



Characters and Plots in Nathanael West's Fiction

Robert L. Gale

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Nathanael West (1903-1940) was neglected in his lifetime but is now highly regarded by critics and general readers alike. He published four novels, eleven short stories, and many miscellaneous pieces in a tragically short career. He also wrote for Hollywood, but mainly for money. *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is a literary satire taking place in the intestines of the Trojan Horse. *Miss Lonelyhearts* chronicles a newspaper columnist's ineffective struggle to offer comfort to the lovelorn who write him for advice. *A Cool Million* depicts the failed efforts of a self-reliant lad seeking to achieve the American Dream by clean living and hard work. And *The Day of the Locust* savages, with unique thoroughness, the hypocrisy of the Hollywood film industry.

West's short fiction combines bitter humor and serious commentary. Careful readers are aware that his ideas are often pertinent today. He knew and was generally admired by most of the important writers of his time. If he had lived longer, he undoubtedly would have become a towering figure in American literary history.

Nathanael West and his wife Eileen were both killed in a car accident when they were returning to Hollywood from a little Mexican vacation. Iowa-born Robert L. Gale has degrees from Dartmouth College and Columbia University, was an officer during World War II in the Counter-Intelligence Corps of the U.S. Army Air Corps, and served in England and France. He taught forty years at American and foreign universities and has published widely, including more than twenty reference books like this one on Nathanael West, and including five also published by Word Association Publishers on Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Norman Maclean, James Welch, D Arcy McNickle, and Dorothy Parker. Retired from the University of Pittsburgh, Gale now lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

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