In Nathanael West’s often-undervalued satire *A Cool Million*, the author makes several remarks in the text that are purposefully offensive. These comments often target those who fit into the mold of the literary “other.” West’s purposefully tasteless remarks target African Americans, women, Jewish Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans, just to name a few. Nobody, it seems, is free from West’s hard racial profiling. As readers of American satire, we are aware that West is most likely targeting the other to make a political or social statement. His message, however, can seem unclear until we understand the novel’s inherent criticism of the Horatio Alger novels, novels that did not embrace a gendered or racial other. The supposed racism in West’s novel, therefore, is used as a tool to criticize not only the optimism of the Horatio Alger myth, but also the racial exclusivity of the early twentieth century’s concept of the American Dream.

Horatio Alger was a late nineteenth-century children’s novelist who wrote sentimental, optimistic texts that follow a predictable plot. According to the *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, these novels always follow a young male hero who is “born poor, overcame odds by living virtuously and working hard and rose to fame and fortune.” West’s parody of Alger, *A Cool Million*, questions this idea that young Americans could become wealthy simply by their own optimism and good luck. He does this by showing Lemuel, a caricature of the traditional Algerian hero, being torn down by society. Throughout the novel, Lemuel gradually loses everything of value (including his own life) in his pursuit of wealth and fame. Harlon L. Dalton claims that the Horatio Alger myth is one that is “socially destructive” (304), yet with a purpose. Dalton further explains that Alger novels support the optimistic message that if one works hard, he or she will always win out in life. He writes, “It suggests that success in life has nothing to do with pedigree, race, class background, gender, national origin, sexual orientation—in short, with anything beyond our individual control” (Dalton 304). These Horatio Alger novels seem to exclude the presence of the other entirely, ignoring the fact that there are societal and economic conditions and influences, which realistically prevented some people from achieving the American Dream.

It’s apparent that West noticed this lack of representation and ignorance of the economic and social struggles of some by choosing to include these marginalized people in his novel. Perhaps West’s most obvious critique of the lack of representation of the other in the Alger novels is in relation to gender. While the Alger novels always follow a young man in his pursuit of happiness, they neglect to show a female perspective. West immediately decides to disprove this myth by providing Betty Prail with a detailed storyline. In the novel, Betty spends the earlier years of her life just trying to get by and is violently attacked, ignored, and abused. Imitating the “aw-shucks” tone of the Alger novel, West writes:
“On her twelfth birthday, Betty became an orphan with the simultaneous death of her two parents in a fire which also destroyed what little property might have been left her. In this fire, or rather at it, she also lost something which, like her parents, could never be replaced” (79). In this caricature, West parodies (and thereby resists) the gender stereotypes found in a typical Alger novel.

By showing us Betty’s perspective and her tragic history, West makes it clear to the reader that Betty was never given an opportunity to pursue the American Dream. She is often the object of many hardships and struggles to survive. At each point in the novel when it seems that things are beginning to look up for Betty, West again quickly tears her down. We see this first when Betty manages to free herself from the world of prostitution and make a living supporting Mr. Whipple and Lemuel’s gold mining business. Immediately after she is comfortable in this world, she is again attacked. West makes it very clear that Betty is helpless to improve her situation when he writes, “In the half gloom of the cabin, Lem was horrified to see the Pike man busily tearing off Betty’s sole remaining piece of underwear. She was struggling as best as she could, but the ruffian from Missouri was too strong for her” (154). This mirrors another earlier moment in the novel where the white male protagonist, Lem, is in a similar situation when he is nearly raped. However, Lem is able to easily work his way out of the situation where Betty is left completely helpless due to the limitations of her own gender identity.

In fact, it is only through the power of a white Protestant man that Betty is finally able to reach anything close to resembling a happy ending. At the end of the novel, West describes Betty as having obtained “some official position” as “Mr. Whipple’s secretary” (178). Betty still fails to completely make an identity for herself and is instead known only as an aide to Mr. Whipple. Despite these limitations, West still gives the reader an insight into a woman’s struggles, something that Alger would not have done.

West shows a similar life struggle through his portrayal of the Widow Pitkin. Lemuel’s mother loses her farm and spends the rest of her life living in the shadows. While her farm and livelihood is struggling, she has no opportunities to better her own situation herself. In fact, she is forced to rely entirely on Lemuel to save her from poverty. When we see her again in the end of the novel, apparently free from her isolated life of homelessness, it is only through the aide of Mr. Whipple. Like Betty, the Widow Pitkin has had no opportunities to pursue the American Dream herself and instead is forced to rely on male characters to better her situation. By showing the helplessness of Betty and Widow Pitkin in their pursuit of the American Dream, West criticizes the blind optimism of the Horatio Alger myth and the gender exclusion embedded in the concept of the American Dream. West’s criticism about the lack of opportunities in this “ideal” American world is not only impossible for women but also for people who are classified as “the other” based on their heritage, ethnicity, or race. Much like women, these Americans also did not have a place within the Horatio Alger concept of the American Dream. While the novel is filled with mock racial prejudices, one that is particularly prevalent is through West’s portrayal of Asian Americans. Perhaps
the most notable Asian character within the text is the owner of the international whorehouse, Wu Fong. While Wu Fong is described as being “the biggest man in the district” (West 132), it should also be noted that the character is portrayed in West’s novel as being exceptionally cunning. In fact it is only through illegal means that Wu Fong is able to even achieve his money. West portrays Wu Fong as a cunning and manipulative man because he is wealthy, suggesting that in order for someone who is not a white Protestant in America to be successful and wealthy, he must achieve this through illegal or deceptive means. Of course Wu Fong is portrayed as a villain. In an effort to display these limitations in American society for the other, West suggests that the majority of white readers believe that it is impossible for any other to obtain wealth and fortune through any honest means.

Another instance of racial stereotyping is seen in Sam’s mistreatment of the elderly Asian man in Chinatown. The elderly man is enjoying his time reading his paper when he is suddenly the target of race-related bullying from Sam. Sam insults the man with a series of racial remarks to instigate a confrontation. When Sam attempts to violently attack the elderly man, he is forced to respond violently. “That surprising individual was not in the least frightened. He took a small hatchet out of his pocket and proceeded to shave the hair from the back of his hand with its razor-sharp edge” writes West (124). West makes two statements regarding the equality of Asian Americans at this time. This interaction with the elderly man shows us that the other is the subject of harsh mistreatment and bullying when they try to pursue a typical American life to achieve their dreams. In addition, the only way that they can respond is through violence because they are socially incapable of finding a resolution to their problems in any other means. During a time in America where immigration from China was common, the Chinese were often the targets of hate crimes throughout America, especially in New York City where Nathanael West lived. West likely saw the tragedies that these Chinese men and women were suffering and hoped to make a statement about how the land of the free were placing the same expectations upon them as had been placed upon Caucasians, but not providing them with the same opportunities.

One critic explains, “Nevertheless, it is by now generally agreed that there is a large category of Americans- some have called it the underclass- for whom upward mobility is practically impossible without massive changes in the structure of the economy and in the location of public resource” (Dalton 306). If society prevents these “underclass” people from moving up in society, then their fate is often doomed from the beginning. However, West takes this a step further in his narrative. Not only are racial minorities limited in their opportunities as a result of the color of their skin, but they are also the target of much violence and are attacked and targeted by nearly everyone in the world. We see this particularly through the character of Jake Raven, a dark-skinned Native American, who throughout the novel is often abused due to his skin complexion resemblance to an African American or his identity as the “Indian other.” Apart from Lemuel, he is the only character to be physically injured/mutilated or ‘dismantled’ multiple
times throughout the novel. Through this violence, West shows America’s true colors as a nation: one that discriminates against anyone with a darker skin tone and cruelly runs them into their graves.

Later in the novel, when West introduces a tribe of Indians living in the West, his descriptions are filled with heavy-handed racial stereotypes. The Indians refer to themselves as “red men” (West 155). Referring to Native Americans as red-skinned people is another way that many European Americans would isolate the Natives by creating a sense of other, and pointing out their darkness in comparison to whites. However, in the tradition of satire, West turns this concept of racism against Native Americans on its head by portraying the Native Americans as racist. We see this when West describes the chief’s primary motivations by writing, “he had been trying to get the Indian nations to rise and drive the pale-faces back to the countries from which they had come” (155). What makes this statement particularly ironic is that this was often the same motivation used by many Caucasians when they forced the Natives to journey west on the Trail of Tears. It is also the same ideology used by white supremacists in support of evicting African Americans, Chinese Americans, and Irish Americans from America and sending them back to their place of national origin in the early twentieth century.

However, while this passage paints the Native Americans as being racist in an attempt to draw attention to the racism of the European Americans, it is also littered with racist comments against Native Americans. One example of this is the chief’s name, “Israel Satinpenny” (West 155). West creates a name to parody immigrants and natives by simply combining two words. This type of name would appear in Alger novels, and West is mocking Ager’s patronizing style. A few sentences later he describes Native Americans as having “grown soft and lost their warlike ways” (West 155). By including this sentence, West asserts one of the common racist stereotypes of the other. He suggests that due to their alternative heritage that they are naturally more warlike and prone to violence. This was used as motivation for Europeans to attack and colonize the natives, and it was also used as a defense in many court cases where African Americans were unjustly tried for violent crimes on the basis of their supposed natural savagery. West writes this way in an attempt to cause readers to read between the lines and evaluate their own social inequalities. By pointing fingers at the concept of racial segregation and bigotry, West smashes any idealistic visions for the American Dream by showing it as a bogus concept that is based on inequality.

“West’s heavy-handedness is deliberate; by drawing attention to itself, the rhetoric helps to expose the deception underneath. West always used rhetoric to reveal or expose fraud” explains Victor Comerchero (107). West uses his skills as a writer of satire to embed these very real criticisms of our society, which he witnessed withholding these inalienable American rights from some of its own citizens, within his novel. He did this with subtlety and allowed the readers to use their own analytical skills to come to this conclusion. “A Cool Million is surely warmly comic; but beneath its comic surface there is a sinister social and political analysis” he further comments (Comerchero 107). While many of the scenes may
come across as farcical dark comedy, there is a much deeper message that West is trying to convey. This novel subtly criticizes the entire ideology behind the American Dream, race relations, and women’s rights in America. It seems that West was very progressive for his time and had hoped that through his writing he could draw attention to some of the evils that were occurring in New York City, a city of immigrants. (West’s parents were immigrants.) These people had come to America in search of freedom and a brighter future and instead suffered prejudice, discrimination, and societal violence.

In his novel, West tears apart the myth of the American Dream. This myth—that Americans could strive and live a successful life of wealth and fortune—was a dream that was glorified by Horatio Alger in his novels. In the traditional sense of the Alger myth of the American Dream, a “hero should succeed through Luck and Pluck. But he doesn’t. His pluck is only persistence in stupidity, and his luck is all bad. ‘Jail is his first reward. Poverty his second. Violence is his third, Death is his last.’ The Alger success story is turned on its head” explains Randall Reid (108). West points out the state of the country during the harsh times of the Great Depression. This was a country where the idealized ‘keep pushing forward’ message of the American Dream was nearly impossible, especially for people who were considered as being a part of this ‘underclass’. This creates an absolute impossibility for anyone who was generally considered to be lower on the societal hierarchy to live a safe and healthy life, never mind pursue wealth and success. West realized this as being problematic and unrealistic and decided to direct his attack toward the American Dream and optimism novelists like Horatio Alger.

“West realizes that the Dreams mask horrors and coexist with nightmares: American xenophobia, anxiety, fear of the cultural exotic. Hence the racial stereotypes,” argues West scholar David Madden (159). West understood that this optimism often masks the neglect and inequality in society. Using satire, West hopes to draw the attention of his readers to these injustices. Madden explains that West used these racial stereotypes to highlight the horrors and mistreatment of these people as a result of their difference from the ‘cultural norm’. By doing this he shows the harshness of our ways as a nation of prejudice with a lack of fairness and opportunity. “Cops are always Irish and revel in brutality; Chinese are inscrutable ‘celestials’; Indians retain the redness of their savagery; Jews, in their craft and cunning, deceive and steal,” explains Madden.

Stacey Olster has a slightly different view of West’s use of ethnic stereotypes: “Humorous as these remarks are, they suggest quite clearly the arbitrary ways in which ethnic categorization is often determined.” On the surface, these racist remarks can be viewed as offensive or as a form of lowbrow humor; however, there is much more being said here in West’s writing. West creates these caricatures of various ethnicities as a reflection of white reality, the kind found in an Alger novel. The humor makes us uncomfortable because it subverts some very dark realities about our country’s history in its treatment of the other. These are issues that were detrimental in West’s world just as they are today. (Just remember all of the negative stereotypes imposed upon Barack Obama by many Americans the moment that he took office simply because of his race.)
Nathanael West uses humor to subvert the seriousness of the situation, but when we look at the core of these jokes, what we find is a criticism of the country and an exposure of America’s mistreatment of people in regards to race, gender, or ethnicity.

In summary, Nathanael West fills his novel, *A Cool Million*, with supposed racial stereotypes in an attempt to criticize the limitations of the Horatio Alger version of the American Dream. According to West, not only is the optimism of Alger’s novels and the general American mindset dangerous, but so too is how it ignores a large portion of America’s population. West realized the gender and race related corruption, which these myths attempt to conceal, and he used satire as a tool to expose these injustices. *A Cool Million* is a disturbing work of satire that asks American readers to look at their own country and question the fairness of some of the principles that the nation is supposedly built upon.

**Works Cited**


These are recommendation lists which contains Laws of the Other World. You should give them a visit if you're looking for similar novels to read. Alternatively, you can also create your own list. A Big fan of this author's other stories, too. The author has the gift of creating MCs that are completely believable even when they are put through extraordinary situations, and corresponding MLs with personalities that don't lose to their overwhelming OPness. West's novel is a darkly comic parody of the typical Horatio Alger novel, in which a poor but honest boy performs a series of brave actions and eventually rises from rags to riches. West's hero Lemuel Pitkin is indeed a poor but honest boy, but each time he tries to do something adventurous or brave he loses another body part: first his teeth, then his eye, his leg, his scalp, etc. In America, politics is a business like any other and Shagpoe is undeterred by his recent incarceration. “The time for a new party with the old American principles was, I realized, overripe.” In A Cool Million, the themes are reversed. The assumption that every American can achieve wealth and honor is mercilessly savaged while exposing the bigotry and racism of the Protestant elite.