destroy a fly, or watching as the lizard’s desires are unrealized; destruction or disappointment, the two things that the Hollywood Dream offered to most. Emerson suggests that a change of perspective is exactly what is needed saying:

The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is, because man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist, until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit. (Emerson 1607)

As is evident in *Day of the Locust*, the redemption of the soul that Emerson speaks of can’t be found in the allure of Hollywood; rather, Tod’s prophetic painting and the final scene of destruction suggest that an apocalypse is imminent as unrealized dreams built on unrealistic expectations rule the day, and the American Dream of freedom, blessings from God, and the pursuit of happiness is, like Homer, destroyed by the Hollywood dream factory. West’s frequent biblical allusions suggest that a modernist society focused on material wealth and rejecting religion is doomed to destruction, like Babylon of old. In reference to Walter Benjamin’s writings on art and technology, Peter Osborne and Matthew Charles suggest that at the time of West’s writing of *Locust*, “technology appear[ed] on a political knife-edge between its possibilities as ‘a fetish of doom’ and ‘a key to happiness’”(Osborne). Benjamin saw the film industry as teetering on that edge and suggested that it had the potential to prepare humanity to deal with the

technological advancements of modern society. Alternately, West predicts the “fetish of doom” outcome with his somewhat nihilistic representation of Hollywood, and the destruction that is prophesied in *Locust*. That destruction is not just destruction in the literal sense, like we saw in the collapse of the Waterloo set; rather, West suggests a destruction of the soul, of individual thought and creativity and, ultimately, the destruction of happiness. We see West’s perspective further developed in his novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, where the protagonist, an advice columnist, struggles with the plight of those suffering from the effects of the Depression and other societal ills, and who wants to share the message that Christ is the answer to their struggles; however, “By avoiding God, he had failed to tap the force in his heart and had merely written a column for his paper” (49). Here, again, West highlights the dilemma facing modern society; “Having abandoned God, where do people turn for answers? What values, what morals, remain to provide structure for men’s lives?” (Judd). Stephanie Stiles suggests that in answer to that dilemma, “spiritually impoverished Americans have created Hollywood in a pathetic and futile attempt at self-fulfillment” (242). His satiric, darkly comedic, and even absurd manner might suggest that he is making fun of society, including religion, but the compelling images of destruction in a society moving away from God and the values that the American Dream once stood for, make it clear that for West the spiritual and economic poverty found in the Hollywood Dream factory could only lead to an apocalypse.

CHAPTER IV

THE SELF-MADE MAN AND THE
PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

The End of the Frontier

Monroe Stahr, the protagonist in *The Last Tycoon*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, is the epitome of the self-made man and the personification of that rise to success and wealth that is the American Dream. Mathew J. Bruccoli describes him as, “a 1935 incarnation of the nineteenth-century American hero—the self-made man who embodies the principles of integrity and responsibility” (9). Stahr is fashioned after self-made men like Abraham Lincoln, Benjamin Franklin, and Andrew Jackson, who each participated in and contributed to the compilation of ideals that were the American Dream. By their model, and the example of others, Linton Weeks author of “With the American Dream Comes the Nightmare” suggests, Americans had a unique belief “that one could transcend one's appointed rung on the ladder of society as determined by class, gender, birth order, inherited vocation and religion” (Weeks). Fitzgerald points to such men throughout *The Last Tycoon* as a standard by which to measure a man’s character, and to identify the old American Dream once based on self determination, and “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” in contrast with the Hollywood Dream based on wealth, beauty, and power. Stahr represents the last of such men, a hero if you will, as well as the coinciding fall of the Golden Era of Hollywood. Similarly, Hollywood represents the end of the frontier and the end of the ideals once associated with the American Dream.

An Assembly Line of Dreams

We meet the characters of *The Last Tycoon* through the eyes of Cecilia Brady, the daughter of a big Hollywood producer named Pat Brady, Stahr's antagonist. Unlike Stahr, he is only focused on power and making money, placing very little, if any, importance on the artistic value of films. We learn of Brady's focus from the very beginning as Cecilia explains, "My father was in the picture business as another man might be in cotton or steel" (3). Budd Schulberg, screenwriter, son of Hollywood film producer B.P. Schulberg, and friend of Fitzgerald said that Fitzgerald's comparison of Hollywood to the cotton and steel industries was inspired by Schulberg's own account of growing up in Hollywood as "the son of a Hollywood mogul" (14). He describes it as such: "Being raised in Hollywood, you could never look at it as a glamorous town. It may look glamorous from the outside, but if you're from the inside, it's really just like any other factory town. It's very much a company town. The only difference is, instead of turning out steel or tires, you're turning out cans of film" (14). Fitzgerald must have been bothered by the mass production of films, as we see the struggle between Brady (who viewed film making in this way), and Stahr. Schulberg suggests that Fitzgerald "was seriously interested in the process of the motion picture and even in the art of the motion picture. He had moments when he thought it might even replace the novel as an art form" (14). If films might replace novels, surely the artists who create those films would be of great importance, but because Brady's focus is on the mass production of films and their profit, he has little interest in the individual welfare of the studio artists beyond their ability to produce a lucrative product. Consequently, Brady represents the greed and

corruption that undermines the American Dream, as well as the deceptive glitz and glitter of Hollywood that has so heavily influenced mass culture.

Our image of Pat Brady isn't very favorable, partially from Cecilia's impressions and descriptions of him. She explains, "Once in New York when I met him where I didn't expect to, I was aware of a bulky, middle aged man who looked a little ashamed of himself, and I wished he'd move on – and then I saw he was father" (Fitzgerald 22). Her momentary unbiased impression of her father in New York portrays his less than honorable character in his perceived shame. This indignity is also revealed when Cecilia discovers Brady in a sexual encounter with his secretary in his office, and in his less than noble conversations with colleagues. Where Stahr was regarded a "hero," Cecilia reveals that, "most of what [Brady] accomplished boiled down to shrewd" (28). In the Roman à Clef style, he represents Louis B. Mayer, known (along with Thalberg) for building MGM into what Helen Hayes described as, "*the* great film studio of the world" (Eyman 7). Mayer, too, was a shrewd businessman who, as screen-writer-director-producer Joseph Mankiewicz asserted, "could have run General Motors as successfully as MGM" (Eyman 7). This statement is reminiscent of the one Cecilia made comparing her father's business to that of cotton or steel. In both cases, filmmaking is compared to industries where a commodity is mass-produced—and where labor is grossly exploited one on a northern and the other on a southern model. In Cecilia's account, Brady doesn't know anything about the actual making of a film and, unlike Stahr, had acquired his wealth "with luck and shrewdness" (28), characteristics that are in opposition to the ones that define the American Dream. As such, Brady's focus is the

mass production of films to generate higher profits. Fitzgerald also created Brady to resemble Mayer in his disregard for the creative foundation of the movie industry's success. Adorno and Horkheimer later discussed how the mass production of films damaged individuality and creativity in "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" stating:

Films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce. They call themselves industries, and the published figures for their directors' incomes quell any doubts about the social necessity of their finished products. (Horkheimer 95)

The individuality that is lost in mass production of films is noticeable in a disregard for the team of individuals that make that production possible. For example, Mayer didn't value the screenwriters the way Thalberg did - which might explain, in part, Fitzgerald's negative portrayal of Brady. To illustrate this correlation, and in comparing Mayer and Thalberg, Scott Eyman, author of *Lion of Hollywood: The Life and Legend of Louis B. Mayer*, explained:

Thalberg was something of an autodidact; because he liked writers, writers liked him, hence, *The Last Tycoon*, and thousands of reverent anecdotes – mostly told by writers. For Mayer, and to a lesser extent, Thalberg, the most important concepts of filmmaking were, first, the star, second, the producer, third, the script, and bringing up the rear, the director. (155)

Eyman suggests that "Mayer lacked respect for most writers and directors" because they lacked power (267). In fact, Mankiewicz claimed that not only did he lack respect for them, "he [Mayer] hated writers" (267). Understandably, such a sentiment probably wouldn't have set well with Fitzgerald. Similarly, the relationship between Pat Brady and Stahr resembles the one between Mayer and Thalberg. The rivalry between them signifies

that struggle between the idealistic American Dream, versus the one based on materialism, and greed. Furthermore, in Hollywood, dreams, like the films that are being produced, are a commodity, as we see in the scene where Stahr and his production team are viewing the rushes. In *Tycoon*, Fitzgerald writes, “Dreams hung in fragments at the far end of the room, suffered analysis, passed—to be dreamed in crowds, or else discarded” (56). Hollywood was in the business of producing dreams for the masses for a profit but most of those dreams were never realized. In a review of John Gregory Dunne’s book, *Monster: Living off the Big Screen*, Michael Wood describes Hollywood as, “the cemetery of dreams, the place where possibilities flicker for a moment and die before they reach the world” (Wood). With so many dreams never realized, there is the question of what the pursuit of happiness really means in the American psyche, especially since Monroe Stahr achieves what Hollywood would suggest is happiness with his wealth, power, and status; but, even with all he possesses true happiness seems to elude him.

The Character of a Man

To establish Stahr’s position as leader and hero, Fitzgerald compares him to historical heroes like Jackson, Lincoln, and “the Emperor and the Old Guard,” and writes, “There is no world so but it has its heroes, and Stahr was the hero” (27). He further establishes Stahr’s character by describing his devotion to the studio employees: “Most of the men had been here a long time—through the beginnings and the great upset, when sound came, and the three years of depression, he had seen that no harm came to them” (27). Stahr’s paternalistic manner has fostered a great respect for his leadership in the

industry. But that position is precarious as the passage goes on to say, “The old loyalties were trembling now, there were clay feet everywhere; but still he was their man, the last of the princes. And their greeting was a sort of low cheer as they went by” (27). The instability of that position is also foreshadowed early in the novel when Schwartz attempts to warn Stahr saying, “let me warn you once again look out! I know” (16). Further, that instability that Schwartz’s warning implies seems to also symbolize the precarious position of the American Dream.

Cecilia idolizes Stahr, much the way society idolizes Hollywood, in part, I would suggest, because she sees in him everything that her father isn’t. Cecilia also, perhaps, represents Fitzgerald and his own respect and admiration for MGM film producer Irving Thalberg, or “the boy wonder” as he was often called. Thalberg was one of Fitzgerald’s inspirations for Monroe Stahr, as he too was a self-made man. Fitzgerald said of Thalberg, “I’ve long chosen him for a hero (this has been in my mind for three years) because he is one of the half-dozen men I have known who were built on a grand scale” (8). Thalberg was the complete archetype of the self made man with all the characteristics described in *The Self-Made Man in American Life* by President Grover Cleveland. Cleveland clearly emphasizes a self-made man’s uprightness saying:

The men thus described are self-made men because they can only be the products of self-endeavor and struggle—often to overcome external difficulties and disadvantages, and always to improve whatever opportunities are within their reach, to subdue the selfishness of human nature, and to stimulate its noblest aspirations and best purposes. (13)

In the style of the American Dream and as Cleveland describes, Thalberg became successful at an extremely young age despite physical struggles, and other

disadvantages that resulted from those struggles. In a biography of Irving Thalberg's life, Mark Vieira writes, "due to his heart condition, he lacked the stamina he would need for the rigors of college, for all-night sessions writing term papers and cramming for exams" (5); thus, he lacked the education and degrees that one would expect for the success he so remarkably attained. Stahr also suffered from physical limitations due to a weak heart and, like Thalberg, he climbed the ladder of success in spite of those disadvantages. More importantly, however, in *Stahr Fitzgerald* created a character that shared the integrity for which Thalberg was so well known. Like Thalberg, Stahr rose to a position of power and success not by climbing on the backs of others, but by making honest connections with those he met. Cecilia describes Stahr as "a money man among money men," but, like Thalberg, Stahr valued hard work, the quality of the product of his work, and those who worked along side him to create that quality product. Edwin Loeb said, "The real foundation of Irving's success was his ability to look at life through the eyes of any given person. He had a gift of empathy, and almost complete perspective" (Vieira 74). This was true of Stahr, as well. Fitzgerald chose Thalberg as a model for Stahr because he so closely resembled an example of upward mobility, and success achieved through hard work, and good character,

In the fashion of Thalberg, Fitzgerald also gave Stahr an empathetic nature that counters the impersonal atmosphere associated with mass culture, and that values the individual. We see his empathy and perspective in his treatment of the employees at the movie studio. For example, he stays with Rodriguez, an actor, patiently listening to his personal domestic problems, even though he is supposed to be at a meeting with his

colleagues. To Rodriguez Stahr says, ““You sit down”... “We’ll take plenty of time and talk this over”” (Fitzgerald 36). He also goes above and beyond expectations when he sends Pete Zavras to the eye doctor following his attempted suicide. This kind act coupled with his influence to clear Zavras’ name and reputation show that his concern for the success of the studio is based upon his concern for those who’ve helped to build it.

Stahr’s fate suggests that he “represents an older American tradition of personal responsibility, which is being defeated by the forces of collectivism,” (Brucoli 9); therefore, the values that Cleveland described would not survive in the film industry in Hollywood, and perhaps not even in America as a whole. To illustrate that notion, Robert A. Martin, author of “Fitzgerald’s Use of History in *The Last Tycoon*” suggests, “Fitzgerald was using history as a thematic subtext to connect the American past and present—the dream turned cynical and corrupt” (Martin 141). Thus, while Hollywood is the setting, the American theme suggests a larger struggle that has been negatively influenced by the materialistic ideals set forth in Hollywood. John F. Callahan, author of “F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Evolving American Dream: The Pursuit of Happiness in *Gatsby*, *Tender is the Night*, and *The Last Tycoon*” observes, “For over 200 years...Americans have sought to balance property’s material reality with the imaginative possibilities hinted at in the phrase “the ‘pursuit of happiness’” (379). Even Thalberg, who was an inspiration for Stahr, “fought for a bigger share of the profits” (Brucoli 9) while Stahr cared more about his responsibilities to the studio. Brucoli points out:

Stahr is not interested in money. He is literally working himself to death because he needs to exercise responsibility, and because there is nothing else he would rather do. But the financiers and the lawyers are taking over the studio. The novel

marks the end of a phase of American capitalism—the end of individual responsibility in industry. (9)

Stahr is stuck somewhere between the past and what the American Dream used to stand for, and the future of Hollywood and the film industry. Fitzgerald describes him as, “a rationalist who did his own reasoning with out benefit of books—and he had just managed to climb out of a thousand years of Jewry into the late eighteenth century. He could not bear to see it melt away—he cherished the parvenu’s passionate loyalty to an imaginary past” (118). Like the parvenu, Stahr too is passionately loyal to the past and has, with hard work and perseverance, and limited education, risen above social origins and therefore has partaken in the American Dream. Furthermore, Fitzgerald frequently compares Stahr to Lincoln and Jackson, and gave him the first name of Monroe to suggest that Stahr has some of the characteristics reminiscent of these American leaders. That Fitzgerald chose Lincoln as a model by which to fashion Stahr is telling, as Lincoln was known for his honesty and integrity in his personal life and as a leader. In fact, the title *The Last Tycoon* references Lincoln as those close to him affectionately called him “the Tycoon”. Brucoli explains:

By means of these presidential associations Fitzgerald tried to place Stahr in the tradition of the American leaders, to endow him with a largeness of character that goes beyond the movie industry. The Lincoln connection is not far-fetched: Stahr is another poor boy who rose to a position of enormous responsibility without losing his humane qualities. From log cabin to the White House; from the Bronx to Hollywood--Stahr is the last tycoon, the last of the paternalistic bosses who takes full responsibility for his business. He is a production man, not a money man; and he is an anachronism, under attack from both the capitalists and the communists. (9)

Further, Martin points out similarities between Stahr and Andrew Jackson saying, “both Jackson and Stahr are bound by a class code, and both are egalitarian in temperament and

philosophy both are also believers in democracy, the common man, and the American Dream” (148). In addition, both Jackson and Stahr came from humble beginnings and had limited education. Surely, Fitzgerald was deliberate in these presidential comparisons to not only align Stahr with greatness, but to also suggest a link to an American past and to highlight the unique qualities that Stahr possesses.

Stahr’s position is a balancing act wherein he is trying to hold on to that past, while also trying to make successful pictures in the current Hollywood atmosphere. Boxley, an important figure in *Tycoon* because he is himself a writer, identifies Stahr leadership as, “like Lincoln... carrying on a long war on many fronts; almost single-handed he had moved pictures sharply forward through a decade, to a point where the content of the “A productions” was wider and richer than that of the stage. Stahr was an artist only, as Mr Lincoln was a general, perforce and as a layman” (Fitzgerald 106). Boxley’s observation about Stahr’s ability to inspire artistic creativity is apparent when the writers are at a point of stalemate. To inspire creativity in a script they are working on, Stahr challenges Boxley to give them some “sugar” (105), and then distracts the team for a bit with a coin game. Before long, Boxley has the answer and is able to break the stalemate. Although it was Stahr’s plan all along, he feigns ignorance and “conceal[s] a smile” (107) when the team is back on track and their creative juices are flowing.

Even though Stahr is not an artist himself he is, “endowed with supreme intelligence and taste” and, therefore, he is able to elevate the “art form without being an artist” (Brucoli 7), by elevating the artists themselves. Frustrated by the lack of creativity in Hollywood film-making Boxley says, “It’s such a damn bother... You can’t

let yourself go—I keep wishing you could start over... It's this mass production” (Fitzgerald 105). Stahr feels this too, and is very aware of the importance of every individual piece of the empire he runs from the cameraman, to the writers, to the actors, and so on. Even though he criticizes the writers saying, “Writers are children—even in normal times they can't keep their minds on their work,” (120), he recognizes that their contribution is essential and that it is his job to inspire and encourage them. When Brimmer suggests that some of the writers are only paid “thirty dollars a week... The ones that are commodities and easy to replace,” Stahr refutes that saying, “Not on my lot” (121). Instead, he tells Brimmer of a writer who makes fifteen hundred dollars and who threatens other writers calling them “Fink!” behind their backs in the commissary. He blames Brimmer and the Communist Party for this unrest and rejects their ideals. Brucoli explains, “A self-made man, Stahr believes that anyone with ability can succeed, and resists any attempt by outsiders to interfere with his studio, his people” (8). His loyalty is not only to his people, but to the American Dream as well. We see this in his attempt to hold on to his principles amidst those who prefer profit to artistic value, and in response to the labor unions that, in his eyes, are upsetting a system where success is directly related to effort.

Unlike Nathanael West's characters who are largely outsiders playing around the margins of Hollywood, Fitzgerald's characters take the reader inside the film industry revealing, at close range, some of the ruin at its core, and championing the would-be-hero who attempted to keep it afloat. Through hard work and perseverance, just like the dream promises, Stahr is able to achieve the success he desires. He explains, “When I was

young I wanted to be a chief clerk—the one who knew where everything was” (79). His original aspirations were simple in comparison to his achievements. But even as the head of a giant film company in Hollywood, he still sees himself as a chief clerk. He tells

Kathleen:

That's my gift, if I have one. Only when I got to be it I found out that no one knew where anything was. And I found out that you had to know why it was where it was, and whether it should be left there. They began throwing it all at me and it was a very complex office. Pretty soon I had all the keys. And they wouldn't have remembered what locks they fitted if I gave them back. (79)

It's clear that his success isn't based on luck; rather, he has climbed the ladder of success because he is responsible and works hard. Ultimately, however, the dream fails him too as, in Stahr's eyes, labor unions and communism challenge his position and the cultural ideal of the self-made man. Nevertheless, he meets with Brimmer, “who represents the communist party and philosophy” and does so in an attempt, “to develop an understanding between himself as a paternalistic studio head and the writers and directors who work under his authority and direction” (Martin 147). Additionally, even though he achieves the financial success that is coveted by so many, in the brutality of Hollywood, he is still unhappy. Fitzgerald's frequent historical references suggest that the ethics of Hollywood are not conducive to happiness; rather, Hollywood is “the ultimate perversion of the American Dream” (Kundu 98).

Much of what the American Dream was initially based on included an emphasis on character and the integrity of an individual and of a society as outlined in Benjamin Franklin's *The Art of Virtue*. Franklin's “quest for moral perfection” included thirteen virtues such as, temperance, justice, humility, chastity, frugality etc. Like

Franklin, Stahr determined to better himself, and the society that he described as “all wrong—a mess—all a lie—and a sham—” (Fitzgerald 97). Rather than give up, however, “He said to himself, ‘*This* will never do.’ And so he learned tolerance, kindness, forbearance, and even affection like lessons” (97). Fitzgerald suggests that virtues such as those are disappearing and that men, like Monroe Stahr, who cling to those antiquated ideals, cannot survive in a society without ethics; rather, the society will corrupt or destroy the individual. In discussing Fitzgerald’s works as a whole (most specifically *Tender is the Night* and *The Crack Up*) Bruce Grenberg described Fitzgerald as, “A pained observer and reluctant recorder of the demise of “old America” (Fitzgerald 206). Stahr represents that demise, as his own decline is apparent throughout the novel. Following Kathleen’s marriage and in conjunction with his meeting with Brimmer, his decline seems to hasten. He recognizes in these events that first, he has lost Kathleen—his one chance at happiness and redemption; and second, the ideals he clings to are fading. Cecilia describes him as “pale... so transparent that you could almost watch the alcohol mingle with the poison of his exhaustion” (126), as his decline coincides with the failure of the dream.

The Dark Side of the Dream

If Fitzgerald believed that the American dream was dying, and that the frontier had run out, Mortimer Zuckerman argues that, “America is delivering on its promise of the American Dream” (Zuckerman). In his editorial “Living the Dream” he states:

Our immigrant history and our frontier experience helped us evolve a unique culture of self-reliance, independence, resourcefulness, pragmatism, and novelty. We are comfortable with change and with people who make things happen. We

foster the upstart and the young. In America, the new is better than the old; taking charge is valued over playing it safe; making money is superior to inheriting it; education and merit are favored over family ties. Over a century ago, as the frontier vanished, the scholar Frederick Jackson Turner suggested that the frontier virtues would vanish too. Not so: They have flourished. And we are still discovering new frontiers. (Zuckerman)

While Zuckerman's assertions are arguably true, Fitzgerald explores a much darker side of the American Dream—one that along the way has fostered ideals based on entitlement, imperialism, and greed, and one that has strayed from the traditional American Dream based on a Protestant work ethic. Furthermore, as Tirman points out, "Winthrop's line from his 1630 sermon, "we shall be as a City upon a Hill," is frequently intoned to suggest that America is uniquely gifted and providential. Unfortunately, countless politicians have sermonized with this gratifying image and used it, erroneously, to celebrate belligerence, individualism, and aggrandizement" (Tirman 11). Therefore, the American Dream and, perhaps even more so, the Hollywood Dream have become inflated with irrational expectations of fame and wealth. So when Stahr and Kathleen cross "suicide bridge" Kathleen says, "I know what it is... but how stupid. English people don't kill themselves when they don't get what they want" (114). In answer to that problem, Fitzgerald points to a time when the American Dream was more keenly focused on "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," as a more hopeful and advantageous way of life.

Perhaps that original dream still exists for some, but for others, like Joan Didion's Maria Wycliff, Nathanael West's Homer Simpson, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's Monroe Stahr, the dream has become a nightmare. For these characters, and perhaps for their authors, the rewards are bitter, and their pursuit for happiness seems futile. That

nightmare is also evident in the “young actress [who] kept staring out the window in such an intent way the stewardess was afraid she was contemplating a leap” (Fitzgerald 5) and in Mr. Schwartz who, “meeting him was like encountering a friend who had been in a fight or collision, and got flattened... with broken teeth and swollen lips” (7). The nightmare also manifests itself in Schwartz’s suicide and in Pete Zavras who, “walked up to the outside balcony... mounted to the iron railing and dove head first to the pavement below” (29). In their pursuit of wealth and fame, many Americans have equated financial success with happiness, and when those dreams aren’t realized, they lose faith in the American Dream.

We see the clash of Hollywood and the American Dream in the first chapter when the plane that carried “the coastal rich... casually alighted in mid-America” at the home of Andrew Jackson—as if to come down to earth, and reality, for a brief moment. The “Hollywood people,” Cecilia, Wylie White, and Mr. Schwartz, are unable to “gain admittance or even see the place clearly” suggesting “the relation of the moving-picture industry to the American ideals and tradition” (129). In the synopsis of the unfinished ending of *The Last Tycoon*, it is supposed that Fitzgerald intended to emphasize the importance of this opening motif by returning to the same setting at some point in the novel (129). The scene is also important because it is near Wylie White’s birthplace. His comments again suggest the juxtaposition of Hollywood, the land of dreams, and the rest of the country where White was born the “son of impoverished southern paupers” (10). He claims his “family mansion is now used as an outhouse” (10) and while he has had

some success in realizing his dreams, he says that he has “reached a dead end” (10). He has far exceeded his humble beginnings with wealth and fame, yet he is still not happy.

Weeks states, “The unalienable right to pursue individual happiness is coded into America's DNA. The underlying message is that you can be as happy as you want to be, as happy as you can make yourself” (Weeks). The idea that the American Dream means that anyone can *pursue* happiness is often mistaken for the expectation of happiness—which isn't guaranteed no matter the level of success. While the definition of the American Dream is diverse, the original dream was not about achieving excessive wealth; rather, it was about building, through hard work, a better life. Adams said:

We cannot become a great democracy by giving ourselves up as individuals to selfishness, physical comfort, and cheap amusements. The very foundation of the American dream of a better and richer life for all is that all, in varying degrees, shall be capable of wanting to share in it. It can never be wrought into a reality by cheap people or by ‘keeping up with the Joneses.’ (411)

On the other hand, with the nearly instant success of immigrant filmmakers in the idyllic setting of Hollywood, among depression era conditions elsewhere, the dream developed into a destructive fantasy. Matthew Warshauer adds, “Numerous scholars note that the shift away from the traditional American work ethic corresponded directly with the rise of industry. Work values changed dramatically when the assembly line production and machine driven atmosphere of industrial America swallowed up skilled workers” (Warshauer). Consequently, Hollywood too became an assembly line with the mass production of films. In addition to films, however, Hollywood also manufactured dreams. Bob Mondello points out, “Hollywood's not called a dream factory for nothing. It manufactures optimism, and in the process of selling it, can make the possibility of

success feel wondrously real” (Mondello). Those manufactured dreams are what make Hollywood so seductive, but most of them are based on illusory promises and unrealistic expectations.

Fitzgerald’s own approbations and defeats in Hollywood speak loudly through his characters and force the reader to see the contradictions that plague the American Dream. Schulberg tells of Fitzgerald selling his screenplay “Babylon Revisited” to an independent film producer Lester Cowan for \$5000, only to have Cowan sell it to MGM for \$100,000. Schulberg says that the circumstances surrounding “Babylon Revisited” were so typical of Scott’s career in Hollywood” (13) and, as a result, Fitzgerald’s novels reflect that feeling of defeat and expose the moral decline that Fitzgerald was not only observing, but also experiencing in his own life. Callahan argues that, “In *The Last Tycoon* Fitzgerald does for the American dream what Ralph Ellison argues every serious novel does for the craft of fiction. Even as a fragment, the work extends the range of idea and phenomena associated with the dream” (378). Once again, as we saw in *Play It as It Lays*, and *The Day of the Locust*, *The Last Tycoon* reveals a part of American culture that is the proverbial skeleton in the closet, wherein the American Dream is not what it once was—at least amid the unrealistic ideals of Hollywood. In response to that assertion, Fitzgerald emphasizes the importance of goodness, integrity, responsibility, and spirituality in the flourishing of a nation and in the pursuit of happiness by creating a hero that exemplifies the characteristics that Fitzgerald admires.

Like Fitzgerald, Manny Schwartz is also a victim of Hollywood. He is obviously down on his luck when he says, “Once upon a time, when I was in the big

money, I had a daughter—a beautiful daughter” (Fitzgerald 9). From this statement it seems that he has lost everything and feels he is finished in the industry. We find out from Wylie White that “He was the head of some combine once... Now he’s down and out” (11), and following “an imagined or real slight from ‘Mr. Smith’ who is actually Monroe Stahr” (Martin 144), there at the Hermitage, he kills himself. It seems significant that Fitzgerald would choose to start his novel at Andrew Jackson’s home, and to pick that sight for Schwartz’s suicide. First, the Hermitage is a symbol of “a better part of American history and the American Dream” (145). Schwartz’s death on the steps of the Hermitage suggests the death of that “better part of American history”. Also, because Stahr rejects his warning Schwartz determines that “it is no use” to “continue the journey” (Fitzgerald 16). Unfortunately, because the novel is unfinished, the reader never finds out what Schwartz knows but we assume that Stahr is in danger of the same fate. His despair suggests that whatever he has experienced, he felt Stahr was his only hope, and now “he had come a long way from some ghetto to present himself at the raw shrine” (13). Cecilia said, “It was doubtful if he knew who Andrew Jackson was as he wandered around, but perhaps he figured that if people had preserved his house Andrew Jackson must have been someone who was large and merciful, able to understand” (13). Here we see the parallel Fitzgerald drew between Stahr and Andrew Jackson, as Schwartz admired Stahr’s honor and saw in him the characteristics that Cecilia described in Jackson. His note to Stahr says, “You are the best of them all...” and is signed, “Your friend, Manny” (16). Schwartz’s admiration indicates that Stahr is what Brucoli describes as, “The twenty-year development of the aristocratic romantic egotism introduced in Amory

Blaine” (9). Brucoli proposes that like Armory, Stahr, “is in quest of values that will satisfy his need to shape society while at the same time fulfilling his uniqueness” (10). Brucoli also suggests, “Fitzgerald was a believer. He grew up believing in the promises of America,” (10), but Schwartz’s and Stahr’s fates suggest a disillusionment with the dream.

Schwartz’s suicide, along with Cecilia’s conversation with the stewardess about an actress who appeared as if she was “contemplating a leap” from the plane (Fitzgerald 5), gives the reader a foreboding feeling right from the start. Schwartz’s death at The Hermitage signifies the end of the archetypal American Dream, which grew out of the aspirations of men like Jackson, and the beginning of the end for Stahr, a character built out of Fitzgerald’s belief in the qualities that Stahr embodied. Brucoli says, “[Fitzgerald] believed in the possibilities of life. He believed in character. He believed in decency, honor, courage, responsibility. More than any other Fitzgerald hero, Monroe Stahr exemplifies these qualities. That may be why F. Scott Fitzgerald thought of him as “the last tycoon”—and of himself as the “last of the novelists” (10).

An Unfulfilled Dream

Stahr’s desperate attempt to hold on to the past is also represented in Kathleen. He sees in her “the face of his dead wife, identical even to the expression. Across the four feet of moonlight, the eyes he knew looked back at him, a curl blew a little on a familiar forehead; the lips parted—the same” (Fitzgerald 26). Fitzgerald continues to connect Stahr to the past at his unfinished beach house with Kathleen. He disinterest in material wealth is evident when he says, “I don’t know why I’m building it”

(80). Then Kathleen says, “Perhaps it’s for me” (80) and in this statement we see that Kathleen not only represents the past in her resemblance to Minna, but she is also beginning to represent a future. Callahan explains, “For all of Stahr’s love affair with an “imaginary past,” Kathleen awakens his passion for life in the present” (389). Furthermore, unlike Stahr, Kathleen is leaving behind her past and looks forward to the future. She says, “I’d like to see the house you’re building, I don’t want tea—tea is the past” (81). But the past is important to Stahr for the ideals that once framed the American Dream. Even in their lovemaking, Stahr’s mood, “was passionately to repeat yet not recapitulate the past” (88). When Kathleen speaks of forgetting things that she learned, Stahr emphatically tells her she “shouldn’t forget,” partly because he values learning, but also because the past is so important to him. He tells her again, “You shouldn’t forget” (91). As if on cue, the grunion fish make their “run” on shore to spawn as they have always done. “They came in twos and threes and platoons and companies, relentless and exalted and scornful, around the great bare feet of the intruders, as they had come before Sir Francis Drake had nailed his plaque to the boulder on the shore” (92). This ritual is nearly as old and predictable as the rising tide with the full and new moons—another link to the past, and, like Stahr, it is also as reliable. The fish pull the reader away from the house, a representation of the Hollywood Dream based on prosperity and affluence, and redirect the focus to tradition and the past. The house, “an open wound in the seascape” (81), and even Stahr and Kathleen, are the “intruders” (92). Graeme Abernethy, author of “‘I Wish for Another Pail’: The Fisherman on the Sand in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Love of the Last Tycoon*” describes the beach house, “As the western outpost of the city” and

claims it “is a microcosm of Fitzgerald’s America – a place where man and nature (again) violently and irreconcilably meet” (16). He also suggests that this change in focus from the house to the Grunion fish is deliberate. He references “Drake’s arrival in California and the transfixed gaze of Dutch sailors at the end of *The Great Gatsby*” and explains; “By shifting the temporal focus from the present, two evoked landings confirm Fitzgerald’s ongoing narrative investment in America’s founding myths” (16).

This is the moment, too, when Stahr and Kathleen meet a black fisherman gathering Grunion in two buckets. The fisherman has seemingly not achieved success by Hollywood’s standards, but, unlike Stahr, seems content, and happy. Furthermore, unlike Stahr, the fisherman is educated, and “never [goes] to the movies” (Fitzgerald 92). When asked why he says, “There is no profit” (92), but in this case his idea of profit is very different from the financial profit which drives the film industry. He adds that he never lets his children go either. For him, profit is measured not so much by monetary value, but by how valuable it is to his self-improvement and the improvement of his family and society; as such, he represents the American Dream before it was tainted by greed. In his opinion, the ideals set forth by Emerson are much more profitable, ideals based on self-reliance and industry. Furthermore, as Adams points out, “In no other author can we get so close to the whole of the American spirit as in Emerson” (198). The fisherman’s rejection of Hollywood troubles Stahr who has dedicated his life to the film industry. Consequently, he is haunted by the fisherman who is, “waiting at home for Stahr, with his pails of silver fish, and he would be waiting at the studio in the morning” (Fitzgerald 95). The juxtaposition of these two seemingly opposite characters is a powerful image. One

has achieved the Hollywood dream of wealth and power, but happiness eludes him. The other is completely outside of the film industry, comes “to the shore to read some Emerson” (92), and gathers fish in pails. As a black man he is not, at this point in time, eligible for the status Stahr has achieved; however, he has a family, is educated, and has achieved the American Dream of life, liberty and happiness.

Stahr is affected by what the fisherman says because until the fisherman inadvertently, “rocked an industry.” Stahr believed that his sacrifices were essential and his films were of importance to everyone. Brady would have likely dismissed the fisherman altogether, but Stahr takes his words to heart. Kathleen patronizingly calls the fisherman, “Poor old Sambo” (93), as if his opinion doesn’t matter, but to Stahr it matters a great deal and he determines, “A picture, many pictures, a decade of pictures, must be made to show him he was wrong” (95). He assumes that if he works even harder, he can change the fisherman’s mind. He figuratively submits borderline pictures “to the negro”, throws them out when he finds them trash, and rescues one “for the negro man” (95) that he had previously sacrificed for Brady. The fisherman forces Stahr to reevaluate the films that are being produced; thus, he reevaluates his own integrity to the art—integrity that had unwittingly been compromised by the influences of the Hollywood film industry. Abernethy aptly describes the disparity between the Hollywood that Fitzgerald was observing and writing about, and the American Dream, saying:

Fitzgerald himself, as an outsider in the film industry and, increasingly, in the literary establishment – and being, in his phrase, “a moralist at heart” – was also imaginatively drawn to the symbolism of the black fisherman, a figure of richly biblical texture. Professing his moral doubts while occupying a liminal space, the fisherman stands comfortably outside present time, untainted by modern

compromises. He nevertheless evokes a distinctly American morality, not least in his association with Emerson's model of self-reliance. (16)

Schulberg similarly said, "The tension between the ideal American Dream and reality was what haunted Scott. I think it haunted him personally and tore him apart at the same time that it inspired and intensified his body of work" (4).

Stahr's tragic end implies the end of the industry in which he was intimately involved from its inception and the end of the ideals once associated with the American Dream and the American frontier. By connecting Stahr to self-made men like Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Jackson, Fitzgerald proposes a penchant for a time when dreams were based on what James Truslow Adams described as a "life... better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (Adams 308). In the model Adams described, dreams were based on the belief, as explained by W. Lloyd Warner, that one, "by applying himself, using the talents he has, by acquiring the necessary skills, can rise from lower to higher status... The opportunity for social mobility for everyone is the very fabric of the American Dream" (Adams xi). While the dream didn't promise that everyone would be rich or famous, it promised opportunity that hadn't been there under British rule and with the restraints of social class boundaries. As the country has evolved and other social boundaries based on race and gender have slowly dissipated, the promises of the dream have become obtainable for even more Americans. For example, Dr. Martin Luther King drew on those very ideals in his fight for racial equality in his speech titled, "The American Dream". He said:

America is essentially a dream, a dream yet unfulfilled. The substance of the dream is expressed in some very familiar words found in the Declaration of Independence, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created

equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’ This is a dream.”
(King)

Barack Obama also used the American Dream in his presidential campaign and authored a book titled, “The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream.”

The title of Obama’s book suggests, as does Fitzgerald, that we should look to history to discover the dream that was the foundation of America. Fitzgerald also suggests we should look there for men like Stahr, who,

[flew} up very high to see, on strong wings, when he was young. And while he was up there he had looked on all the kingdoms, with the kind of eyes that can stare straight into the sun, beating his wings tenaciously—finally frantically—and keeping on beating them, he had stayed up there longer than most of us, and then, remembering all he had seen from his great height of how things were, he had settled gradually to earth. (Fitzgerald 20)

In other words, Fitzgerald champions self-made men with hero-like qualities and traditional values, self-made men who “struggle... to subdue the selfishness of human nature” (Cleveland) and, who have been replaced by those who have achieved success by “luck and shrewdness” (Fitzgerald 28). In the trenches of Hollywood, for Stahr, and others like Schwartz and Pete Zavras, the old dream has failed; or in some cases, has evolved into something very different. Hollywood is a corrupted version of that dream as suggested by “One of the Epilogues Fitzgerald toyed with for *The Last Tycoon*” where “three children are ‘utterly fascinated,’ ‘corrupted,’ when they find some movie people's possessions in the wreckage of a plane (Marsh 184). This scene represents Hollywood’s influence as one that is far-reaching and suggests that when the dream is based on illusions, where success is for the lucky and the beautiful, and virtue and integrity are

often seen as hindrances rather than ideals, the American Dream becomes tainted, and the pursuit of happiness is in vain.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Because the American Dream developed over time and as a result of many defining events in American history, it may be impossible to uncover its exact origin or to precisely define it. However, many historians site Benjamin Franklin, an inventor, politician, revolutionary, and entrepreneur, as an example of one who achieved the dream, and some even credit him with inventing it. In a biography of Franklin by Jim Powell titled, “Benjamin Franklin: The Man Who Invented the American Dream” Powell says,

He championed personal responsibility, intellectual curiosity, honesty, persistence, and thrift—principles that have helped people everywhere lift themselves up. He nurtured an entrepreneurial culture which creates opportunity and hope through peaceful cooperation. He affirmed that by improving yourself and helping your neighbors you can make a free society succeed. His most glorious invention was—and is—the American dream. (Powell)

For Franklin, and many other revolutionaries who were influential in the establishment of “one nation under God,” the American Dream meant freedom and unlimited opportunities conditioned upon personal responsibility. The American landscape was an inspiration for them because it offered what seemed to be unlimited resources as we see in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau who observed God everywhere in nature, and who also saw nature as a symbol of human potential.

By looking at the novels examined for this thesis through the lens of Emerson, Thoreau, and other early American writers, I have sought to reveal a shift in American

values in the film industry as put forth by Joan Didion, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Nathanael West. For all their differences, they are united in suggesting that the American Dream, wrapped up in the glitter of Hollywood, is anything but glorious. As a social criticism, all three authors comment on the corruption of the American Dream and propose that the film industry and, perhaps, as a result of the far-reaching effects of mass media, the whole of American culture lacks the values that Franklin, and others who were influential in the building of America embraced. Further, the dream is focused on unrealistic expectations of wealth and the pleasures of popular culture. The result is a self-destructive culture of unmediated desire and discontent. Stephanie Sarver, author of *Homer Simpson meets Frankenstein: Cinematic influence in Nathanael West's The Day of the Locust*, explains, "West offers more than a simple criticism of the superficial aspects of Hollywood culture: he reveals the social disorder that occurs when a body of people adopt the artifice of film and integrate it into their lives as a representation of reality" (217). The social disorder that Sarver describes and that is apparent in *The Day of the Locust* is the disillusionment of the cheated that have been promised instant success, wealth and beauty by the culture industry. As Adorno and Horkheimer suggest, "The culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers of what it endlessly promises" (111).

Along with a focus on material wealth, the novels also highlight the secularization of Hollywood. In *Play it as it Lays* a man looks for God in the desert only to be killed by a rattlesnake, suggesting that God can no longer be found in a society focused on material gain. Similarly, West's biblical references, contrasted with the corruption and violence of the disillusioned, followed by the riot and the murders of

Adore Loomis and Homer Simpson, also suggest the destruction of a society turned away from religion. Further, West highlights the manipulation of society by the Hollywood dream factory. West's narrative suggests the spiritual and economic poverty found in the Hollywood Dream factory could only lead to an apocalypse. And finally, in *The Last Tycoon* we see the emptiness of success symbolized in Stahr's unfinished house, his precarious position, and in his meeting with the fisherman. As the fisherman implies, the pursuit of wealth in the film industry has jeopardized the quality and creativity of the films, and has replaced God leaving society spiritually famished.

Fitzgerald extends the nightmare to include not only those who were on the fringes of Hollywood, like the outsiders who were unable to achieve success in *Locust*, but also to those who have made it big in the film industry. Monroe Stahr had everything that Hollywood promised; yet, he was still unhappy, which suggests that no one is exempt from its deceptive allure. Fitzgerald's writings indicate that he still believed in the American Dream, but *Tycoon*, with its frequent historical allusions, suggests that he likely considered it a dream of the past. Didion and West seem to share his views and offer little hope of a better future in their novels. Nevertheless, in a note to himself while writing *Tycoon* Fitzgerald describes a more positive perspective when he says, "I look out at it—and I think it is the most beautiful history in the world. It is a history of me and of my people. And if I came here yesterday like Sheila, I would still think so. It is the history of all aspiration—not just the American dream, but the human dream and if I came at the end of it, that too is a place in the line of pioneers" (Martin 141). His words offer some solace and again point to history for the answer; but, while American culture

may still believe in the American Dream, *The Day of the Locust*, *Play it as it lays*, and *The Last Tycoon* portray the effects of the dream's failure in Hollywood, and the nightmare of promises unfulfilled.

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