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# Spring 2014 First Prize Essay

## CALIFORNIA: THE LAND OF BROKEN DREAMS

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The well-renowned dream of moving to California and making it big in Hollywood is a classic American dream. However, this dream is not all it seems. In fact, the Hollywood dream can be destructive, illusory, and unattainable. Hollywood is capable of changing people, and not necessarily for the better. In the novel *The Day of the Locust* and the film *The Player*, Nathanael West and Robert Altman respectively focus on the falsehood of the Hollywood dream. West characterizes Faye, Homer, and Harry as desperate for the seemingly promising lifestyle Hollywood supposedly offers in order to suggest that the Hollywood dream is impossible to achieve, while Altman develops the character of Griffin Mill by employing an eye-level camera angle to characterize him as a shallow producer who gets away with murder, utilizes framing in order to characterize Tom Oakley as an aspiring writer/director who succumbs to the pressures of Hollywood, and cohesively employs character placement and camera distance to characterize Bonnie Sherow as an underestimated woman who represents what Hollywood truly has to offer, all to demonstrate that the Hollywood lifestyle is deceptive and has the ability to change hopefuls into phonies. Though both examine the negative features of the Hollywood dream, West believes the Hollywood dream is impossible and people go to California to die, while Altman expresses that the Hollywood dream is possible for those who are shallow and that the famous can get away with anything, even murder.

West characterizes Faye as a young woman with a shallow personality who has expectations of stardom, which ultimately cause her downfall. In the novel, West includes a scene in which Faye describes her dream of becoming a famous actress. West writes Faye's dialogue as, "It's my life. It's the only thing in the world that I want," then continues to explain, "If I'm not I'll commit suicide" (98). These two excerpts display Faye's materialistic qualities, as she believes that acting is her life and she possesses enough talent to deserve the fame. They also express her inexplicable yearning as a sort of desperateness, for which she is willing to die if she does not get what she wants. This correlates to West's phrase that he continually mentions throughout the novel, that people "come to California to die." Because some people are undeniably this desperate, West demonstrates how easily these people can be fooled into Hollywood's allure of phony promises. Writer Leonard Wilcox shares his insight on West's portrayal of Faye in his article "West's *Day of the Locust* and Shepard's *Angel City*: Refiguring L.A. *Noir*." Wilcox believes that "she identifies totally with the reified image of the star, an image which, however, remains forever out of reach" (63). This illuminates West's characterization of Faye Greener, who ends up broke, not a famous actress, and disappears by the end of the novel. Wilcox's description of Faye accurately reflects West's theme of the illusion of the Hollywood dream. It symbolically explains that no matter how much hope an aspiring star has for earning fame, he or she will desperately cling on to that hope even though the cold reality of Hollywood will fail to grant his or her wish(es). West includes Faye Greener to represent the naïve Hollywood dreamers and display that the Hollywood dream is unachievable, especially for the shallow and greedy.

Another character West includes is Homer Simpson, an introvert who dreams of finding true love and living a stress-free life in California, and fails at doing so, thus falling into the illusionary trap of the

west coast. After he moves to California, Homer spontaneously meets Faye Greener and immediately falls head-over-heels in love with her. In the scene where the two meet for the first time, West writes, "Just as he was about to sit down, she asked for something to drink. He poured her a glass of milk and stood watching her like a waiter. He was unaware of her rudeness" (95). This displays Homer's strange attachment to people, especially women, he has an interest in pursuing. As the novel continues, Faye characteristically treats Homer with no respect and eventually leaves him, which in turn leaves Homer emotionally distressed. He goes to California to fall in love, but ends up alone, which emphasizes West's portrayal of the Hollywood dream as an impossible evil. Literary critic George M. Pisk examines West's characterization of Homer in his article, "The Graveyard of Dreams: A Study of Nathanael West's Last Novel, 'The Day of the Locust.'" He writes, "because of his peculiar psychological makeup, he will be destroyed by his dream as it approaches reality and centers on a specific woman. For Homer is unable to lust impersonally or half-heartedly" (Pisk 66). This demonstrates that Homer not only falls under the hypnotic spell of Hollywood, but he also falls for Faye Greener, who is much like Hollywood in the sense that she lures Homer in, then pushes him out to fend for himself at the end of the novel. Distinctive of a Hollywood hopeful, Homer continually allows himself to be treated poorly in hopes that something better is surely to come soon. Homer is just as naïve as Faye in the sense that he does not understand the illusory nature of Hollywood until it is too late. West's characterization of Homer provides another example of Hollywood's deceptive invitations that ultimately fail to deliver the ability to provide a promising life for these hopefuls.

### **Hollywood's enticing capabilities can consume peoples' lives and its fakery can also allow people to get away with almost anything.**

West introduces the sickly, old Harry Greener as a prime example of a failure in the game to attain stardom in Hollywood. West reveals Harry's backstory in the novel in order to explain how Harry becomes such an unhappy, poor man. West states, "He who had hoped to play Hamlet, Lear, Othello, must needs become the Co. in an act called Nat Plumstone & Co., light quips and breezy patter. He made them dog his dragging feet as, an aged and trembling old man..." (120-121). West contextually hints that Harry was once a young hopeful wanting to acquire fame, yet, by the end of his life, he still slaves away as a salesman at a homemade silver polish company in order to make the bare minimum to survive in Hollywood's dog-eat-dog world. Though Harry is clearly out of luck, he continues to try and achieve his dream vicariously through his daughter, Faye. West's characterization of Harry explains a different dream and personality that Hollywood's illusions are clearly capable of destroying. Though Harry has been in search his whole life for fame, he never accomplishes his career aspirations. This destroys his positive perception on Hollywood, yet Harry knows he must finish his life struggling, just to try to provide for his daughter. In Pisk's article, he also observes West's characterization of Harry Greener and his dream, as he explains, "Harry's sickness parallels the disintegration of his dream, as does his poverty..." (67-68). This quote accurately exposes that Hollywood's illusions ultimately destroy Harry's health and happiness. It also furthers West's motif of the falsity and ephemeral quality of the Hollywood dream, in the sense that no matter how long a person may try to make it big in Hollywood, he or she will never get the rewards anticipated. Though the characters in the novel do not pay attention to Mr. Greener's demise, West's characterization of Harry acts as an evident model of the stereotypical hopeful who comes to California to die (literally).

In the film *The Player*, Altman develops the character of Griffin Mill, who is a shallow, selfish Hollywood studio executive whose obsession with Hollywood allows him to get away with treating people poorly, live his life like a movie, and even get away with murder. In one scene from the film, Griffin is at

a lunch meeting with his fellow studio members. At the meeting, Altman includes dialogue in which Griffin asks, “Can we talk about something other than Hollywood for a change?” (*The Player*). After he poses the question to the others at the table, there is an awkward silence, and then everyone at the table laughs and continues to gossip about movies and actors. Altman utilizes a camera angle that is at eye-level in order to make the scene more realistic, as if the audience is a part of the group at the lunch table. He does this in order to bring the personas of Hollywood’s obsessive followers to life. Altman includes this scene to demonstrate Griffin’s obsession (and the other people at the table for that matter) with Hollywood. Though Griffin may realize it, he fails to accept or act upon the fact that Hollywood consumes his life. It consumes his whole life so much that he ends up murdering an angered writer, but gets away with it at the end of the movie. Michael T. Schuyler, author of “‘Traffic Was a Bitch’: Gender, Race, and Spectatorship in Robert Altman’s ‘The Player’” comments on Altman’s execution of Griffin Mill’s character. He writes, “Griffin’s notions of reality derive solely from the movies” (Schuyler 218). This quote expands on the fact that Griffin blurs the lines between fictional movies and the reality of his life. He is so obsessed with Hollywood that his life becomes a movie and unrealistically allows him to get away with murder. Altman’s development of Griffin’s character as a shallow movie producer who lives his life as if it were a movie expands upon the notion of Hollywood’s ability to consume the lives of the shallow and greedy. Hollywood’s enticing capabilities can consume peoples’ lives and its fakery can also allow people to get away with almost anything.

Altman also introduces the character Tom Oakley as an aspiring movie writer who eventually submits to the false reality of Hollywood and its tendency to praise happy endings. Tom Oakley moves to California to make a pivotal impact on Hollywood movies. He writes a movie pitch in which there are no famous actors and there is no typical Hollywood happy ending (*The Player*). When he gives the movie pitch, Oakley’s hands make a frame shape to which Altman directs the actual camera to frame around Oakley’s hands. This filmic technique helps to provide a realistic and imaginative view of Oakley’s movie idea. It also develops Oakley’s character as a Hollywood hopeful who has an imaginative personality with the gullibility to be cast under the spell of Hollywood’s illusory forces. When describing the ending of the movie to Griffin Mill, Tom Oakley explains, “That’s the reality... the innocent die” (*The Player*). Though it seems as though Oakley will be able to change the movie scene in Hollywood, instead he transforms into a typical Hollywood writer when he decides to change the ending of his movie to a cheesy, happy ending. Through the character of Tom Oakley, Altman illustrates the reality of Hollywood hopefuls and what they can potentially turn into when they move to California. It emphasizes that the expectations of the Hollywood dream do not always turn into reality, especially in the way a person may have originally planned. Author Jack Boozer analyzes Altman’s choice in character development towards the end of *The Player* in his article “Novelist-Screenwriter versus Auteur Desire: The Player.” He examines that “this is more than just a circular closure on the film’s plot up to this point” (Boozer 82). Boozer’s analysis of Tom Oakley’s transformation as a character and as a screenwriter illuminates that the Hollywood dream is always going to take over. It is circular because Oakley originally strives to change the false depictions of life in Hollywood films, yet ends up falling under Hollywood’s hypnotic spell and its admiration for happy endings. Altman includes Tom Oakley as a representative for those who come to Hollywood hoping to change the disingenuous town, but end up falling for the deceptive illusions and become the opposite of what they intended. This explains Hollywood’s acceptance of achieving stardom through hypocrisy and phoniness.

Altman includes the character Bonnie Sherow as a representative of the truth behind Hollywood’s seemingly glamorous appearance. Bonnie is a woman who tries to gain rank and executive power in the Hollywood workplace, but ultimately fails at doing so. She winds up getting fired from her job when

she tries to stand up for Tom Oakley's original, grim ending of his movie (*The Player*). Altman cohesively utilizes character placement and camera distance to express Bonnie's demise at the end of the film. He places her on the steps so as to demonstrate her struggle and loss in the battle to live the glamorous Hollywood lifestyle. The camera's far-away shot enhances the belittlement of Bonnie's character, as she fails to achieve Hollywood's promising lifestyle. Altman develops Bonnie's character as the only example of a negative ending, while all the other characters all live "happily ever after." This displays that even though Hollywood can provide a luxurious life for those consumed and transformed by the Hollywood system, it is not a guaranteed lifestyle, as Hollywood may deceptively display to hopefuls. In Schuyler's article about the film, he writes extensively about Bonnie's character. He believes that "we feel bad for Bonnie, but we don't like her, for ultimately, she's weak" (Schuyler 227). Schuyler's commentary further explains Bonnie's representation of the reality of the Hollywood dream in an audience perspective. Bonnie seems "weak" because she does not obtain the Hollywood dream, as she does not want the happy ending for the movie and gets fired. Getting fired is a realistic part of life, and this is not something that people necessarily enjoy to see happen. Altman's development of Bonnie Sherow explains that people still want all the fame and wealth Hollywood supposedly offers, even though it is clear through Bonnie's character that the Hollywood dream is not always possible, especially for those who refuse to give in to the pressures and illusions of the California dream.

Both Nathanael West and Robert Altman utilize characterization of a variety of characters in each of their works. When West introduces Faye and Altman introduces Griffin, they both characterize these figures as self-absorbed and both characters get away with treating people poorly throughout each story. However, West's theme of the impossible Hollywood dream is evident, as Faye never achieves her dreams. On the other hand, Altman directs the film so the flawed Griffin has a happy ending, which illuminates Altman's idea of Hollywood allowing happy endings, but only for the shallow. West includes Homer and Altman presents Tom Oakley, both of whom represent Hollywood hopefuls who succumb to Hollywood's illusionary trap. Homer never attains his dreams of finding love, as West expands upon the theme of Hollywood's inability to grant wishes for the weak-willed. Yet, Altman's characterization of the ever-changeable Tom Oakley furthers his point that Hollywood is a powerful force that can provide a phony happiness for those who fall into the trap. West writes about Harry Greener and Altman directs and develops Bonnie's character. Both are created to represent the truth of Hollywood's seemingly promising lifestyle, yet deceptive and illusory capabilities. However, West's rendering of Harry Greener explains that people go to California to die, as evidence through Greener's death, whereas Altman's characterization of Bonnie and her downfall explains that the Hollywood dream is unattainable for those who refuse to fall for the illusion of Hollywood's glitz and glamour.

Nathanael West and Robert Altman both put forward fictional pieces that revolve around the theme of Hollywood's falsehood. West characterizes Faye, Homer, and Harry as desperate for the fame and fortune Hollywood supposedly offers. Altman characterizes Griffin with an eye-level camera angle, Tom Oakley with the framing technique, and Bonnie with camera distance and character placement, all as separate representations of what the Hollywood dream can and cannot offer, and to whom it can and cannot offer. *The Day of the Locust* serves as a signal to enlighten aspiring stars or other naïve hopefuls that Hollywood is not all it seems and can, in fact, even be destructive, while *The Player* acts as an informative film to explain that Hollywood is filled with phony people who can get away with almost anything. West's point is that Hollywood may seem like a paradise where people go to live, when in reality people go to California to suffer and die, yet Altman believes that Hollywood can be a place where dreams come true, but only under the spell of illusion and deception.

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