

Day of the Locust Thematic Paper Prompt

General Directions: West is a very allusive writer. Your task is to choose one of the options below, research some of the cultural references, gather 2 illustrations, 1 secondary quotation, and consider how this knowledge base helps to **interpret the novella as a critique of Hollywood**. To prepare, note passages in the text where these topics arise, editing and analyzing several extended quotations. When you have all your materials write a 1,000 word paper explaining how West used your theme to satirize the movie industry. Conclude with a brief reflection on whether his accusations are still valid today.

OPTION 3 -- Geography and Architecture in 1930s

For this theme, begin with the various architectural styles mentioned in the novel and find photographs of similar homes in Hollywood. Investigate another local style known as “storybook architecture” that is quintessentially LA. Find maps of the city that demonstrate real locations such as Vine Street, and speculate where the fictional “Pinyon Canyon” may have been. Compare all this to information about Des Moines, IA in the 1930s for insight into the culture shock that Homer might have experienced. The history of the “Sunkist” Co. may be instructive.

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AP English Literature

03 December 2018

A. Well done! As a theme, you show how the natural & built environments offer a strong contrast and allow West to construct a global critique of Hollywood. Clear evidence that you situate the text in early 20th century context, well-phrased & argued.
Thematic Paper on *The Day of the Locust*

Good intro! A strong position, clear evidence of research into the novel's historical context.

When Nathanael West wrote *The Day of the Locust* in the 1930's, Hollywood was in its prime. With films like *Gone With the Wind*, ~~and~~ *The Wizard Of Oz* and the beginning of the Age of Technicolor and animation, the industry was booming. During the same time period, crop failures in the Dust Bowl states and the subsequent loss of income led to the mass migration of large populations to metropolitan cities. Among these migraters was Nathanael West, a screenwriter hoping to find success in the film industry in Los Angeles. After years of working in B-level movie productions, West developed a strong hatred for Los Angeles that was grounded in the disillusionment many people like him experienced after arriving in the City of Angels; they came to see the it as a "place where people come to die." West demonstrates his negative critique of Hollywood's falsity through juxtaposing his characters and the architecture in Los Angeles as a means to compare their low morals to the ugliness of its physical, man-made landscape.

In the novella, West explicitly declares that Hollywood, as the hub of the film industry, is mostly fake. According to West—whether the films are about love, comedy, or history—this is demonstrated by the repeated and illusory nature of some of the plots in the films, like meeting “hunky men in jungles” or “handsome sailors on South Sea Voyages.” This is further exemplified by the sets built and used in the early twentieth century films (see

the image in Appendix A). With one side completely built to look life-like and the other side fragile and propped up by thin pieces of wood, these sets perfectly symbolized the duality of both the film industry and the ethical standards of movie studios. The main character, Todd Hackett, sees the movies of Hollywood not filmed on an actual site, but instead filmed on a set with one side looking like a full rendering of a Mississippi Steamboat and the other side looking like a hodgepodge of plaster that is barely holding together. Each film ~~shared with an~~ audience ^{to} who suspends their regular beliefs in order to become emotionally connected to a movie—something that causes an idealism that will not become a reality. ^{requires the} ~~shared with an~~ ^{Furthermore} These films were premiered at places like “Kahn’s Persian Palace” or the french-styled *Los Angeles Theater*, where the actors put on deceptive smiles to hide their arranged marriages, exploitative studio contracts, drug-fueled performances, and emotional insecurities. West brings the reader to the conclusion that the only part of Los Angeles that is real is the bare, un-built-upon ground that we stand on.

The novella also explores different regions of the United States and the culture shock that occurs following their migration to the city. For instance, Homer Simpson lived a simple, routine life in Des Moines, Iowa. When he moved to Los Angeles, Simpson found the colorful lights shining on the fruit at the grocery store confusing, unnecessary, and ostentatious. This contrast is also portrayed by the difference in architecture in both locations. In the 1930’s, Des Moines architecture was bland and generic. On the contrary, West posits the diversity and decoration of Los Angeles’ circus-like architecture: “Mexican Ranch Houses, Samoan Huts, Mediterranean Villas... and every possible combination of these styles that lined the slopes of the canyon.” From storybook architecture to the pathetic attempt at

combining “Tudor cottages and Swiss chalets,” to West, the architecture in Los Angeles represents its fake culture by illustrating its need to be “worldly,” but in a superficial way. The storybook architecture, for example, exhibits a sense of unreality normally portrayed in films, which reminds the viewer of the surreal and almost dream-like nature of living in Los Angeles, living in a fantasy. Throughout the book, West claims that Los Angeles and its architecture, compared to that of Des Moines, exemplifies the facade that Angelenos buy into—one of an amalgamation of cultures and realities.

Despite the negative aspects of LA portrayed in the book, *The Day of the Locust* emphasizes that something real does exist in Los Angeles, and it is represented by the natural paradise of Pinyon Canyon, Homer Simpson's home. Vine Street, a real street in L.A., is located in the heart of Hollywood, whereas “Pinyon Canyon” is a fake location that West created in order to provide a natural sanctuary. Based on the book’s description of Pinyon Canyon, it seems to be located ^{north} ~~south~~ of Hollywood as part of a continuation of Vine Street. West writes passionately about Pinyon Canyon, explicitly sharing how it represents the better side of Los Angeles. As he contrasts the beauty of Pinyon Canyon with the ugliness of L.A.’s artificial buildings, West claims that the only authentic part of Hollywood is its natural landscape. Throughout his descriptions of Pinyon Canyon and the surrounding terrain “covered with lupines, Canterbury bells, poppies, and several varieties of large yellow daisy,” he seems to believe that this rare, uncut part of Los Angeles should be a model for the rest of the city. This part of the city doesn’t contain the falsities that pervade other areas in L.A. and serves as a reminder of why people settled in this beautiful city in the first place. Since ~~the~~ fictional Pinyon Canyon is located near the center of Hollywood, the reader can sense very

(It's nature hills)

Good quotation, well-integrated

strongly the juxtaposition between the calm, serene slopes of the canyon ^{and} with the crazy, factory-like glamour of Hollywood. The fusing of the natural environment in Pinyon Canyon with the artificial landscape of Vine Street criticizes the reality of Hollywood and implies how West wanted Los Angeles to be.

^{loathing} Nathanael West had a strong opinion of Los Angeles—one that was filled with ^{detest} for the superficiality of a city built on dreams, as shown in Appendix B. If West had seen this plaque during his lifetime, he would have disapproved this propaganda, especially since both West and his protagonist, Hackett, came to L.A. to become something in the movie industry, but that did not happen. Even today, the ^{upselling} of Los Angeles and the wonders of Hollywood still occur: the official website of the Hollywood sign explains that

It's more than just nine white letters spelling out a city's name; it's one of the world's most evocative symbols – a universal metaphor for ambition, success, glamour...for this dazzling place, industry and dream we call H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D. In this site, you'll get closer to Hollywood's "biggest star" than you ever dreamed possible...¹

This demonstrates how, even after more than 80 years since this book was written, people in Los Angeles still believe in the fantasy of Hollywood and the facade surrounding it. This is precisely what West feared: he found the disillusionment of Los Angeles, and the architecture that mirrored it, as repulsive and a misrepresentation of the pure physical landscape; something that should have been burnt.

Punctuation use (— and :) is especially pleasing :)

¹ "Hollywood Sign." Hollywood Sign, City of Los Angeles, hollywoodsign.com/.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A



APPENDIX B

