

# What makes homer tick: an interpretation of west's the day of the locust

[Literature](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Surrounded as he is by more vibrant characters, it might be easy for much of what Homer Simpson does to go unnoticed by the reader. But in many ways he is the central character of *The Day of the Locust*, with more text devoted to him than any other character. And it is impossible to understand *Locust*, to know what West is saying about L. A. and America, about art and film and sex, without a thorough understanding of Homer. The themes of the novel are all present in the destruction of Homer Simpson.

First, it is essential know who Homer is and where he came from, and to consider West's method of characterization more generally. Next, an interpretation of the turning points of the novel is needed to understand the climactic riot scene in which the novel's thematic forces collide. The first aspect of Homer that jumps out at the reader is his name. In a general sense, Homer Simpson does seem to have wandered to Los Angeles just as the blind bard of antiquity might have wandered Greece, but the name is intended to mock any association between the two men.

There is nothing poetic or heroic about the Homer of *Locust*, and he is often at a loss for words. Though when Homer suffers Faye's final betrayal, he does "pour out" his story in a way that "wasn't jumbled so much as timeless" (West 368). With the conspicuous use of the word "timeless," West seems to be indicating that Homer shares something with his classical namesake, that Homer is a modern, American distortion of the bard. Ironic parallels between Homer and the hero of the classical epics are also hard to miss.

Homer has had his Circe encounter with Ramola Martin, the close call that drove him to L. A. Ramola even refers to Homer as an "enormous cow," <https://assignbuster.com/what-makes-homer-tick-an-interpretation-of-wests-the-day-of-the-locust/>

though Homer, like Odysseus, does not stick around long enough to make the transformation (271). But Homer's brief encounter with Ramola is a formative one. His "growing excitement" as he presents the coquettish drunk with her bill reveals how naive and sexually undeveloped he is (271). Homer, unlike his epic counterpart, cannot take advantage of a good thing, and his only recourse is to "[run] out of the room" (271). This timidity and inability to act, which seems to be based on a sexual immaturity, will show through in Homer's actions throughout *Locust*.

A close look at Homer also reveals the way in which West creates characters. Homer is defined by his deficiencies. He lacks a mature, developed sexuality. This is clear from his inability to deal with Ramola, but also from his perplexity at the sounds coming from Faye's bedroom. He also lacks any kind of aesthetic sense or emotional depth. As Homer sits in his back yard, the reader is told that there is "a much better view in any direction than the one he faced" (275). There is also something physical that Homer does not possess: "For all his size and shape, he looked neither strong nor fertile" (268).

While it might be true to say that West has created "grotesques," and the author uses this word himself, this does not say much about his technique. West's characters are defined by what they are missing. Tod Hackett has the eye and talent to be a great artist, but he is lazy; his "slow blue eyes and sloppy grin," seem to show he lacks the necessary drive (242). Harry Greener, in contrast, works hard but lacks talent. He is a man who "clowned continuously" but "on the stage was a complete failure" (262). The novel is

populated with characters who are missing something but do not seem to know it.

Faye has inherited her father's lack of talent. She thinks of herself as an actress, but her only work has been as a harem girl in " a two-reel farce" (250). Claude Estee is a " dried-up little man" who carries himself like a Civil War colonel (252). When the reader first sees Claude, he is pretending he has a large, respectable gut. Earle Shoop, a " dull fool" who is " criminally handsome," spends his days in front of a saddlery store, pretending to be a cowboy (299). Even the overweight and large-foreheaded Adore is depicted through his deficiency. His mother asks, " What's Shirley Temple got that he ain't got?" (333).

West defines his characters by what they " ain't got. " Homer is presented as lacking many things, but he is also an iconic " Middle-Westerner" the author uses to explore the phoniness of the L. A. movie world (265). West tells the reader that " the forty years of [Homer's] life had been entirely without variety or excitement" (275). He is also a parody of midwestern industriousness. His hands " worked mechanically" and his mind is entirely that of an accountant (275). In fact, " with a will of their own," his hands have more personality than Homer himself (275).

Spending his days eating canned goods from the SunGold market, Homer is the midwestern blank on which the temptations of L. A. will make their mark. His role throughout the novel is as the victim of the bait-and-switch game the other characters play. The story unfolds as a series of tricks played on Homer, each one pushing him closer to his final explosion. The novel ultimately redeems Tod's initial impression of Homer, that " he was the exact <https://assignbuster.com/what-makes-homer-tick-an-interpretation-of-wests-the-day-of-the-locust/>

model of the kind of person who comes to California to die, perfect in every detail down to fever eyes and unruly hands" (264).

Homer might be characterized as the anti-Odysseus, never clever enough to grasp what he wants. And it is in this impotence that Homer's name takes on a second comic meaning. He is the novel's most domesticated character, a true home-body who is content to cook, clean, and sit in his back yard. He is content, that is, until Harry and Faye Greener come knocking at his door. The first episode of bait and switch that Homer suffers is over a can of silver polish and a seventeen-year-old girl dressed as a twelve-year-old. Homer's first brush with Faye changes him forever.

His mundane routine, in which he had been neither happy nor unhappy " just as a plant is neither," is shattered by his desire for Faye (276). Her " vitality" causes an obsession in him (281). In a pitiful mixture of functionality and beauty, Homer marvels that she is as " shiny as a new spoon" (281). The scene becomes something of a religious farce: Faye snacks on salmon and a large red apple, while Homer feels he has done a " Christian deed" and " suddenly become very pious" (288). Though neither the reader nor Homer knows how much of the Greener's sales pitch is an act, it is clear he has been played for a fool.

Having bought a can of polish and fallen for Faye's enticements, Homer is terrified that he " felt more alive" than at any time since his encounter with Ramola Martin (291). Homer does not know what to make of his emotions and desires. His own feelings often frighten him. He " somehow knew," and this is the way Homer's thoughts are often characterized, that " his only defense was chastity, that it served him like the shell of a tortoise, as both <https://assignbuster.com/what-makes-homer-tick-an-interpretation-of-wests-the-day-of-the-locust/>

spine and armor" (290). Recalling Ramola, he is frightened that he " wouldn't escape again" (290).

He is right, and the reader can sense that Homer will meet a bad end. The next phase of the novel consists of Homer's awkward courting of Faye. At first he is seen " staring at [Faye's] apartment from a shadow" across the street, later venturing to the door to present wine and flowers (264). The " pleasant sadness" he had lived with before meeting Faye has turned to anguish (291). While there is not much he can give a woman who would " only let a handsome, wealthy man love her," he does have a home and savings to offer Faye when her father dies (250).

Faye's neediness allows for what Homer thinks of as a " business arrangement" between the two (332). He fatuously seeks to meet his emotional needs through an investment in Faye, by keeping a tally of her expenses. The stage is set for him to play the fool again. The " final crisis" of Homer and Faye's relationship plays out over the last seven chapters of the novel, all held together by a unity of time and place while the middle portion of the novel jumps between subplots (339). As chapter 20 opens, Faye has grown bored with Homer, and Homer has become a " clumsy dog who is always anticipating a blow" (339).

It is clear as well that their business relationship has been all business, that Homer's romantic intentions have not been realized. The betrayal Homer suffers in these final chapters begins in the Cinderella Bar, a club with drag-queen entertainment that seems characteristic of the L. A. scene. The place itself mocks Homer's sensibilities. Faye force-feeds brandy to Homer as Tod watches in horror and embarrassment. As an example of the cruelty Homer  
<https://assignbuster.com/what-makes-homer-tick-an-interpretation-of-wests-the-day-of-the-locust/>

suffers, this scene is important. After being forced to drink, the reader sees the earliest signs of the derangement of Homer's character.

He has become a parody, the butt of a mean joke, as he drunkenly shouts "Whoopee!" (340). Until this point, Homer had been sober in every sense of the word. The reader learns that he has been forced to make room in his home for Faye's disreputable friends. The indignity he has suffered becomes clear in his telling Tod about "the dirty black hen" (343). Faye humiliates him by dancing with a stranger, and as the chapter closes, Homer cowers away from her "as though she were going to hit him" (346).

The sense of crisis between Homer and Faye carries over into the next night, when a cockfight takes place at Homer's house. Faye dances for the men attending the party, suggesting "undefined intimacies" as Homer watches from the edge of the crowd and later through a window (355). He begins to sense the betrayal that he had not seen before. Having fled the house to talk with Tod, Homer's hands compulsively form churches and steeples, the "most complicated tic" Tod has ever seen (359). Homer's hands express what he cannot, his sexual frustration and his feelings of betrayal.

Tod's admonition that "She's a whore!" sends Homer to his room as the party continues to rage (360). The final nail in the coffin of Homer's sanity comes not long after Faye, in an attempt to restart the cycle of bait and switch with Homer, has "called him daddy and kissed him" (370). A strange moaning from Faye's room leads Homer to discover her in bed with "the Mexican" (370). Homer's inexperience is evident in this scene. His first reaction is to feel ashamed and protective. The next day, he is catatonic. In

what the narrator describes as " Uterine Flight," Homer curls into a ball on his couch (372).

This final betrayal has stripped Homer of his illusions and what little personality he has affected throughout the novel. Homer struggles to find refuge in his " original coil," a place the reader is told is " better by far than Religion or Art or the South Sea Islands" (372). He weeps in redundant and incessant sobs that Tod observes, " would never reach a climax" (367). Homer has been dealt a blow from which he cannot recover. Stripped down to his essential self, he sets out from home in a semi-conscious state, intent on making it back to Wayneville, Iowa, on foot.

The riotous climax of the novel is at hand as crowds gather around Kahn's Persian Palace Theatre for a movie premiere. The occasion gives West a chance to comment on the mob of people who have been " cheated and betrayed" by their mundane lives and the " murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, [and] wars" brought to them by an entertainment industry that entices them to want more (381). West sees all movie-going Americans as a mob slavishly assembled outside a " pleasure dome" (378).

Their " slack minds and bodies" are fit for nothing more than facile Hollywood fare (381). It is into this mob that Homer wanders in a misguided attempt to go home. Here it becomes clear that Homer is not the " everyman" of the novel. He is the conservative dolt whom the everyman of the mob runs over in an attempt to reach the latest enticement. Adore emerges from the crowd to taunt Homer with a pocketbook on a string. The picture West paints of the



impetuous child teasing a deranged man with a purse is the distillation of the novel's view of Hollywood and the American experience.

It is " a painter's clue, that is--a clue told in the form of a symbol," meant to characterize all the relationships in the novel (261). This final act of trickery has come at a time when Homer is unable to resist his baser instincts. He stomps the boy to death and provokes a riotous response from the mob. But the irony of the mob's actions should not be lost: as rioters righteously surge forth to avenge the killing of child, acts of depravity take place within the mob itself.

Women are groped and victimized, and the innocent are injured. The novel ends in violence and a series of injustices. Tod is inspired to paint his masterpiece, but in the next moment he is seemingly driven mad. In Tod's vision, L. A. has destroyed everyone. Locust is the story of how America went wrong. The dreams of each character seem to have ended in fire, though surely the producers of the Kahn Theatre premiere will be pleased with the headlines the event will draw.