



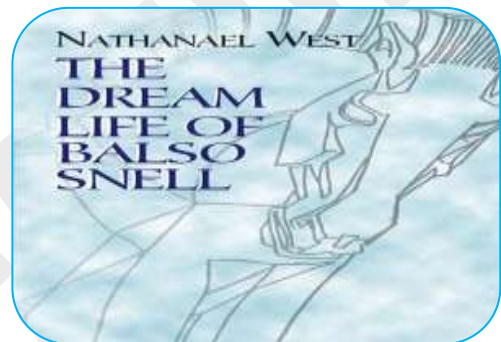
SCATALOGICAL IMAGERY IN NATHANAEAL WEST'S *THE DREAM LIFE OF BALSO SNELL*

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ABSTRACT:

*Nathanael West's fiction offers a complex and engaging representation of the American Dream and its disintegration in his fictional works. This paper studies *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* as a hysterical, obscure, disgusted, shriek against the intellect - a key to all West's later works. West's portrayal of human nature struggling for, and being consumed by, its own ideals, illusion and dreams makes his fictional works ripe for ethical study. While West captured the dilemmas that were representative of the American Dream and disintegration, he felt that these dilemmas are timeless and cannot be easily resolved. They are horrifying, and, as some critics contend, grotesque. They reveal the sordid realities and difficulties which reduced mankind to mere waste bags of absurdity and lechery.*



KEYWORDS: American Dream , human nature struggling , ethical study.

INTRODUCTION

West's works rather tell a dire story. Despite the stylistic devices he practices, the intermittent ecstasies, predominant tones of disillusionment and disintegration of dreams are really pessimistic throughout. This pessimism extends beyond the usual and commonplace reflection that failure is the story of human life in general; for the disintegration described in West's works touches everything in a special way, touches everything with a special doom. Disintegration is an enduring theme and intended to be both an account

of American Civilization and a moral judgment on it, and this account is rendered in terms of disintegration. Neither a vision of universal disintegration nor the wish to express it in a work of narrative art is unique to West. On the contrary, he took up the theme of dream and disintegration which is very near the heart of modern literature, particularly the literature produced during the thirties.

The Dream Life of Balso Snell is the scatological genesis of West's disintegration of American Dream. He creates in the novel a grotesque body of prose as Balso traverses the bowels of antiquity. This journey in *Bal*

so takes place in the body of a Trojan horse he encounters while walking in a field. Finding no other point of entry, Balso plunges into the horse's posterior opening and begins his journey through the alimentary canal. The novel ends in what many critics dismiss as an unproductive orgasm. An examination of imagery of the lower extremities present in the novel, along with a comparison to the carnival world that Mikhail Bakhtin finds at the heart of all fiction reveal, however, that the orgasm is in fact more productive than it is generally given credit for the dream world of Balso Snell.

Few novelistic careers begin with an entry into the anus of a horse, but a familiarization with West's oeuvre makes the scenery for his debut seem fitting. Jay Martin, his biographer, describes West as the "youngest and the last of the Lost Generation" (*Nathanael* 40). West is the perfect segue from Modern to Post-Modern literature in such a legacy of writers. His characters, descriptions, and situations seldom set foot in the realm of normalcy, and *Balso Snell* is certainly not an exception. These characteristics in his writing in some respects isolate him from the Lost Generation writers, but as Philippe Soupault states, "no other writer of his generation willingly accepts the knowledge that he is American" the way West does (112).

The novel is a Bakhtinian carnival of grotesque, bodily imagery parading forward in a state of hallucinogenic becoming. Once inside the horse Balso encounters an impatient man with "'Tours' embroidered on his cap" (6)¹. Commenting on the comic and absurd sequence Jay Martin notes, "Virgil served Dante as a rational guide through the mysteries of purgatory, and Sancho Panza maintained a contact with reality against which his master's illusions assumed their tragic-comic significance, but in the innards of the Trojan Horse there are no guides" (*Nathanael* 33). There are no guides in most of West's fiction of course, but here in an imaginary dream world and with an unlikely tour guide; the novelistic world of Nathanael West begins its digestive passage. West creates a surrealistic atmosphere with novel that overstates and intensifies qualities of wretchedness and loss which so many writers of the thirties portrayed their tragic characters.

The action takes place in a fertile dream world where dreams are not yet the bleak nightmare they become in West's future novels. West's likening of the novel to *Alice in Wonderland* affirms this view. He explains, "Just as Alice escapes through the looking glass, Balso Snell escapes the real world by entering the Wooden Horse of the Greeks." The novel is meant as a satire on art, but is ultimately a contemplation of art. Within the horse's dream world body, West is allowed to explore and experiment as he pleases. In the Westian narrative, the genesis of conflict lies not in its irresolvable nature, but in grappling with various ideological forms. While he represents the conundrum between self and society in ways relevant to the 1930s and still today, his "disease" is the human disease of confronting moral dilemmas that are not easily resolvable. In all of his works, he offers no easy solution to the ideological perils the characters face, whether social or psychological. Their actions are often problematic and paradoxical because they represent the actual conditions of humanity. This does not mean that there is no resolution to moral conflict, but that moral conflict is a continual conundrum of life. This turns a fatalistic reading of West into one where actions matter significantly. In characters' actions, intentions, and assumptions, the meaning of choices carry significant moral weight. The writer's brilliance lies in allowing the reader to consider what kind of action the characters ought to make, why they ought to make it, and whether or not flaws in reasoning lie in the character's moral assessment, in their environment, or in the reader's normative assumptions.

The story of the novel is surrealistic. Surrealist writers influenced West greatly and the work bears the mark of key facets of the genre. Taking place within the bowels of a Trojan horse, Balso is the initiator of discovery, rummaging through the horse's entrails, symbolic vagabonds who find a home within it. Among the several characters that Balso meets is a self-flagellating priest, a flea in the armpit of Christ, and a man who transforms himself into a woman. There is no linear plot structure in the narrative and Balso roams from one place to another quite aimlessly. What the reader is given are mini-narratives which converge only in the context of Balso's journey. Each character Balso comes across represents a personification of American Dream as a satire on conventional ideals or emblems.

One of Balso's first encounters is with Maloney the Areopagite, a catholic mystic who is trying to crucify himself with thumb tacks (10). The immediate allusion is to that of Christ. This is suggested further by Maloney's tale of a flea, Saint Puce, who lives in the armpit of Christ, and travels throughout his body, eating off of Christ's flesh and blood (12). In representing this figure, West parodies the masochistic nature of religion – namely Roman Catholicism, which places value in, and has a history of,

¹West, Nathanael. *The Complete Works of Nathanael West*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1957. All the subsequent references are to this edition.

self-flagellation as a remedy for one's inherent sinful nature. As the saint-flea devours the flesh of Christ, Christ's own body serves for masochistic ends, for the body's mutilation is the basis of pleasure and redemption. West writes that the flea is "Happy in a church whose walls were the flesh of Christ" (12). The saint-flea acts as a caricature of self-punishing practices. In its satire, the novel uses accounts such as these to expose religious and social customs, which, from an objective or practical view, are questionable.

There is also political, psychological and sexual satire in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. In other sections of the Trojan horse's intestines, the narrator encounters letters and manuscripts. One manuscript relates the killing of a man named Adolf to "restore balance" for John Gilson, the writer of the manuscript (20). The allusion is fitting of Adolf Hitler, whose book *Mein Kampf* was published in 1925 and was in wider circulation by the 1930s. The manuscript is fascinating since it combines elements of the political, psychological and sexual. With regard to the political, the killing of Adolf would restore balance in direct opposition to Hitler's claim in *Mein Kampf* that the riddance of non-Aryans and Communists would produce stabilization for the Aryan race and the world. From a psychological perspective, West goes into much detail about the killing of Adolf in ways similar to Poe. The manuscript reads "Nonsense, eh? I agree- nonsense. Please, please - here [please believe me] is why I killed Adolph" (20). In his confession of the killing, the writer, John Gilson, is psychotic, questioning his mental state in enacting the murder. Much like the "mad" narrator in Poe's "The Tell Tale Heart," the narrator is paranoid about how actions will be interpreted by others.

With regard to unfulfilled longing and dreams West moves from the psychological to the sexual. The narrator, after killing Adolf and letting the knife "slip," feels like a young girl, "kittenish and free" (21). Having killed Adolf, and thus a male body, the narrator morphs into a female body, "like a young girl who has suddenly become conscious of her body on a hot afternoon" (22). Becoming conscious of his female body only after he has killed a male body, John's act has psychological and sexual connotations. He parodies the theory of castration anxiety promoted by Freud. In killing the man while the narrator's genitals became "tight and hard" (21), the narrator's paranoia arises, in part, from anxieties of psychosexual development. Moreover, there are homoerotic allusions represented here, as is elsewhere in the text. The rise of a female body out of the male body could allude to homosexual feelings. Once able to express himself freely, the narrator has desires to "show off before groups of boys" (22). Since it is the only part in the manuscript where the narrator shows any form of sexual desire, one reads the narrator as formerly suppressed in a male body, which denied sexual feelings towards other men. After the symbolic killing of the male body, the narrator is able to exert his desires in a way acceptable from a conventional perspective - a female body. This transference suggests transgender and homosexual conflict. In a novel which takes place in an anus and ends orgasmically with "his body screamed and shouted as it marched and uncoiled [...] victorious relieved" (62), the scene represents the physical, religious, judicial, political, and psychological implications of homosexual identification which the story proposes.

As satire on American Dream, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* questions conventional assumptions of the era. The text offers a critique of disintegrating forces promoted by religious orthodoxy, the paradoxical nature of criminality in post-war culture and the pervasive preference towards procreative sexuality stemming from the false dreams. It is only fitting that *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* ends in the sexual conquest of Balso's love interest, Mary McGeeney, after he awakens from a dream. By waking from a dream, Balso momentarily transcends the paradoxical dilemmas of earlier characters and his own longing through instantaneous sexual gratification. As Balso tells Mary McGeeney, "come to bed and a new world" (59), he rejects religious and social conventions and psychological preoccupations. The new dream world is one where meaning exists expressively through the effects of one's immediate actions and the pleasures derived from it. This concept moves away from the preconceived notions of American Dream to the purely physical. Where the story takes us from there is towards sex; Balso's body "broke free of the bard" and "in this activity, Home and Duty, Love and Art, was forgotten" (61). By breaking free of prior idealisms and expectations, Balso is able to generate an "evolution of love," released from the conventional.

From an ethical perspective, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* portrays disintegrating universal moral maxims. Its satire upon the political, religious, and conventional is a critique of absolute notions of right and wrong, or totalizing idealisms. Its portrayal of killing, for example, suggests that killing is neither right nor wrong, but dependent on the particular context where it is committed. Its portrayal of sex and sexuality is another example that defies normative or conventional notions of right and wrong. While certain characters are directly affected by dream by their sexual desire, Balso offers no judgment nor indictment of practices; after he encounters one group of characters or a situation, he immediately moves to another. Balso's own sexual realization at the end negates any absolute moralizing of sexuality. He satisfies his longing for Mary without any preoccupation of whether it is a good act or a bad act, or if it defies any universal principle of sexuality. The ethical theory that negates universal principles of right and wrong is Moral Relativism. Moral Relativism holds that there are no universal maxims, but local values of right and wrong that are binding to those who agree to those values. In such a manner, an agent cannot make moral judgments of those who do not ascribe to the values that the agent holds. While one may like or dislike the actions of others, one cannot form a moral critique of others who do not agree with one's reasons of what makes actions right or wrong. Because there are no universal or categorical imperatives of right and wrong, one must accept local or individual moral imperatives. Moral Relativism does not make the case, generally speaking, that there is no objective way to make moral judgments, but that what one determines to be right in one situation may not be right in another situation, or in another context where the normative principles of the first instance have no bearing.

The Dream life of Balso Snell is not a novel that can be treated with extreme seriousness. More than anything else, the novel is more akin to watching West doodle on a piece of drawing paper. The novel shifts sporadically from one character to another and from text to text, mimicking the bowel movements of the horse until the novel ends. Otherwise, no linear storyline is available, as only West's playfulness is present. The end result of West's playful doodling, however, is fascinating.

Something unique to *Balso Snell* within the body of West's novels is its authorial self-consciousness. An intriguing instance of this self-consciousness occurs as Balso turns "a bend in the intestine." He sees a boy hiding a packet of letters in a hollow tree. These writings turn out to be the boy's diary: At the top of the first page was written, "English Theme by John Gilson, Class 8B, Public School 186, Miss McGeeney, teacher." Balso begins to read the January 1st entry:

I am an honest man and feel badly about masks,
cardboard noses, diaries, memoirs, letters from a Sabine
farm, the theatre... I feel badly, yet I can do nothing.
'Sir!' I say to myself, 'your name is not Iago, but simply
John. It is monstrous to write lies in a diary.' (14)

West reveals much to his readers about his personal struggle as a writer. Reading Gilson's ramblings is like reading his journal on writing a first novel. In this context the line, "Whom do I fool by calling these pages a journal?" (14), becomes very ironic. One of the beauties of this novel is that West's reader in effect witnesses a self-conscious, novelistic freestyle.

Gilson's journal continues with glimpses of authorial self-consciousness, but the novel's omnipresent scatology surfaces as well. The boy's journal offers the rawness that Galloway alludes to in *Balso Snell* via digestive imagery. Gilson's next entry makes particularly vivid use of uncontrollable bowel movements:

Inexperienced diary-writers make their first entry the
largest. They come to the paper with a constipation of
ideas - eager, impatient. The white paper acts as a laxative. A diahroea of words is the result. The
richness of the flow is unnatural; it cannot be sustained. (15)

The "inexperienced" approach to diary writing that Gilson describes in this passage, along with the uncontrollable bowel movement imagery, mirrors West's own attempt at writing in this first novel. The reader experiences much of what Gilson describes in the novel, as the novel is an outpouring of ideas that are locked in West's authorial mind. As Galloway suggests, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is "a catalogue of the delusions which are to be the subjects of his later work - Christianity, the success dream, artistic detachment, the innocence of childhood, the return to nature, and political idealism" (37). In this sense, the pages of *Balso Snell* act like the laxative Gilson describes for the young author. West states in an interview that *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is written "as a protest against writing books" (qtd in Martin, *Nathanael* 129). Being that this is the writer's first novel, this statement seems peculiar. It may be the case, however, that because he employs Gilson's "outpouring" method that this is what he means by saying that his writing of *Balso Snell* is a "protest." In turn, this method creates a fertile playground where ideas can be born via scatological imagery.

The scatology of *Balso Snell* is indicative of West's fascination with the human body, apparently an early interest. Jay Martin mentions an instance where he questioned his cousin extensively about the dissection of cadavers. He was particularly concerned with the body's "odors, its orifices, its corruptibility and diseases, with parasites that feed, on the human body" (*Nathanael* 32). It is no wonder that the setting for his first novel would take place in the digestive system of a horse, but it is still a curious choice of setting. "The scatology is obviously there, but what is it doing there?" asks Randall Reid. Reid proceeds to caution readers not to dismiss its presence as a "juvenile desire to shock" or as a "juvenile delight in toilet humor." The imagery can be treated as such, but Reid does not think it should be at least not until one examines more august reasons for its presence (16). Reid cites three major justifications for the imagery that are well presented and lengthy, but in the end *Balso Snell's* scatology is in terms of the novel's plot - just potty humor.

Reid's interpretations of the imagery have some validity, but run the risk of making more out of the imagery than is actually present. For example, Reid writes of the intellectuals and writers alluded to in the horse's bowels, "They quote, they allude, they pose and their profundities and then poses have been so thoroughly digested in past ages that only excrement remains" (18). Although, this reading may grasp West's likely aim in the novel's incorporation of his artistic predecessors into its narrative, the reading is defeated by *Balso Snell's* incoherent plot. Reid's reading can be defended, but it can more easily be defeated by his immaturity as a writer at this point in his career. He was a young author, and his "juvenile" humor is not a bad thing, especially in a first novel. Yet extraneous justification of the imagery can only weaken the critic's perception of *Balso Snell* because it reaches for interpretations only vaguely present and underdeveloped by West at this early stage.

A connection with principles that Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) applies to scatology in the carnival world and his theories of the grotesque body make a meaningful justification for *Balso Snell's* scatology possible by using imagery already present in the novel. Bakhtin presents the concept of carnival in *Rabelais and His World*, which Michael Holquist maintains is the book's most productive idea (18). Although Bakhtin and West were contemporaries, West would not have been conscious of *Rabelais and his World*, as it was compiled from Bakhtin's notebooks and presented to the Gorky Institute of World Literature in 1940 (the year West died) as a thesis. Bakhtin did not defend his thesis until 1947 (*Rabelais* 29).

The book's content, however, provides remarkable insight into not only to *Balso Snell*, but in all his novels. Bakhtin's theory unearths unconscious themes in West's first novel that transcend its narrative, and apply to his future texts as well.

Reid questions the presence of *Balso Snell's* scatology, but a larger question is better directed at why West chooses to use a grotesque body as his setting. According to Bakhtin, "the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world." "It is not a closed, completed unit," states Bakhtin, but rather an unfinished unit that outgrows itself and transgresses its own limits. "The stress" says Bakhtin "is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world." These are the parts of the body through which the body meets the world (26). In the case of *Balso Snell* the body meets the world through the Trojan horse's posterior opening, which leads into the alimentary canal. More specifically, this orifice is

the place where Nathanael West as an author meets the literary world. This may not sound like the most flattering description of an author's beginning, but the place where he chooses to begin is part of what makes him a unique writer. In Rabelaisian terms, it is an ideal place to start, because it is where the body of Nathanael West's writing imitates the scatological orientation of cannibalistic writing.

The Phoenix Excrementi shed light on why the alimentary canal is an ideal place for West to begin his career. Conveniently, the Phoenix Excrementi is one of the novel's first images. Balso Snell describes the Excrementi as "a race of men he had invented one Sunday afternoon while in bed." The Phoenix Excrementi "eat themselves, digest themselves, and give birth to themselves by evacuating their bowels" (6). Balso is fearful of this imaginary race, but their actions are mimicked in his journey. Bakhtin describes excrement as something "intermediate between earth and body, as something relating the one to the other" (*Rabelais* 175-176). In *Balso Snell*, West creates a body that will evolve into other bodies in his succeeding novels. *Balso Snell* is a journey into the past, whereas the succeeding novels will evolve onto American soil. It is *Balso Snell*'s excremental imagery, however, that makes such a transition possible. Bakhtin explains that excrement is "an intermediate between the living body and dead disintegrating matter that is being transformed into earth, into manure." He adds, "The living body returns to the earth its excrement, which fertilizes the earth as does the body of the dead" (*Rabelais* 175-176). There are many allusions as well as overt references to older texts in *Balso Snell*. This presence coupled with *Balso Snell*'s excremental setting fertilizes West's imagination and creates new texts, but it is – here – in the bowels of antiquity that they are born.

A related Rabelaisian act in which the novel partakes in is degradation. Degradation is actually a part of regeneration. West, however, severs this relationship in his later novels where degradation exists alone. Balso's fear of the Phoenix Excrementi foreshadows this broken relationship, as his character in effect fears regeneration. In *Balso Snell*, however, the relationship functions as it should. Bakhtin explains that to "degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place" (21). West's choice of setting degrades literature, art, pretentiousness and the writing process the way Bakhtin explains. His aim in degrading is not to destroy art permanently, but instead to examine it and pull it apart so that he may know how to continue as an artist himself. Bakhtin asserts, "Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb," and "it is always conceiving" (21). By casting literature and art into the lower stratum, West creates a grotesque body in a state of emergence. Its grotesquerie continues as he creates new work as Bakhtin's theory affirms, is always conceiving.

Balso Snell affirms Bakhtin's theory of degenerative and regenerative simultaneity, but the novel is also unique to West's oeuvre. The time that it appears in print (1931) also makes it unique to Western fiction. Another of its distinctions is that it defies a key differentiation that Bakhtin makes between parodies of medieval times and those of modern times. Bakhtin states that the act of perpetual conception is what separates medieval parody from the "literary parody of modern times." Modern parody "has solely negative character and is deprived of regenerating ambivalence" (21).

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