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AMERICAN DREAM SCREAMS:
SUCCESS IDEOLOGY AND THE HOLLYWOOD NOVEL
BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the American Studies Program
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirement for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

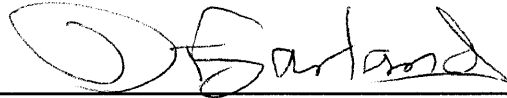
David Travers Garland

1990

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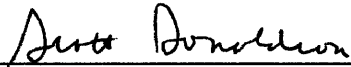
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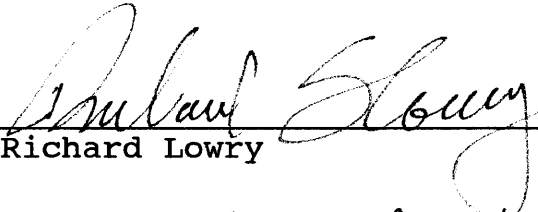


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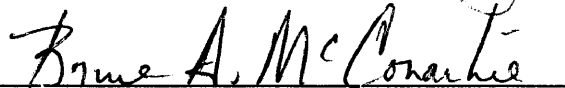
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ABSTRACT

This study's purpose is to explore how the Hollywood novel between the two world wars dealt with Hollywood's reflection and refraction of success ideology.

The term Hollywood American Dream is used to suggest the transforming impact of the "Dream Factory" on existing success ideology, a traditional American Dream which originated as a "slippery" abstraction of a middle-class Northern American work ethic crystallized in the mid-nineteenth century out of the legacy of the Protestant ethic and before that early, rural American Puitanism.

An overview of the period suggests that two Hollywood novels, Harry Leon Wilson's Merton of the Movies (1922) and Nathanael West's The Day of the Locust (1939), stand out in the genre by their even-handed and incisive analysis of how the competing success ideologies affected the aspirations and behavior of Tinsel Town denizens, in particular the movie industry fringe figures.

Case studies of the two novels reveal a charting of typical but troubled transitions from a traditional ethos of scarcity, the work ethic, and muscular Christianity to one of abundance, a passive luck ethic, and secular hedonism. As such, the works show how in its relationship to success ideology the Hollywood Dream Factory interacted in vital ways with the general consumerist and therapeutic ethos increasingly influential in the United States during this century.

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CHAPTER I

WHEN YOU WISH UPON A STAHR: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

When you wish upon a star,
Makes no difference who you are,
When you wish upon a star,
Your dreams come true.
-Pinocchio (1940)

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
-W. B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming,' (1921)

An American way of life.
-F.D. Roosevelt, Speech, accepting Presidential
nomination, Philadelphia, Pa., 27 June, 1936

And the word is capitalism. We are too mealy-
mouthed. We fear the word capitalism is unpopular.
So we talk about the "free enterprise system" and
run to cover in the folds of the flag and talk
about the American Way of Life.
-Eric A. Johnston, movie executive and diplomat,
N.Y. Times, 26 January, 1958¹

Hollywood stands high among the most significant
influences on American society this century. Many studies
have thus inevitably focused on Hollywood's relationship
with the "American way of life," in particular the success
ideology popularly known as the American Dream. These

studies have varied widely in approach, ranging from articles in fan magazines and academic journals to self-reflexive movies and a wealth of Hollywood novels. Such novels, particularly those written before the movie industry's decline in the fifties, tend to view Hollywood as at the vanguard of change in society, containing the essence of and thus the key to what the United States is becoming. They typically portray a clash of value-systems, with Hollywood spearheading an assault on the existing dominant framework of values and beliefs in American life. Implied as the crux of this threat is the specter of a disintegrating consensus in society regarding success ideology, followed by a collapse in national identity and purpose, that is, in the American way itself.²

However, while numerous Hollywood novels have implicitly promulgated such a scenario, usually as part of confused, anti-Hollywood diatribes, few have succeeded in providing a sustained, penetrating critique of Hollywood's dissemination of the American Dream. Unfortunately, the general failure of the genre in this context has obscured and detracted from the small number of works which certainly prove its potency in the area of sociocultural analysis. In common with a great amount of popular, genre-based fiction, the Hollywood novel has been consigned for the most part to a ghetto of critical disrepute. As a result, several outstanding investigations of American success ideology have

suffered misinterpretation or neglect.

Almost all the genre's most incisive treatments of the American Dream were published during the period between the United States's involvement in the two world wars. These years encompass two ostensibly very different decades, commonly labelled the Roaring Twenties and the Depression Thirties. Running through them both, however, lies the thread of a profound crisis in success ideology. This crisis is reflected "passively" by all the Hollywood novels of the era. With only one or two exceptions, the few which directly address and examine the crisis come out of the thirties, the years of most acute pressure on traditional ideology. Undue emphasis, however, can too easily be placed on the Depression's direct effect on the crisis and on the superior handling of this situation by a small number of Hollywood novels. The rise of this "Golden Age" for the genre was significantly motivated by factors not at all or only indirectly linked to the Depression, while the crisis itself certainly did not suddenly appear after the crash of the stock market in the Fall of 1929. The Depression merely exacerbated and more clearly revealed strains and tensions in the American Dream which had increased after 1918 (via progressively hysterical and artificial optimism), and which can be traced back to the nineteenth century.

Although The Home Book of Proverbs, Maxims and Familiar Phrases (1948) attributes "American way of life" to

Roosevelt's 1936 speech accepting the presidential nomination,³ this catch-all catch-phrase proves historically elusive in signification, a characteristic it shares with such related expressions as "Americanism" and "American Dream." Fox and Lears tie this fluctuating phrase to the "culture of consumption" increasingly dominant in the twentieth century,⁴ and indeed we might regard it as a euphemism for corporate-capitalist cultural hegemony. In this regard, the changing nature of the success ideology long labelled the American Dream corresponds to Lears's persuasive proposition that the turn of this century saw "the beginning of a shift from a Protestant ethos of salvation through self-denial toward a therapeutic ethos stressing self-realization in this world,"⁵ a process marked by evolutions from "producer" and "inner-direction" ethics to "consumer" and "other-direction" ones.

The American Dream originated as a "slippery" abstraction of a middle-class Northern American work ethic, itself crystallized in the mid-nineteenth century out of the legacy of the Protestant ethic and before that from early, rural American Puritanism.⁶ Basically, this work ethic elevated work and active, conscientious doing over leisure and idleness, although as Daniel Rodgers rightly points out, it was initially "not a single conviction but a complex of ideas with roots and branches."⁷ From the time of its crystallization, however, the roots of this success ideology

became increasingly detached from both their sustaining soil and the abstracted bright petals of the American Dream. This double dislocation emanated from the growing secularization and the rapid modernization that transformed American society in the post-Civil War era. As this pressure exposed and heightened the ideology's many inherent contradictions and limitations, popular faith in the American Dream inevitably came under strain.⁸

In their introduction to The Culture of Consumption, Fox and Lears cursorily acknowledge film's place in American consumer culture. Drawing on Lears's paradigm of a shift from a Protestant to a therapeutic ethos, I would submit that the Hollywood movie industry played a crucial, defining role in this shift. After its inception in the teens of this century, Hollywood rapidly became the single most powerful focus for and carrier of the American Dream, in terms of both the myths surrounding and the movies emanating from the "Dream Colony." In the process, however, this Hollywood-filtered success ideology germinated significant differences from the traditional dream; in part because of the nature of Hollywood's appeal as place, medium, and emerging ideological force in its own right; and in part because of the growing therapeutic sensibility privileging the quest for intense emotional experience--for "real life"--in the face of the perceived "weightlessness" of liberalized, secularized Protestantism.⁹

People were now faced with a version of the American Dream which paradoxically both circumscribed and conflicted with the existing ideology. This variant, what might be called the Hollywood American Dream, internalized such conflict into further self-contradictions of its own. Offering a deceptive closeness and easy entrée to extreme real life experience, the new dream proved very seductive to many whose adherence to traditional ideology had slackened in the turn-of-the-century climate of what Lears calls the "flight from unreality":

At its most mundane, this change involved a loosening of the work ethic in response to "overpressure," a growing acceptance of what William James called "The Gospel of Relaxation" among educated business and professional people as well as factory and clerical workers. While avant-garde bohemians dramatized the appeal of life in extremis, captains of a nascent "leisure industry" played to the yearning for intense experience at all social levels. They commodified titillation at cabarets and in amusement parks; they catered to the anxious businessman as well as the bored shop girl; they assimilated immigrants and WASPs in a new mass audience. Roller coasters, exotic dancers, and hootchy-kootchy girls all promised temporary escapes to a realm of intense experience, far from the stuffy unreality of bourgeois culture.¹⁰

Hollywood played right into this prevailing trend. The new ideology, however, proved more elusive and "thinly spread" than the traditional dream (part indeed of what Daniel Boorstin terms "the thinner life of things"¹¹), and thus ultimately a less satisfying and sustaining comfort. As such, the Hollywood American Dream suffered from many of the drawbacks Lears identifies in the therapeutic ethos as a

whole: "For many, the therapeutic quest led ultimately in circles. . . . A loosening of repressive morality came at the price of increased banality. . . . Instinct liberated became instinct made banal; the reaction against weightlessness produced more weightlessness."¹²

By far the most important characteristic distinguishing the new Hollywood variant from the traditional dream was its considerable emphasis on luck. As Richard Weiss states in his study of American success ideology, luck was "an element that the Protestant ethic did not admit."¹³ This ethic essentially promised success to those who believed in and practiced certain values, namely honesty, thrift, prudence, and industry. A major source of its appeal was that it simplified life and society, ignoring complexities and dismissing doubts. Such a simplistic, generalized philosophy inevitably abounded with contradictions. Never mind that many patently honest, thrifty, prudent, and industrious people remained in poverty; or equally that those who succeeded in climbing the greasy pole were often conspicuously lacking in one or more of these qualities. Never mind, that is, so long as the ideology's appeal remained sufficient to encompass and transcend these contradictions. However, the new social order after the Civil War increasingly challenged this sufficiency.¹⁴ With the cogs of the American Dream badly creaking, luck provided a slippery enough concept to act as a lubricant, notably in

the late nineteenth century "rags-to-riches" novels of Horatio Alger, Jr.¹⁵

Although unrestricted luck had no place within the traditional success ideology, it made a perfect focal point for a Hollywood variant emphasizing, but by no means confined to, success in the movie industry. Luck publicly permeated every aspect of Hollywood, leading the sociologist Leo Rosten to assert in 1941: "Hollywood means Luck."¹⁶ Thus, the role of luck within the Hollywood American Dream necessarily became one of full-blown propulsion rather than mere lubrication. In this version, creaking Puritan maxims were relegated well into the background, to be paid a rather hazy homage. Richard Maltby, focusing on the new dream's emphasis on Hollywood stardom, defines it as offering "a seemingly effortless version of the Horatio Alger myth, in which a star could be made by a self-made man, and hard work was replaced by talent, good looks or merely good fortune."¹⁷ Yet while the main ingredients of the dream might well have been, as Maltby asserts, "beauty and easy success,"¹⁸ luck was surely the essence of the recipe, the catalytic binding agent. It took on the role of capricious Blind Fortune, knowing neither moral nor rational code. Luck could make--or break-- anybody: good, bad, even ugly. For although the dream celebrated physical beauty, it simultaneously suggested a multitude of ways to correct defects in one's appearance. The Dream Factory, in

particular, could do wonders for aspiring stars in true Fairy Godmother style;¹⁹ while good dentistry and hairstyling could not do any harm for those in other fields. Only luck remained beyond human control.

However, although the Hollywood American Dream's conception of luck could certainly account for unworthy successes, this same conception posed problems of its own. Most notably, it could prompt a great deal of passivity, even determinism, in people's attitudes. Wishful thinking replaced positive thinking and doing. The prevailing sentiment proved less the Algerite "I must work my way to a lucky break" than "It could happen to me one day." David Thomson convincingly suggests that the very nature of the filmic medium, in terms of the type of narrative realism developed by Hollywood, encouraged such passivity:

It may be that Hollywood took flight on a technology that assisted daydreaming; fantasies could be realised; the lazy fantasist could relax in the warmth and provided manifestations of a movie house.²⁰

On top of this, the movie industry itself operated on an extremely volatile basis, with unpredictable circumstances leading to as many sudden falls from grace as overnight successes, and to a plethora of flops for every box-office hit. Little wonder then, that in a 1950 study of Hollywood, the anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker is led to liken "the general atmosphere pervading the studios" to "that of the gamblers' den."²¹ Rosten makes a similar point some years

earlier in an analysis of the extreme, hysterical optimism he identifies as dominating Hollywood:

Optimism and insecurity run through the movie colony side by side. This is no paradox, for optimism is often a narcotic to deaden anxiety, and in Hollywood anxiety serves as a restraint on excessive elation and as a kind of penance for extravagances of income, spending, conduct, or business operations. There seems to be an unconscious need for anxiety in the movie colony, and anxiety is provoked, nursed, and kept alive (note the popularity of gambling, for example) in a manner which suggests self-punishment for obscure and disturbing guilts. . . . Optimism is the desideratum of Hollywood, but Cassandra is its prophet.²²

Rosten correctly suggests that among many the volatility of Hollywood success became a convenient, catch-all rationalization for anxiety, enabling them to stomach other less easily digestible discontents. He identifies one of the most important of these as the fact that in Hollywood there were "no fixed goals . . . no reasonable point at which to fix 'success.'"²³ At the heart of this specific discontent lay a more general confusion concerning success ideology, by no means confined to the Dream Colony. As the Hollywood variant's appeal mounted, the deeply ingrained nature of traditional ideology inevitably spawned a guilt complex in those caught between dreams. Carolyn Penelope See well describes how this guilt found reflection in Hollywood novels:

The average protagonist who has "made it" in the industry divides his time between feeling guilty over his money because he may not deserve it, or wondering whether the money is really being paid to him at all. Success materializes, but it is a

reward for very little work, and so is a vulgarization of the dream, an adolescent fantasy of self-improvement without effort and ultimately satisfaction.²⁴

From its beginnings in the late teens,²⁵ the Hollywood novel could not help but reflect and respond to the schism in success ideology. Few pre-Depression works, however, show either the depth of insight or the artistic intent and talent necessary to any penetrative analysis of the phenomenon. During this period, the genre proved replete with popular romance novels which attempted to exploit Hollywood's massive appeal with their target readership while simultaneously denouncing the place and its products. Their authors very often had little or no first-hand experience of the movie industry.²⁶ Reflecting the prevailing ideological climate, these books tend to emit strongly conflicting signals, such as glamor/depravity and success/misery (signals which also permeate the fan press of the inter-war years²⁷). Ostensibly pious, anti-Hollywood tirades, their messages are in effect somewhat more confused and ambiguous, making manifest despite themselves signs of deep ideological crisis.²⁸ As epitomized by Nina Putnam's Laughter Limited (1922) and Stella Perry's Extra-Girl (1929), such works typically show their (usually female) protagonists attempting to remain true to their traditional values and ideals in the face of the seducing pressures of Hollywood. This struggle more often than not is symbolized by threats to the physical purity/virginity of the

protagonists, to be resolved either in their escape from or in their corruption by Hollywood. Rarely can they both remain in the Dream Factory and retain their integrity; and whatever happens, a sense of loss generally pervades the climax of these stories.

Representing the other side of the coin, Rupert Hughes's Souls For Sale (1922) is one of the very few Hollywood novels, in either the twenties or the thirties, stridently to affirm Hollywood attitudes at the expense of traditional ideology. The protagonist, Remember Steddon, undergoes a process of disillusionment on arriving in Hollywood, only eventually to realize that it is in fact her strict Presbyterian upbringing (she is a minister's daughter) which is the cause of her discontent. However, in common with contemporary anti-Hollywood works, beneath Hughes' unequivocal, "sledgehammer" defense of all things Hollywood lies ideological uncertainty, an uncertainty best illustrated in the portrayal of his heroine. After settling in Hollywood and repudiating her past life, Remember reviews this past as a "slothful indolence at best, a waste of gifts, a burying of genius," and plans in the future "to be busy, to achieve, to build her soul and sell it."²⁹ Her attitude towards her past and future shows a confusing, contradictory mix of traditional and Hollywood elements in the present make-up of her success ideology, which in turn suggests a nascent consumerism along the lines described by

Fox and Lears: "Individuals have been invited to seek commodities as keys to personal welfare, and even to conceive of their selves as commodities. One sells not only one's labor and skills, but one's image and personality, too."³⁰ Remember's confusion resembles the state of mind of Harry Leon Wilson's eponymous hero at the dènouement of Merton of the Movies, published in the same year. Wilson's novel, however, stands head and shoulders above Souls for Sale and other pre-Depression works, distinguished most of all by the even-handed and knowing nature of its analytical approach to the American Dream. It is not until the thirties that Merton receives any company in this respect.

Two events in the late twenties profoundly influenced the nature and development of the Hollywood novel in the following decade: the onset of the Great Depression at the end of 1929, and, of equal importance, the conversion of Hollywood movies to sound between 1927 and 1929. This conversion created a need for far more screenwriters in the colony, especially proven wordsmiths. Always on the lookout for a veneer of prestige and calculating that the best writers would make them the most money at the box-office, the studios made strenuous attempts to entice the pre-eminent novelists and playwrights to Hollywood. Their success in this venture was greatly enhanced by the Depression which, while affecting Hollywood later and far less than most other industries, crippled both the

publishing business and the commercial theatre. Many writers previously resistant to the lure of Hollywood lucre now proved only too eager to take up offers of work in Tinsel Town.³¹

Once in Hollywood, these novelists/playwrights-turned-screenwriters were often treated very badly by their employers, but even more significantly their talents were generally misused and wasted. More than one critic of the genre has seen the Hollywood novel as the means whereby such writers took their revenge on Hollywood and its ruling establishment; they released pent up anger into diatribes of "Literary Aggression" and "Fictional Hate," to quote Virgil L. Lokke.³² While pertinent to several individual works, this viewpoint lacks credibility as a generalization. The reaction of many of the writers in question proved far more complex, combining a deep but often grudging fascination for their place of work, with an enormous sense of frustration and even guilt.³³ Walter Wells incisively locates this frame of mind when he comments:

By the thirties, the film industry . . . had assumed first rank in the demonology of serious writers. It was the capitol of anti-art, the home of the Big Sell-Out, a place where writers were paid very well to build, preserve, and enhance illusions--but never examine them [my emphasis].³⁴

The Hollywood novel consequently fulfilled a number of pressing needs for these discontented illusionists, providing: "real" work to help assuage their artistic and

ascetic consciences; a cathartic means to probe their illusions; and finally, the natural genre to tackle the great socio-cultural phenomenon and literary preoccupation of the time, the search for bolsters or alternatives to a disintegrating Weltanschauung.³⁵ However, while many such writers did indeed turn to the genre, few works from these Depression years may seriously be considered to rival the earlier Merton's analytical success, and arguably only one to surpass it: Nathanael West's The Day of the Locust (1939).

Merton and Locust's closest rival in probing analysis, They Shoot Horses, Don't They (1935), benefits in both content and style from author Horace McCoy's experiences during the worst years of the Depression, first as a struggling actor and then as a screenwriter. The novel's handling of the existentialist/determinist dilemma facing the two protagonists marks it as one of the most powerful depictions of success ideology in crisis, although as John Thomas Sturak suggests, the scope of the novel denies it some of Merton and Locust's direct, analytical qualities:

But in the handling of his story's unique setting and of its in extremis resolution, McCoy has projected it beyond the social and ethical concerns of its time and place. Much more than a documentary 'of one of those grisly symptoms of the early years' of this country's Great Depression, more than a symbolic comment upon the desperate socio-economic condition of the Western world in the thirties, McCoy's marathon danse macabre is also a universally applicable parable of modern man's existential predicament.³⁶

Unfortunately, McCoy's second and final work in the genre, I Should Have Stayed Home (1938), suffers greatly in comparison, evincing its author's bruising by several of the perils endemic to the novelist-cum-screenwriter. The most obvious of these was the sheer strain of holding two jobs; and since studio employment paid the bills, novel-writing inevitably lost out, at the very least in terms of time management. However, the "creative fatigue" and self-plagiarism Sturak correctly identifies in McCoy's novel has at its source an even more pernicious pressure, namely the incompatible contents of the movies McCoy and others had to contribute to and the novels they wanted to write.³⁷

This incompatibility became particularly pronounced during the Depression. Instead of attempting to examine the crisis, the studios closed ranks and generally turned out a product which stridently affirmed the American Dream, often to the point of hysteria. In the process, Hollywood hardened its formulae: narratives became increasingly separated into a number of fixed genres, and cinematic language grew more standardized.³⁸ Thus, as Andrew Bergman points out, in the gangster and musical genres of the early thirties, "Hollywood coaxed an old success model back to life, creating special worlds in which it could function. . . , in effect, success preserves."³⁹ His conclusion conveys the diametric opposition of such movies to the social attitudes of writers like McCoy:

What happens in depression movies is that traditional beliefs in the possibilities of individual success are kept alive in the early thirties under various guises, that scapegoats for social dislocation are found and that federal benevolence becomes an implicit and ultimately dead-ended premise by the end of the decade. Hollywood would help the nation's fundamental institutions escape unscathed by attempting to keep alive the myth and wonderful fantasy of a mobile and classless society, by focussing on the endless possibilities for individual success, by turning social evil into personal evil and making the New Deal into a veritable leading man [my emphasis].⁴⁰

On top of such ideological incompatibility came the rigors of collaborative work, an inherent anathema in itself to most novelists and one quickly learnt by others in a prevailing climate of backstabbing, uncredited (and miscredited) contributions, and scripts/writers junked on the word of some distant studio boss. Together, these incompatibilities were enough to bruise the hardiest writer; and ironically, they are best conveyed in the Hollywood novels of two whose work suffered markedly because of them: Budd Schulberg's What Makes Sammy Run? (1941) and F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Last Tycoon (1941).

Fitzgerald's portrayal of powerful producer Monroe Stahr dominates his analysis of Hollywood. Obviously modelled on MGM's wunderkind, Irving Thalberg, the finished character is eulogized to the point of hero-worship. Through Stahr, Fitzgerald narcissistically recreates himself as a supreme and positive influence behind what he described in "The Crack-Up" (1936) as "a more glittering, a grosser

power."⁴¹ Consequently, although Stahr works in an art-form "where personality [is] worn down to the inevitable low gear of collaboration,"⁴² he transcends the process by always having the final say, thereby enabling it to function properly. Consistently identified with such past American heroes as Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Jackson, Stahr fights a losing, rearguard battle in defense of old-fashioned values within the Hollywood stronghold of the emergent enemy forces.

Although Tycoon remained unfinished and unrevised, Fitzgerald's notes suggest that it would not have transcended this Thalberg/Stahr/Fitzgerald wish-fulfillment nexus. One comment from his notes implies that the Stahr factor at least fractionally dislocated the novel's execution from its conception: "Remember my summing-up in Crazy Sunday--don't give the impression that these are bad people."⁴³ Given Stahr's portrayal, however, this impression proves unavoidable. As Lokke suggests, in Tycoon "Hollywood is to be assessed and understood . . . through an analysis of the best man it had produced."⁴⁴ Fitzgerald's creation of such a martyred hero could not help but consign Stahr's adversaries to the status of "bad people."

It is impossible to calculate the effect of the novel-writing/screenwriting ideological incompatibility on Fitzgerald's novel. Certainly, he was always more inclined than his friend West to laud traditional values. As he said

to his daughter when writing Tycoon, he was "too much a moralist at heart and really want[ed] to preach at people in some acceptable form rather than to entertain them."⁴⁵

Although undoubtedly also a moralist, West maintained a detached, analytical edge in Locust where there are indeed no "bad people" as such. Tycoon, by contrast, shares the Depression Hollywood movie's tendency to personalize the social, with the rags-to-riches Stahr replacing the New Deal as the leading man.

Schulberg's Sammy takes a largely inverse tack, in many respects crudely socializing the personal. The novel's eponymous protagonist thus becomes the Product of His Environment, namely the violent, dog-eat-dog tenement streets of New York's Lower East Side where he was raised. One of the most popular of the period's Hollywood novels, Sammy, as Lokke points out, "offered something for everybody":

To the popular front liberal it offered a mirror image of his political and ethical opinions. For the casual and hasty reader, it had simple dialogue, simple sentences, sexy interludes, and an uncomplicated narrative development. . . . But most important of all is the fact that the novel fulfilled the basic requirement which the middle-brow reader of the period demanded of his fiction, . . . watching the rich suffer, particularly if the wealth was accompanied by authority, . . . watching the powerful-rich discover the emptiness of material success.⁴⁶

In its attempt to tackle the crisis in the American Dream, the novel employs a didactic moralism and monolithic socioeconomic conception much beloved by many social protest

novels of the thirties. Both strands are filtered through Schulberg's authorial/narratorial Everyman figure, Al Manheim, a device epitomizing the cumbersomeness of the novel's structure. Here, unlike in Fitzgerald's Tycoon and McCoy's Horses, the stylistic legacy of screenwriting proves as much a burden as a boon;⁴⁷ and it is perhaps significant that Schulberg, unusually among his contemporaries, became a novelist only after three years of training as an apprentice screenwriter. As Wells comments, in Sammy "the deterministic world view that colors Southland fiction is given its most explicit treatment--and its most jejune."⁴⁸ There is no room for subtlety, complexity, or ambiguity in the novel's treatment of success ideology.

Rejecting both traditional and Hollywood versions of the American Dream, Schulberg explicitly proffers a vision of socialist utopia as a remedy for America's woes. Despite somewhat similar political leanings, West does not attempt in Locust to offer any systematic solution to the crisis, an approach he well articulated in a 1939 letter:

I believe that there is a place for the fellow who yells fire and indicates where some of the smoke is coming from without actually dragging the hose to the spot. Remember that famous and much quoted discussion about the comparative merits of Balzac and Eugene Sue which exists, I think, somewhere in Marx's correspondence. As I understand it, Balzac, Marx thought, was the better writer, even revolutionist, than Sue despite the fact that Sue was an active and confirmed radical while Balzac called himself a royalist. Balzac was the better because he kept his eye firmly fixed on the middle class and wrote with great truth and no wish-fulfillment. The superior truth alone in Balzac

was sufficient to reveal the structure of middle class society and its defects and even show how it would ultimately be destroyed.⁴⁹

In these terms, Schulberg and (in a different sense) Fitzgerald appropriately become Sue to Wilson and West's Balzac.

One of the most convincing explanations for this Merton/Locust conjunction lies in their authors's deceptively different screenwriting careers. In common with Fitzgerald and McCoy, West went to Hollywood for the money, in order to finance his novel-writing. Wilson, on the other hand, went there specifically to collect material for a Hollywood novel, having already made a small fortune from his novels, short stories, and plays. Only towards the end of his life in 1935, when his talent had declined and his success has tailed off, did Wilson accept studio employment as a consultant for MGM, a post he could tolerate a mere matter of weeks.⁵⁰ In other words, Wilson had the uncommon advantage in 1920-21 of being able to work in Hollywood on Merton free from any ties to the movie industry, but with access via inside contracts to several studio lots.⁵¹ Such ties, as many a novelist-cum-screenwriter found to his cost, could be debilitating on several counts, ranging from an incompatible surfeit of work to censorship and seduction.

Through an unlikely mixture of circumstance, attitude, and general disposition, West managed to emerge from these perils relatively unscathed. He coped remarkably well with

the pressures of his position in Hollywood, although in this respect his lack of commercial success as either novelist or screenwriter ironically proved to his benefit. West's first spell in Hollywood as a lowly junior writer lasted barely two months, with Columbia deciding not to renew his contract at the end of August 1933. Then when his third novel A Cool Million (1934) joined The Dream Life of Balso Snell (1931) and Miss Lonelyhearts (1933) on the remainder shelves, West again sought work in Hollywood. This proved the beginning of a sustained stay in the Dream Factory. West worked there for the few remaining years of his life, taking time out to write Locust and then later to marry (it was his marriage's happiness rather than the pressures of screenwriting which stalled further novel-writing before his premature death). Eventually he moved from Republic to RKO and Universal, but significantly never worked for any of the biggest studios and wrote only on "C" and "B" rather than "A" movies.

Consequently, West had less of an incentive than Schulberg or Fitzgerald to attempt any movie masterpieces, forced as he was to concoct even more formulaic and less ambitious narratives than the big budget affairs peddled as prestige pictures. This situation fueled his already prodigious ability to departmentalize his two writing careers, enabling him to transcend their incompatibilities where others could not. He had, moreover, as biographer Jay Martin comments, the talent, the disposition, and the

attitude towards his work to be able to churn out script after script, "dictated rather than written, spun off freely and rapidly in a release of energies and in a language virtually indistinguishable from that turned out by his fellow writers."⁵² West thus suffered less grief than most when his work was cut, rewritten or junked; and his relative obscurity as a novelist and screenwriter largely liberated him from the pressures of reprisal which dogged so many of his contemporaries (his problem indeed proved less the reaction than the size of his readership). In common with Wilson, but facing far greater pressures, West remained able to stare at stardust without being blinded; and it is this 20/20 insight which ultimately separates Merton and Locust from other inter-war Hollywood novels in analysis of the Hollywood American Dream scream.

ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER I

1. Quoted in George Seldes, ed., The Great Quotations (New York: Caesar-Stuart, 1960), p. 379.

2. See Virgil L. Lokke, "The Literary Image of Hollywood," (Ph.D. diss., The State University of Iowa, 1955), pp. 10-11. I would disagree that "Novelists of the twenties and early thirties found Hollywood's threat limited in scope" compared to the "direct and virulent malice" against Hollywood in more recent works. In this connection, see Walter Wells, Tycoons and Locusts: A Regional Look at Hollywood Fiction of the 1930s (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), pp. 12-13, 23, and especially 124: "The dissolving dream which was Hollywood to the earlier writers has its death acknowledged and taken for granted in the forties and after."

3. Burton Stevenson, ed., The Home Book of Proverbs, Maxims and Familiar Phrases (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 61.

4. See the "Introduction" to Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, eds., The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), pp. ix-xvii.

5. T.J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertizing and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," in Fox and Lears, op. cit., p. 4.

6. Richard Weiss calls the "American myth of success" one of the most enduring expressions of American popular ideals (p. 3), and examines its roots and various promulgators in some detail, in The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale (New York and London: Basic Books, 1969). See also Daniel T. Rodgers's historical mapping and analysis of the work ethic in The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).

7. Rodgers, op. cit., p. 7.

8. See Charles J. Maland, American Visions: The Films of Chaplin, Ford, Capra, and Welles, 1936-1941 (New York: Arno Press, 1977), pp. 2-8; Walter Sussman, ed., Culture and Commitment 1929-1945 (New York: George Braziller, 1973), pp. 2, 4-11; Jeffrey Morton Paine, The Simplification of American Life: Hollywood Films of the 1930s (New York: Arno Press, 1977), p. 12. With reference to the Lynds's "Middletown" studies of 1925 and 1935, Maland states that for these people the Depression was "a personal rather than a social failure" to be overcome "by the values of hard work and individual conformity to social norms" (p. 5). While basically

correct, he too easily disregards inner confusion and the difference between what is said and what is felt. I would also disagree with Elizabeth Long when she writes in The American Dream and the Popular Novel (Boston and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 1, that "the limits and contradictions of that dream became widely apparent" for the first time during the post-1945 era.

9. See Lears, op. cit., p. 10.

10. Ibid., pp. 10-11.

11. Quoted in Lears, op.cit., p. 7.

12. Ibid., p. 16.

13. Weiss, op. cit., p. 53.

14. Ibid., p. 10.

15. In Alger's novels, luck was skilfully integrated into traditional ideology, as Weiss (op. cit., pp. 53-54) well describes: "Alger himself admits that virtue does not always bring material rewards, though luck never comes to the wicked. Luck is always earned by those who have it, though it is not always had by those who have earned it. This resembles the Puritan notion of salvation: the saved are always virtuous, but the virtuous are not always saved."

16. Leo Rosten, Hollywood: The Movie Colony; The Movie Makers (1941; rpt., New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1970), p. 15.

17. Richard Maltby, Harmless Entertainment: Hollywood and the Ideology of Consensus (Metuchen, N.J., and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1983), p. 4.

18. Ibid., p. 3.

19. See Rosten, op. cit., pp. 12-16.

20. David Thomson, America in the Dark: Hollywood and Gift of Unreality (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1977), p. 47.

21. Hortense Powdermaker, Hollywood, The Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1950), p. 289.

22. Rosten, op. cit., pp. 39-40.

23. Ibid., p. 40.

24. Carolyn Penelope See, "The Hollywood Novel: An Historical and Critical Study," (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1963), pp. 7-8.

25. Nancy Brooker-Bowers suggests that the first true Hollywood novel was published in 1916. See The Hollywood Novel and Other Novels About Film, 1912-1982 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1985), p. 4.

26. See See, op. cit., pp. 17, 36-37; Brooker-Bowers, op. cit., p. 5. In Budd Schulberg's "Afterword to the Penguin Edition" of What Makes Sammy Run? (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 248, he recalls Random House's Bennett Cerf commenting to him that "People who read novels aren't interested in Hollywood, and people interested in Hollywood don't read novels." This statement has no basis in fact.

27. For example, see Ruth Waterbury's 1924 Photoplay article, "Don't Go to Hollywood," reprinted in Gerald Mast, ed., The Movies in Our Midst: Documents in the Cultural History of Film in America (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 215-222.

28. Lokke, op. cit., p. 9, comments that most Hollywood novelists have "deliberately blunted their analytical powers so that their frustration, anger, and indignation may burn with a brighter flame."

29. Rupert Hughes, Souls For Sale (1922; rpt., New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1978), p. 186.

30. Fox and Lears, op. cit., p. xii.

31. See Richard Fine, Hollywood and the Profession of Authorship, 1928-1940 (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), pp. 1-17.

32. Lokke, op. cit., p. 11. In his essay "The Hollywood Novel" (Film Comment 21:2, Mar.-Apr., 1985, pp. 7-13), Terry Curtis-Fox calls the genre "the screenwriter's revenge" (p. 8).

33. See See, op. cit., pp. 36-37.

34. Wells, op. cit., pp. 17-18.

35. See Susman, op. cit., pp. 13-14. He comments that the leading games of the period--"Contract" Bridge, "Monopoly," pinball--simultaneously stressed "the extremes of luck and chance...and the importance of a complex set of stern rules and even drastic moral obligations" (p. 13). This can be seen as an Algerite attempt to incorporate a tightly-controlled conception of luck into traditional success ideology.

36. John Thomas Sturak, The Life and Writings of Horace McCoy, 1897-1955 (unpublished doctoral dissertation, UCLA, 1966), p. 268. Sturak further points out that a financially advantageous marriage brought McCoy a partial relief from studio pressures during the writing of Horses. See also Wells' excellent comparison of Horses with James M. Cain's The Postman Always Rings Twice (1934), op. cit., pp. 14-35.

37. McCoy's willingness to change important aspects of Home at his publisher's request (see Sturak, op. cit., pp. 363-366) can be directly related to the daily compromises forced upon a screenwriter in the Dream Factory.

38. See Paine, op. cit., pp. 24-29.

39. Andrew Bergman, We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p. 168.

40. Ibid., p. xvi.

41. F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Crack-Up," The Crack-Up (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 49.

42. Ibid., p. 48.

43. Ibid., p. 186.

44. Lokke, op. cit., pp. 125-126.

45. Fitzgerald, in a letter to his daughter, Scottie (November 4, 1939), in Andrew Turnbull, ed., The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 63. Quoted in Wells, op. cit., p. 114.

46. Lokke, op. cit., pp. 125-126.

47. Wells, op. cit., convincingly suggests screenwriting's significant stylistic influence on the novels of Fitzgerald, McCoy, and Schulberg. He proves less persuasive, however, with respect to West, repeating James Light's attribution of Locust's "swiftly changing settings" and its "roving, panoramic technique" to West's training as a screenwriter. While partially true, this view disregards the fact that West's three prior novels are also permeated with such techniques. Long before his arrival in Hollywood, the writer had already felt the influence of film (as well as the connected areas of cartoons, European symbolism, and modernism in general). Moreover, West showed an uncanny ability to separate stylistically the processes of novel-writing and screenwriting.

48. Wells, op. cit., p. 46.

49. West, in a letter to Jack Conroy (June 30, 1939), quoted in Jay Martin, Nathanael West: The Art of His Life (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 1970), p. 336.

50. See Lawrence Clark Powell, California Classics: The Creative Literature of the Golden State, 2nd. ed. (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1982), p. 342.

51. Ibid., pp. 339-340.

52. Martin, op. cit., p. 206.

CHAPTER II

ONWARD AND UPWARD?: MERTON OF THE MOVIES AND THE MANIA OF MAKING IT

He was slightly amazed later to observe the old mother outside the set. She was not only smoking a cigarette with every sign of relish, but she was singing as she did a little dance step.

-Merton of the Movies (1922)¹

Harry Leon Wilson's Merton of the Movies stands today as perhaps the greatest victim of misinterpretation and neglect of all the inter-war Hollywood novels. Out of print since a solitary reissue in 1923, Merton has consistently found critical damnation through faint praise. Yet ironically, the novel's current literary status can be explained as largely a legacy of its enormous initial popularity and subsequent influence on Hollywood myth. The plethora of inferior adaptations and imitations has clearly colored many a rash judgement of the work.

Merton was first published as a serial in The Saturday Evening Post from February 4 to April 8, 1922; and its success and subject-matter posed an irresistible temptation to a movie industry highly prone to narcissistic self-contemplation and even more susceptible to the lure of the

greenback. The studios rushed to set such a dream dish before a public which devoured bestsellers and box-office blockbusters as complementary courses. Not surprisingly then, the 1924 Famous Players-Lasky adaptation found itself sandwiched between such loose, unofficial versions as Mary of the Movies (1923) and Polly of the Movies (1927). Filmed again by Paramount in 1932 and by MGM in 1947, Merton has also inspired two notable plays coauthored by George S. Kaufman and the 1975 movie Hearts of the West.

The depth and longevity of the novel's influence is especially marked within the Hollywood novel genre itself. Merton provided the genre with at least a partial framework for its main formalized tradition: the satirical and/or lurid portrayal of life in the dream colony through the perspective of a recently-arrived outsider, usually a naive innocent, who by the end of the novel is either disillusioned and defeated/corrupted or else disillusioned and on a train (or ship) out of the colony.² It is a tradition which Terry Curtis-Fox has called "the story of the eternal outsider."³

Few of Merton's offspring, however, have done the novel any real justice. Immediate imitators in the literary genre tended to replace the sharply ironic, analytical focus of Wilson's "genuine movie dope"⁴ with sordid exposès of exotic colony life. And as Lawrence Clark Powell points out, "None of the films stressed the book's satire, dwelling

instead on the pathos."⁵ This circumstance is hardly surprising since Hollywood bears much of the brunt of Merton's sting. More mystifying has been the lukewarm nature of most critical reactions, which read as if incestuously culled from one another. Certainly, Merton's longstanding disrepute and relative inaccessibility may have increased the temptation (in lieu of ignoring the novel entirely) of relying on previous "scholarship," as well as the chance of happening first (or solely) upon an unimpressive but impressing travesty. Ultimately though, despite its deceptively light-hearted tone, there remains little excuse for such brief, casual dismissals of Merton as "good-natured comedy"⁶ or "kindly satire"⁷ or "one of the more literate, that early tongue-in-cheeker."⁸ In his otherwise generally excellent Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies, Robert Sklar epitomizes the lack of good scholarship on the genre when he comments: "Perhaps fifty novels had been written about Hollywood by the mid-1930s, . . . and only one, Harry Leon Wilson's gentle satire Merton of the Movies (1922), a work admired by Gertrude Stein, was worth remembering."⁹ Not only does Sklar perpetuate the misrepresentation of Merton and loftily dismiss such seminal works as Carl Van Vechten's Spider Boy (1928) and the Graham brothers' Queer People (1930), but his estimate falls at least 80 novels short of the mark.¹⁰

Probably the two best discussions of Merton to date are

to be found in Carolyn See's unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Hollywood Novel: An Historical and Critical Study (1963), and in Lawrence Clark Powell's California Classics: The Creative Literature of the Golden State (1971). However, while both writers perceptively stress the depth and intensity of the novel's satire, they skirt around the fundamental focus for this satire:

[Merton] satirized the "public" life of the stars as portrayed in fan magazines, but its main targets were stereotyped and silly films, and the emotionally stunted people who are taken in by them.¹¹

Behind the false-fronts, the fun and games and the hyperbole, there is an indictment of Hollywood and the fans who create it that has never been bettered and is still pertinent.¹²

Merton undoubtedly does all these things, yet the kernel of its potency lies not in direct criticism of products, people, and institutions, but in keen analysis of the success ideology enveloping them.

The novel provides a fictional case study of the conflict in the general public's mind between the traditional American Dream and its Hollywood offshoot; it charts protagonist Merton Gill's rags-to-riches road to Hollywood fame and fortune but also to ideological confusion. Using the basic structure of an Horatio Alger tale,¹³ and subverting it ironically at crucial points, Wilson depicts the gradual disintegration of Merton's faith in traditional ideology and his inability to accept the Hollywood American Dream as a satisfactory alternative.¹⁴

In true Alger style, Merton initially exhibits all the required work ethic qualities (with, as in Alger's young heroes, the odd minor lapse¹⁵), before being put through a period of great hardship during which these qualities are severely tested. Like the typical Alger hero, he eventually achieves success when a combination of luck and his good qualities lead an admiring benefactor to help him on his way¹⁶; but unlike his counterpart, Merton does not come through this rite of passage unscathed, with his faith in the traditional dream reaffirmed.

As with many a protagonist of a Hollywood novel, Merton Gill is a naive and virginal innocent from a small town in the midwest (Simsbury, Illinois), the mythical heartland of traditional American Dream values and adherents. But his mind has also been attracted by the glamorous myths of Hollywood as potently promulgated through the twin media of movies and, most especially, Hollywood fan magazines such as Photo Land, Camera, and Silver Screenings:

Silver Screenings proffered some fresh views of Beulah Baxter, not in dangerous moments, but revealing certain quieter aspects of her wondrous life. In her kitchen, apron clad, she stirred something. In her lofty music room she was seated at her piano. In her charming library she was shown "Among Her Books." More charmingly she was portrayed with her beautiful arms about the shoulders of her dear old mother. And these accompanied an interview with the actress.

The writer . . . found that success had not spoiled Miss Baxter. A sincere artist, she yet absolutely lacked the usual temperament and mannerisms. . . .

"I'm so interested in my work," prettily observed Miss Baxter to the interviewer; "suppose

we talk only of that. Leave out all the rest--my Beverly Hills home, my cars, my jewels, my Paris gowns, my dogs, my servants, my recreations. It is work alone that counts, don't you think? We must learn that success, all that is beautiful and fine, requires work, infinite work and struggle. The beautiful comes only through suffering and sacrifice. . . .

"But of course I have my leisure moments from the grinding stress. Then I turn to my books--I'm wild about history. And how I love the great free out-of-doors! I should prefer to be on a simple farm, were I a boy. The public would not have me a boy, you say"--she shrugged prettily--"oh, of course, my beauty, as they are pleased to call it. After all, why should one not speak of that? Beauty is just a stock in trade, you know. Why not acknowledge it frankly? But do come to my delightful kitchen, where I spend many a spare moment, and see the lovely custard I have made for dear mamma's luncheon."

Merton was entranced by this exposition of the quieter side of his idol's life. . . . More than ever he was persuaded that his day would come. Even might come the day when it would be his lot to lighten the sorrow of those eyes and appease the wistfulness of that tender mouth. . . . This, if he remembered well her message about hard work. (pp. 23-25)

A masterpiece of comic writing worthy of Evelyn Waugh, this passage parodies the insidious way movie magazines blended the Protestant work ethic and other American Way values with the spice of Hollywood-associated temptations (fame, money/materialism, exotica, glamor, physical beauty/sex) to present a seductive variant on the American Dream. The article's emphasis is seemingly on work and the work ethic: "I'm so interested in my work . . . ; suppose we talk only of that. Leave out all the rest . . ." Yet Beulah¹⁷ then proceeds to list the "rest" in such a way as to "entrance" the magazine's reader and leave him/her wanting to know far

more about the contents of this aside. In the process, any possible sense of ideological guilt and conflict is neatly sidestepped. It is thus the fact and manner of the star's ostensible dismissal of her Hollywood lifestyle in favor of stressing work, family, culture, and ordinary everyday tasks that makes the Hollywood American Dream so appealing to such wavering Protestants as Merton Gill. Apparently it is possible to make it in Hollywood, enjoy the glamorous lifestyle, and still remain faithful to traditional values. The implication is that while most people in Hollywood might indeed be debauched (titillation for the reader and confirmation of all those scandalous stories also told by the magazine), this is the result of their own weakness, the truly virtuous remaining untainted (reassurance for the reader). The Mertons of America are thus encouraged to believe that they can have their cake and eat it too.

Wilson's use of beauty in the mock article shows particular perception as to the way the Hollywood American Dream manipulates and undermines aspects of traditional ideology. The article sets up an implicit connection between abstract beauty in terms of ideals and values and physical beauty in terms of people and material possessions. In this way, the wavering Protestant finds it easier to embrace the Hollywood obsession with beautiful objects, rationalizing it through and incorporating it into his or her existing ideology. It is thus his physical resemblance to the movie

star Harold Parmalee almost as much as the work ethic that convinces Merton he will certainly make it in Tinsel Town.

Consequently, by the beginning of the novel Merton's system of values has already been subtly undermined, although he has not as yet been seduced by the Hollywood American Dream's maxim of luck nor by other prominent Hollywood and therapeutic attractions most fervently opposed by traditional ideology. He has so far managed to encompass the change by sublimating much of his attraction to Hollywood into an even greater devotion to work, hence his painstaking study of acting technique. The key to such sublimation's success at this stage is Beulah Baxter, whom Merton elevates to the status of iconic role model and romantic fantasy. She is described several times as "entrancing" and "inspiring" him; and it is this obsessed state of mind which allows Merton to transcend temporarily the mounting tensions of his straddled ideological position.

Wilson articulates these tensions most effectively early in the novel via Merton's attitude towards such leisure activities as drinking, gambling, smoking, and dancing. All feature prominently in the glamorous myths of Hollywood, but find disapproval in traditional Protestant ideology. Strongly underlying such disapproval is the general attitude of saving and living for the future rather than spending and living for the present. All rewards should be earned through "suffering and sacrifice"; all indulgence

should be resisted today in favor of waiting patiently for tomorrow, an eternal tomorrow which never comes in life no matter how successful one becomes. This aspect of Protestant belief particularly colors Merton's posture on gambling:

He had no great liking for poker at any limit, and he would not subject his savings to a senseless hazard. Of course he might win, but you could never tell. . . . What diversions were these for one who had a future? Let these clods live out their dull lives in their own way. But not Merton Gill, who held aloof from their low sports, studied faithfully the lessons in his film-acting course, and patiently bided his time. (p. 16)

The emphasis here is on "senseless hazard" rather than vice, "dull lives" rather than depraved lives; and this state of mind extends to Merton's giving up smoking, his one "indulgence," in favor of "saving against his great day" (p. 16). Such an attitude minimalizes conflict between competing ideologies on this issue, especially given Merton's interpretation of living for the future. He regards the policy as merely a means to an end, a definite tomorrow sometime soon whereafter he can indulge himself (albeit moderately) in Hollywood-style "dissipation" à la his movie-star role models:

Briefly he permitted himself a vision of his own future home--a palatial bungalow in distant Hollywood, with expensive cigars in elaborate humidors and costly gold-tipped cigarettes in silver things on low tables. . . . The tray would be gleaming silver, but he was uncertain about the drinks; something with long straws in them, probably. But as to anything alcoholic, now-- While he was trying to determine this the general-delivery window was opened and the interview had to wait. (p. 17)

As the passage shows, while Merton may have some success reconciling dreams through temporal distinctions--that is, present realities versus futuristic fantasies--the influence of his traditional upbringing continually disrupts these fantasies. In this instance, alcohol provides the sticking-point, the daydream spell broken as much by Merton's indoctrination as by the opening of the window.

Adding to Merton's quandary is the ambiguous nature of the Hollywood American Dream. In its attempt to paper over what Gene Wise would call the "fault-lines" in traditional ideology,¹⁸ this new dream tries to have it both ways with respect to alcohol and other such "dissipations," either alternately condemning and glamorizing them or insidiously doing both at the same time. Wilson uses The Blight of Broadway as a case in point, a movie featuring Merton in his first role as an extra. Ostensibly depicting the "hollowness" of extravagant, dissolute night life, the movie in fact luxuriates in its prurience, much to the discomfort of the puritanical Merton who ironically exudes the required ennui and malaise:

Very slowly he inhaled from a cigarette that was already distasteful--adding no little to the desired effect--and very slowly he exhaled as he raised to hers the bored eyes of a soul quite disillusioned. Here, indeed, was the blight of Broadway. (p. 101)¹⁹

He was dismayed at this sudden revelation of art in the dance so near him. Imogene Pulver had once done an art dance back in Simsbury, at the cantata of Esther in the vestry of the Methodist church, and had been not a little criticised for her

daring; but Imogene had been abundantly clad, and her gestures much more restrained. (p. 106)

Indeed, dancing functions the most effectively of all the leisure motifs manipulated by Wilson. In common with the other activities, a disapproving attitude towards dancing has been fostered in Merton from birth by such recognized arbiters of acceptable behavior as "pulpit and press" (p. 100). The code these arbiters promulgate includes a respect for authority which itself reinforces their power and influence. At the same time, such deep indoctrination faces a similarly layered force in the Hollywood American Dream. For as Merton quickly discovers, an activity such as dancing is not only highly extolled but also forms an essential social and professional skill. Wilson very subtly shows this ideological struggle in action during the shooting of a dance number for The Blight of Broadway: "Under the hum of the lights he was thinking that he had been a fool not to learn dancing, no matter how the Reverend Otto Carmichael denounced it as a survival from the barbaric Congo" (p. 101). Although Merton initially exhibits such scepticism, he soon after echoes the Carmichael viewpoint in describing one of the featured dancers as "of barbaric appearance" (p. 106). His passage from Simsbury to Hollywood has drawn the ideological conflict onto a more intense plane, from which it can no longer be painlessly encompassed à la his daydream in the hometown church:

At 10:30 he was in church. He was not as attentive

to the sermon as he should have been. . . . He saw himself cast [as] . . . the handsome young clergyman, exponent of a muscular Christianity. He comes to the toughest cattle town in all the great Southwest, determined to make honest men and good women of its sinning derelicts. . . . Though at first they treat him rough, they learn to respect him, and they call him the fighting parson. Eventually he wins the hand in marriage of the youngest of the dance-hall denizens, a sweet young girl who despite her evil surroundings has remained as pure and good as she is beautiful. (p. 37)

Reworked by countless contemporary movies and not a few Hollywood novels, such fantasies show the influence of the therapeutic ethos, which Lears describes as "characterized by an almost obsessive concern with psychic and physical health defined in sweeping terms."²⁰ As described by Lears, the therapeutic ethos can be seen as an integral component of Hollywood ideology, if inevitably a dissonant one. For the ethos functions as a major meeting-place between old and new dreams, an ideological decompression chamber where Merton might imagine himself as the "fighting parson," but not yet as the sexy, drinking parson or even the dancing parson.

The persistent repetition of certain words as ideologically revealing signatures for important characters proves one of Wilson's favorite artistic techniques. This technique is particularly pronounced in the case of the word "dance" and the character Sarah Nevada "Flips" Montague:

She was a blithsome sprite in a salmon-pink dancing frock. (p. 107)

She danced through a doorway and was gone--she was

one who seldom descended to plain walking. She would manage a dance step even in the short distance from the casting-office door to the window. It was not of such material, Merton Gill was sure, that creative artists were moulded. (p. 128)

During the walk from the car to the Montague house she twice indulged in her little dance step [my emphasis]. (p. 295)

Then she gave him a quick little hug and danced away. It was no time for dancing, he thought. (p. 298)

There are over a dozen such examples, each filtered through Merton's consciousness and personifying the conflict between dreams. Sarah is very much the embodiment of the Hollywood American Dream; and as in the case of Beulah Baxter, her name strongly alludes to her symbolic function (Nevada suggesting Vegas/gambling, "Flips" suggesting flippancy). Bearing in mind their respective symbolic roles, the scene where Sarah attempts to teach Merton how to dance begs an ideological reading. It is thus very significant that Merton never learns to dance properly, since the end of the novel leaves him stranded between the traditional and the Hollywood American Dreams.

The revelations that Beulah Baxter has married and divorced several times and that she has also lied in the fan magazines about doing her own stunts most severely dent Merton's faith in the traditional American Dream, into which he has laboriously but futilely tried to place the actress. This highlights a gradual process of disillusionment in which Merton, unable to obtain regular employment even as an

extra, has almost starved to death on the studio lot. At this point of his lowest fortune and greatest disillusionment, Merton finally allows himself to embrace the Hollywood ideology's vital maxim of luck: "He slept peacefully after praying that something good would happen to him. He put it that way very simply. He had placed himself, it seemed, where things could only happen to him. He was, he felt, beyond bringing them about" (p. 151). He has moved from an active, self-reliant philosophy (the traditional American Dream of the Protestant work ethic) to a reactive, even passive one (the Hollywood American Dream of the lucky "Big Break") which borders on the fatalistic. This change has been foreshadowed as early as the second chapter, in a passage emphasizing the brittleness of his ideological make-up. Here a statement of apparent total confidence ("Night and day he had held to his ideal. He knew that when you did this your hour was bound to come") is followed soon afterwards by a prayer: "Oh, God, make me a good movie actor! Make me one of the best! For Jesus' sake, amen!" (p. 29).

Such doubts increase until Merton finally succumbs to despair and forsakes his value system, praying for a lucky break and accepting from Sarah aid previously offered but refused on principle. Although he now embraces the Hollywood American Dream, Merton is completely disorientated and allows Sarah to take him under her wing, hence the

persistent child/mother comparison. Sarah takes on the role of teacher and provider to this "new-hatched chicken" (p. 224), as she calls him, rebuilding Merton both physically (choosing and buying his food) and mentally ("You're just having a run of hard luck" [p. 183]) before engineering his Big Break. Wilson suggests such a relationship from the beginning of their acquaintance. Sarah immediately addresses Merton as "Kid," and this term is soon alternated with those of "Son," "boy," and "child." Then, when Merton is at his lowest ebb, "momentarily menaced by a complete emotional overthrow" (p. 183), she presents herself to him as "mother":

"Listen here, old Kid, you can't fool any one, so quit trying. Don't you s'pose I've seen 'em like you before? Say, boy, I was trouping while you played with marbles. You're up against it. Now, c'mon"--with the arm at his shoulder she pulled him about to face her--"c'mon and be nice--tell mother all about it." (pp. 182-183)

Sarah now forces some money into Merton's hands and takes him to a cafeteria with the appropriate name of "Mother Haggin's." From this point, the "solicitous nurse" takes almost complete control of her "sick child." With director Jeff Baird, she manipulates Merton to Hollywood success, very aware throughout of her surrogate role: "You wouldn't last long if mother here didn't look out for you. I'm playing your dear little sister [in a movie], but I'm playing your mother too" (p. 269).

However, despite her potent nursing, Sarah fails to

rehabilitate her patient completely, Merton's dread of permanent disability proving prophetic, but rather in ideological terms: "Maybe he would always be that way now, practically a cripple" (p. 186). He proceeds to immerse himself in the Hollywood American Dream far more thoroughly than Sarah has. But whereas she has managed to integrate vestiges of traditional ideology into a reasonably viable interpretation of the new dream, Merton's immersion is hysterical and rings hollow:

Merton Gill had indeed been reckless. He was now, he felt, actually one of the Hollywood set. He wondered how Tessie Kearns would regard his progress. . . . Jolly dinners, dancing, gambling, drinking with actresses. . . . It was a gay life, Merton felt. And as for the Montague girl's questions and warnings about his money, he would show her! . . . Now he would show her what he really thought of money. (p. 289)

"Nothing like that," he assured her. "More you spend, more you make--that's my motto." (p. 294)

Merton has become a follower of the Hollywood American Dream by default; and although long attracted by the ideology, he never achieves any real empathy with it.

Throughout the novel, Wilson skilfully sustains a rich, symbiotic comparison between Merton's relationship with success ideology and his relationship with movies. On one level, the traditional and Hollywood American Dreams respectively parallel director Henshaw's "serious" dramas and his colleague Baird's satiric comedies. Initially in the traditional/Henshaw camp, Merton ends up embracing an ideology and acting in a film form of which he has little or

no understanding. Although he is drawn to the former and despises the latter, the consequences in each case prove identical, as Carolyn See suggests:

He marries the young girl and becomes famous, but it is not a very happy ending, for although he can speak glibly about his comic art, he is only parroting his wife and a conversation which he once overheard in a cafeteria. . . . His emotional allegiance somehow is still to the things he satirizes. . . . She is his interpreter.²¹

See's analysis remains equally incisive if the American Dream is substituted for satirical movies. Merton's confusion at the end of the novel over the nature of his sudden Hollywood success reflects and reinforces a confusion regarding success ideology in general: "But beneath that surface of calm approval . . . there still ran a complication of emotions, not the least of which was honest bewilderment" (p. 327). It is a personal confusion which in turn echoes a loss of purpose and identity in society; for Merton is clearly presented as an Everyman figure, his character and adventures constructed from Algerite rags-to-riches archetypes.

In his ironic portrayal of Merton Gill's road to Hollywood success and ideological bewilderment, Wilson correctly implies that both the Alger and the Hollywood versions of the American Dream have fundamental limitations as alternatives to the traditional dream, itself replete with tensions and contradictions which increasingly threaten its viability as a success ideology. Alger's version does

not take into account the irreconcilability of luck with the traditional ideology. It assumes ceteris paribus, whereas any satisfactory integration of luck would inevitably have to involve a radical reinterpretation of the dream's other elements. And while the Hollywood American Dream superficially succeeds in reconciling aberrant characteristics and the traditional dream, it is an uneasy co-existence with a seductiveness based on a slippery manipulation of emphasis. Opportunity rather than constraint is stressed: work hard and drink hard; save hard and spend hard. This proves less a distinctive and viable alternative to the existing dream than a sprawling pressure-outlet, one which in Merton's case fails to prevent the explosion of his value-system and his subsequent plunge into a chaotic, ideological no-man's-land. To be sure, Merton does manage to make it, and he seems destined for continued success in Hollywood at the novel's end. But the route for his psyche is most certainly not "Onward and Upward," the confident title of an Alger novel but the ironic one of Merton of the Movies's last chapter.

ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER II

1. Harry Leon Wilson, Merton of the Movies (1922; rpt., Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1923), p. 232. All subsequent page references are cited within the text.

2. The other seminal work in this respect is the similarly neglected Queer People (1930) by the brothers Carroll and Garrett Graham.

3. Terry Curtis-Fox, "The Hollywood Novel," Film Comment 21:2 (Mar.-Apr. 1985), p. 7.

4. Wilson, quoted in Lawrence Clark Powell, California Classics: The Creative Literature of the Golden State, 2nd Ed. (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1982), p. 338.

5. Ibid., p. 337.

6. Philip French, "That's How Talkies Were Born," London Times Literary Supplement, 3 Dec. 1976, p. 1505.

7. Franklin Walker, "Hollywood in Fiction," The Pacific Spectator 2 (1948), p. 127.

8. Budd Schulberg, "Afterward" to the 1976 reissue of Queer People (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press), p. 279.

9. Robert Sklar, Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 241.

10. In The Hollywood Novel and Other Novels About Film, 1912-1982 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1985), Nancy Brooker-Bowers lists 132 Hollywood novels published by the end of 1934.

11. Carolyn Penelope See, "The Hollywood Novel: An Historical and Critical Study," (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1963), p. 26.

12. Powell, op. cit., p. 338.

13. For detailed descriptions and analyses of Algerite conventions, see Carl Bode's "Introduction" in Horatio Alger, Jr., Ragged Dick and Struggling Upward (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), and Richard Weiss, The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale (New York and London: Basic Books, 1969).

14. Virgil L. Lokke in "The Literary Image of Hollywood" (Ph.D. diss., The State University of Iowa, 1955), pp. 12-14, 47, is one of the few critics who have recognized Wilson's skillful sociological portrayal of Merton in terms of success ideology. He notes Wilson's caricature of what David Riesman would later call the "inner-directed" man and his "presient parody of the Lysgaard-Schneider delayed gratification pattern in the middle-class man." But Lokke fails to pursue these insights in his ultimate conclusions, missing altogether the breakdown of Merton's belief in the traditional American Dream.

15. In Alger's Ragged Dick (op. cit.), for example, the protagonist initially smokes, plays pranks on people, and is extravagant (but generous) with his money; yet he is also hard-working and honest from the very beginning. Similarly, Merton smokes his employer's cigars without permission, but only because he regards Gashwiler's pointed hiding of them from him as an insult and a challenge he cannot refuse to take up.

16. The irony here is that instead of the Algerite middle-aged man, Merton's benefactor is a young woman, hence his particular reluctance in accepting Sarah "Flips" Montague's aid. Merton's upbringing makes him loathe to accept 'charity' from a woman, especially a young and attractive woman with a nickname like "Flips" and a belief in the Hollywood American Dream ideology.

17. The name Beulah is commonly used in Hollywood novels to emphasize, often ironically, Hollywood's mythical status in America as the equivalent to the Promised Land.

18. See Gene Wise, American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry, Rev. 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), especially p. 131.

19. Wilson, op. cit., p. 101. Wilson further hammers home his point later on via comedy-director Jeff Baird's sharp satirizing of such movies as The Blight of Broadway.

20. T.J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertizing and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," in Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, eds., The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), p. 4.

21. See, op. cit., pp. 26-28.

CHAPTER III

UPWARD, OUTWARD, AND INWARD:

THE SPECTER OF SPIRALING SIRENS IN

THE DAY OF THE LOCUST

Faye greeted them at the door. She was wearing a pair of green silk lounging pajamas and green mules with large pompons and very high heels. The top three buttons of her jacket were open and a good deal of her chest was exposed but nothing of her breasts; not because they were small, but because they were placed wide apart and their thrust was upward and outward.

He was carried through the exit to the back street and lifted into a police car. The siren began to scream and at first he thought he was making the noise himself. He felt his lips with his hands. They were clamped tight. He knew then it was the siren. For some reason this made him laugh and he began to imitate the siren as loud as he could.

-The Day of the Locust (1939)¹

Mr. West has caught the emptiness of Hollywood; and he is, as far as I know, the first writer to make this emptiness horrible.

-Edmund Wilson, "The Boys in the Back Room" (1941)²

While certainly not the first writer to convey the horror of Hollywood's emptiness, Nathanael West did provide its most unrelenting evocation; and as such he alone during the inter-war years made this emptiness seem horrific rather

than merely horrible. The Day of the Locust is a horror novel, a ghost story starring a spectral, vampiric villain far more terrifying than any conceived count, one who does not flinch from the cross but on the contrary may even wear it. For since its appearance seventeen years ago in Merton of the Movies, the Hollywood American Dream had been fed richly by the screams of the Depression Thirties. Having as much in common with the creation of Frankenstein as with Dracula, this dream functioned in Locust as an ideological super-monster, one which thrived on light (especially artificial varieties) and which eluded water hazards with ease. Victims found themselves enchanted, seduced, and destroyed by their own collective invocation, caught in a day-dream turned day-mare from which the only escape was death or insanity. To paraphrase a contemporary Hollywood novel's title, those few who were roused only woke up screaming.³

In Ghost Story (1980), Peter Straub's postmodernist paean to the Gothic horror genre, literature lecturer Don Wanderley defines Stephen Crane's The Red Badge of Courage as "a great ghost story in which the ghost never appears."⁴ With its elusive, ideological ghost, Locust would also appear to exemplify this resonant definition; except that the character of Faye Greener proves so possessed by the Hollywood American Dream as to become both its greatest victim and its living embodiment.

West presumably chose to focus on such characters as Tod Hackett (set and costume designer), Homer Simpson (expatriate Midwesterner craving but fearing Hollywood excitement), and Harry Greener (failed vaudeville comic forced to peddle silver polish), because they best exemplify the workings of the Hollywood American Dream. All performers are at some level spectators and vice versa, but in these fringe figures the duality is more marked, thus helping to define more sharply the contradictions within and surrounding the Dream Colony. And in this respect, it is Harry's daughter Faye, who as the aspiring star carries the most resonance, both in her obsession to make it and in the obsession of others to make her. Thus, although critical debate has inevitably focused on Tod and Homer (as the protagonists through whom West filters the story), Faye may indeed be considered Locust's essential figure, as Leslie A. Fiedler cogently argues in Love and Death in the American Novel (1982):

But she cannot really be touched, for she is the dream dreamed by all of America, the dream of a love which is death; and in a strange sense she remains virginal as death is virginal: the immaculate, degraded anima of a nation, her realest existence on the screen.

It is because West's book is about Hollywood, and because he knows that Hollywood is where all America comes to die, that Faye is its proper center, dispensing what the bored hinterlanders do not quite know that they desire, as they press against the restraining ropes at a gala preview: a Götterdämmerung, an orgy of destruction.⁵

While inevitably conditioned by the particular paradigm of

his study, Fiedler's analysis does touch upon the fundamental conception behind Faye's creation. She seems less a convincing character as such than a deliberately overdetermined symbol.

In typical Westian fashion, Faye Greener's very name strongly implies her symbolic function, embodying as she does the Hollywood American Dream complete with its fueling love-death impulse. Jay Martin accurately describes her as "a 'fay,' a fairy figure, appealing and elusive because ultimately illusory,"⁶ while Fiedler points out that as well as tying her to the cult of youth and innocence, the surname "Greener" also suggests "how the grass is always greener on the other side."⁷ The adjective "fey," however, proves even more richly allusive: "1. (sc.) fated to die, at point of death. 2. disordered in mind (often with overconfidence etc.) like person about to die; clairvoyant, other-worldly; elfin; whimsical."⁸ These layers of definition lead us to the crux of the American Dream's paradoxical nature in Locust: on the one hand, it is an ideology in terminal decline, increasingly approaching but never quite reaching complete disintegration; on the other hand, this dream has in a sense already passed away, able now only to haunt its descendant, a capricious simulacrum of itself. Shaken together, we have a sickly strenuous Hollywood American Dream (Faye's surname encompassing both poles of this paradox⁹), gorging on its own decay.

For all the obsession she inspires, Faye is ironically not a Hollywood star but rather a lowly extra aspiring to this position. West elegantly fuses in her depiction elements of both star and aspirant, so that like a dog chasing its tail Faye becomes the narcissistic object of her own quest. The attraction for those pursuing her is thus not so much her star facade or potential as it is her undiluted carrying of the infant Hollywood American Dream (in which the star is the purest, most coveted expression of success). If as Fiedler says she "remains virginal as death is virginal," then she also remains the terrible child of a recent (ideologically breeched) birth:

He thought her extremely beautiful, but what affected him still more was her vitality. She was taut and vibrant. She was as shiny as a new spoon.
(p. 304)

She was smiling, a subtle half-smile uncontaminated by thought. She looked just born, everything moist and fresh, volatile and perfumed.
(p. 364)

In Hollywood even infant ideologies apparently come complete with their own artificial scents. Certainly, Faye is characterized several times as childlike; but corruptly carnivalesque as the new dream proves, this characterization invariably finds itself undercut by grotesque reversals and/or incongruous hybrids.¹⁰ She thus often also becomes a mother figure, but not as with Merton's Sarah a nurturing one: "'Come on, sport,' she said savagely, 'or mama'll spank'" (p. 368).¹¹ Even more revealing, however, is the

hybrid description which introduces her to us:

She was a tall girl with wide, straight shoulders and long, swordlike legs. Her neck was long, too, and columnar. Her face was much fuller than the rest of her body would lead you to expect and much larger. It was a moon face, wide at the cheek bones and narrow at chin and brow. She wore her 'platinum' hair long, letting it fall almost to her shoulders in back, but kept it away from her face and ears with a narrow blue ribbon that went under it and was tied on top of her head with a little bow. (p. 270)

Here it is the blue ribbon with the little bow which undermines the image of the Hollywood femme fatale (swordlike legs, disproportionately large face, long platinum blonde hair). Similarly, on her first meeting with Homer, Faye's cultivated, disdainful manners clash violently with her rude, childish appetite:

The way she said this seemed to mean that it was Homer who made her hungry and he beamed at her. But before he had a chance to sit down, she was already eating. She buttered a slice of bread, covered the butter with sugar and took a big bite. Then she quickly smeared a gob of mayonnaise on the salmon and went to work. Just as he was about to sit down, she asked for something to drink. (p. 305)

Such incongruities highlight West's exposure of grotesque age/appearance discrepancies in Hollywood, where the tennis player Joan Schwartz has "a pretty, eighteen-year-old face and a thirty-five-year-old neck that was veined and sinewy" (p. 272), and where a precocious eight-year-old boy "dressed like a man" sings the blues with writhing buttocks and a voice carrying "a top-heavy load of sexual pain" (pp. 362-364). Indeed, Adore's other star turn, this time very much

against the wishes of his stage mother, proves to be an ironically appropriate impersonation of Boris Karloff's Frankenstein monster. In Faye's case though, these incongruities also reveal her limited acting abilities, hence the bad delivery of her only line in one movie. Yet for all her ponderous playing of the Dream Factory vamp, Faye is cast perfectly as Hollywood's ideological vampire.

Deceptively vulnerable, Faye remains impervious to possession and destruction, tantalizingly elusive even in the bemused Tod Hackett's imagination:

The sensation he felt was like that he got when holding an egg in his hand. Not that she was fragile or even seemed fragile. It wasn't that. It was her completeness, her egglike self-sufficiency, that made him want to crush her. (p. 320)

But either way she would come out all right. Nothing could hurt her. She was like a cork. No matter how rough the sea got, she would go dancing over the same waves that sank iron ships and tore away piers of reinforced concrete. He pictured her riding a tremendous sea. Wave after wave reared its ton on ton of solid water and crashed down only to have her spin gaily away. . . . It was a very pretty cork, gilt with a glittering fragment of mirror set in its top. The sea in which it danced was beautiful, green in the trough of the waves and silver at their tips. (p. 406)

Faye Greener survives, indeed thrives, by encompassing potential threats; the spritely parasite defuses mirrors and waves by harmonizing with them. Paradoxically both green and silver like the sea and eucalyptus tree standing outside the San Bernardino Arms (p. 263), the evergreen actress goes with the flow. Her consistently chameleonic behavior finds a

correlative in Tod's perception of her habitual lip gesture as lizardlike: "staring at her wet lips and the tiny point of her tongue which she kept moving between them" (p. 319). In itself this gesture suggests how Faye seems "to promise all sorts of undefined intimacies" (p. 385). At the same time, we associate it and thus her specifically with the lizard in the backyard of Homer's Pinyon Canyon cottage. For despite rooting for the flies it preys upon, Homer nevertheless finds the lizard captivating, as both he and Tod do Faye (pp. 297-298).

Homer's ambivalent relationships with the lizard and Faye are not surprising given that he personifies the traditional American Dream as much as Faye does its Hollywood offshoot. Like the lizard tied to the yellow-flowered cactus, Faye lures the midwesterner via the silvery side of Tinsel Town's eucalyptus-petalled dream. Driven ill by his suffocating small-town lifestyle, the Iowan seeks recuperation in Southern California, only ultimately to be drawn despite himself less to the sunshine than to the neon. The ensuing turmoil he suffers bears some striking resemblances to that undergone by Merton's eponymous hero. Unfortunately for Homer, things have changed considerably since the twenties: predatory Faye proves to be no nurturing Flips; the mother has turned mean.

The tone of Locust's mother motif is set in Homer's first conversation with Faye: "'I don't go to shows very

often,' he apologized, pushing the gingersnaps toward her. 'The lights hurt my eyes.' She laughed and took a cracker" (p. 309). The Hollywood American Dream feeds on artificial light (although its own stars are still to be seen primarily after dusk), hence for example Homer's neighborhood SunGold Market in which colored spotlights "played on the showcases and counters, heightening the natural hues of the different foods" (p. 296). We thus have between Faye and Homer the type of ideologically symbolic conflict smoothed over in Merton by Sarah "Flips" Montague's motherliness. In Locust, however, Faye does not have such a role in her repertoire. With nobody to guide him gently through his "dream scream," to corrupt him with kindness as it were, and with traditional ideology beyond repair as a haven, Homer turns inward in what Tod diagnoses as "a case of 'Uterine Flight'":

What a perfect escape the return to the womb was. Better by far than Religion or Art or the South Sea Islands. It was so snug and warm there, and the feeding was automatic. Everything perfect in that hotel. No wonder the memory of those accommodations lingered in the blood and nerves of everyone. It was dark, yes, but what a warm, rich darkness. The grave wasn't in it. (pp. 403-404)

This state climaxes Homer's many previous ventures towards an idyllic, dreamless sleep: "The approach to sleep which had once been automatic had somehow become a long, shining tunnel. Sleep was at the far end of it, a soft bit of shadow in the hard glare. He couldn't run, only crawl toward the black patch" (p. 314). In terms of Lear's therapeutic

ethos, Homer's goes from fleeing "unreality" (Wayneville to Hollywood) to fleeing everything (Hollywood to insensibility to death). Not for Homer were the pseudo-health and religious cults (such as Dr. Pierce's raw-foodists) dominating La-La Land (pp. 361-362).¹²

In an even more pronounced fashion than Merton Gill, Homer finds sexual desire to be an inescapable conduit directing him towards the Hollywood American Dream. Indeed, embodied first by Romola Martin and then more completely by Faye, this desire provides for Homer the ideology's sole attraction. He never shares Merton's ambivalence to such Hollywood characteristics as swearing, smoking, alcohol, and rebellion against authority, hence for example his unqualified submission to the Wayneville doctor and the Hollywood real estate agent (p. 286). At the same time, however, his traditional Protestant background gives him a passive stubbornness akin to Melville's *Bartleby*, a quality even Faye cannot totally overwhelm:

After she had gone, he wondered what living with her would do to Homer. He thought it might straighten him out. He fooled himself into believing this with an image, as though a man were a piece of iron to be heated and then straightened with hammer blows. He should have known better, for if anyone ever lacked malleability Homer did. (p. 357)

Faye may be able to force drinks down him through her mean mother act (pp. 367-368), but she can never change his fundamental value-system. A man so deeply repressed that sexuality is physically sublimated into hands with a life of

their own, Homer vaguely realizes that chastity has become for him "both spine and armor. He couldn't shed it even in thought. If he did, he would be destroyed" (p. 313). And destroyed he is, although ultimately more physically than ideologically. For as traumatized as he has become, Homer is nevertheless bent on returning to Wayneville when he is killed by the crowd during the climactic riot.

Faye on the other hand remains elusive to the last. Managing to avoid the riot entirely, she even emerges unscathed in Tod's apocalyptic painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles," running "proudly, throwing her knees high" (p. 420). She alone of the major characters succeeds in straddling the fissures in the Hollywood American Dream, in mixing and matching aspects of the new and the traditional:

. . . but she refused his friendship, or, rather insisted on keeping it impersonal. She had told him why. He had nothing to offer her, neither money nor looks, and she could only love a handsome man and would only let a wealthy man love her. . . . She wasn't hard-boiled. It was just that she put love on a special plane, where a man without money or looks couldn't move. (p. 270)

The passage's effectiveness lies in its baring of fundamentally contradictory assumptions slipperily coexisting. Ostensibly frank in her talk of using people, Faye retraces her steps by also exploiting the myth of true love. The phrase "a special plane" is the very stuff of this myth, but Faye characteristically undercuts it with her qualification. Moreover, the respective emphases of money (traditional) and looks (Hollywood) coalesce in Faye's

corrupting division (loving/being loved) of the true love ideal.

These three currents come together also in Faye's daydreams, which she stores in her mind like a "pack of cards," and once again true love's debasement functions ironically as ideological cement. For example, one daydream concerns a young girl engaged to marry a Russian count. This count has "beautiful manners" but is "old," so she falls in love instead with a handsome young sailor far below her station. Thus, true love apparently triumphs over all (class, prestige, breeding etc.); but then comes the crucial twist ending in which the young girl is allowed to have her cake and eat it too: "Maybe he turns out to be a rich boy who is being a sailor just for the adventure of it, or something like that" (p. 319). Significantly, for conclusions must bear the primary burden of kneading ideological lumps, Tod has to press hard for Faye to finish her story. When she does, Tod's response proves just as revealing:

All these little stories, these little daydreams of hers, were what gave such extraordinary color and mystery to her movements. She seemed always to be struggling in their soft grasp as though she were trying to run in a swamp. As he watched her, he felt sure that her lips must taste of blood and salt and that there must be a delicious weakness in her legs. His impulse wasn't to aid her to get free, but to throw her down in the soft, warm mud and to keep her there. (p. 320)

Like the seductive vampire waiting outside a victim's window, the Hollywood American Dream flirts for an

invitation. So engrossed is he in his rape fantasy, his desire to pin the dream down, that Tod never questions the source of the blood, which may indeed be partly or even wholly his own.

Yet Faye consistently proves able to transfuse types without poisoning, most outrageously in her drunken spiel at the cockfight party:

All I ask is a chance. I've been buying a lot of clothes lately to make myself one. I don't believe in luck. Luck is just hard work, they say, and I'm willing to work as hard as anybody. (p. 386)

As with Merton Gill's frequent rationalizations, here we have the Hollywood American Dream in its luck-and-looks essence. Faye uses the notions of earned luck (hard work) and bought beauty (clothes) as ideological grease for a slipperily specious argument in which without "any noticeable transition, possibilities became probabilities and wound up as inevitabilities" (p. 386).

Locust's visceral horror stems largely from the fact that unlike Merton it focuses on the looks knot of the Hollywood success equation, a contradiction particularly prone to grotesque manifestation: "It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous" (p. 262). It seems, however, that mockery provides the only effective defense against Hollywood's ideological vampire. Tod's undoing lies in his inability to laugh at himself, as

when he envisions that throwing himself at Faye would be like jumping from 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.

He managed to laugh at his language, but it wasn't a real laugh and nothing was destroyed by it. (p. 271)

Unfortunately for Tod, his sense of humor suffers a further critical blow on the gradual realization that he shares "the ingrained, morbid apathy he liked to draw in others. Maybe he could only be galvanized into sensibility and that was why he was chasing Faye" (p. 365). Faced with a choice between the sterility of tradition and the death orgasm of the Hollywood American Dream, Tod like Homer finds himself involuntarily drawn to the latter. So deeply contaminated does his ideological bloodstream become, that when he finally finds a real laugh, Tod can only destroy himself: "For some reason this made him laugh and he began to imitate the siren as loud as he could" (p. 421). The Hollywood American Dream has long since spiked Tod's last laugh, for as Faye suggests, "any dream was better than no dream and beggars couldn't be choosers" (p. 317).

The brilliance of West's novel, and indeed Merton of the Movies some seventeen years earlier, lies ultimately not in making choices between dreams--be it any dream or no dream, one dream or another dream--but in dissecting the particular value-systems on view in a particular place at a

particular time. In their introduction to The Culture of Consumption, Fox and Lears recognize that Hollywood constitutes a major omission in the study's coverage. Certainly, the Dream Factory interacted in vital ways with consumerism and the therapeutic ethos in its reflection and refraction of American success ideology. I hope to have conveyed something of this interaction via its fallout in the inter-war Hollywood novel, but far more work certainly needs to be done on later periods and on other aspects of this phenomenon, not least its current manifestation in our homes as the "tube of plenty."

ENDNOTES FOR CHAPTER III

1. Nathanael West, The Day of the Locust, in The Complete Works of Nathanael West (London: Pan Books, 1983), pp. 383 & 421. All subsequent page references are cited within the text.

2. Edmund Wilson, "The Boys in the Back Room," in Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Co., 1950), p. 54.

3. See Steve Fisher, I Wake Up Screaming (1938; rev. ed., Berkeley: Black Lizard Books, 1988).

4. Peter Straub, Ghost Story (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), p. 233.

5. Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, 3rd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 327.

6. Jay Martin, Nathanael West: The Art of His Life (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 1970), p. 325.

7. Fiedler, op. cit., p. 326.

8. J. B. Sykes, ed., The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 7th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 359.

9. Ibid., p. 436. See especially definitions three to nine.

10. For a lucid interpretation of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, see Robert Stam, Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

11. See also pp. 321, 369, & 384.

12. See Lears, op. cit., for a discussion of the "abundance therapy" and the "pseudo-religion of health" which grew in popularity from the turn of the century.

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- Books, 1956, pp. 48-49.
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