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SINISTER REALITIES AND DISINTEGRATION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN NATHANAEL WEST'S *MISS LONELYHEARTS*

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Nathanael West's fiction offers a complex and engaging representation of the American Dream and its disintegration in his fictional works. His novel *Miss Lonelyhearts* captures the social, psychological and religious predicament of the thirties through the struggles of the eponymous protagonist of the novel. This paper attempts to explore the representation of the American Dream in the novel through the lens of the spiritual, psychological and economic contexts. West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* charts the perilous and painful journey of the protagonist Lonelyhearts, his predicament and futile quest for solutions and eventual death. Miss Lonelyhearts is a pseudonym adopted by a newspaper columnist to advise people who write to him about their varied problems. The letters he receives from people seeking solutions and advice bring to focus the reality of contemporary society. As Norman Podhoretz puts it: "The letters make the fact of evil a concrete presence in the novel, and it is in relation to this fact that west forces us to measure the responses of his characters" (157).

The disintegrating physical environment in the novel constantly serves as signifier of human condition the way the letters do. *Miss Lonelyhearts*'s descriptions of the cityscape also serve as a reiteration of the letters' contents, yet they also expand the narrative toward other themes in the novel-mental disintegration, sexuality and regeneration.

One can locate elements of Bakhtin's carnivalesque in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Laughter and festivity are present in *Miss Lonelyhearts,* but it is a sinister and sarcastic kind of laughter and celebration. The novel's main harbinger of this carnivalesque behavior is Miss Lonelyhearts's feature editor, Shrike who keeps the act of degradation alive and is a prime force preventing regeneration to occur in the novel. He shares his name with "the butcher bird that impales its prey on a thorn or twig while tearing it apart with its sharp hooked beak" (94). The readers' first glimpse of the editor is through the prayer that he leaves on *Miss Lonelyhearts's* desk:

> *"Soul of Miss L, glorify me.*
> *Body of Miss L, nourish me.*
> *Blood of Miss L, intoxicate me.*
> *Tears of Miss L, excuse my plea.*
> *Oh good Miss L, excuse my plea,*
> *And hide me in your heart,*
> *And defend me from mine enemies*
> *Help me, Miss L, help me, help me.*
> *In secula seculorum. Amen."* (59)

This prayer sets the tone for the incessant mockery Shrike unleashes on the columnist throughout the novel, and it also introduces the important notion of the "Christ Dream." Miss Lonelyhearts stops

reading the letter and reflects, "Christ was the answer, but, if he did not want to get sick, he had to stay away from the Christ business" (61). His desire is to have an answer for the suffering in the letters that come to him. The "Christ business" is not Miss Lonelyheart's answer, as the novel reveals, but merely the vehicle that drives him to his fatal end. Shrike makes it his duty to keep this fatal pageant of pain running on schedule through constant acts of degradation like the one the letter presents with wicked degradation. Throughout his multitudinous acts of degradation, he capitalizes on Miss Lonelyheart's ambivalence towards the Christ Dream.

The novel's theme of disintegration makes itself visible as the physical and non-physical mingle. West makes allusions to both bodily and spiritual impotence as Miss Lonelyhearts contemplates what to write with fifteen minutes left on the newspaper's deadline. The columnist is unable to finish his response to the letters. He had gone as far as: "Life is worthwhile, for it is full of dreams and peace, gentleness and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar" (59). What the columnist expresses in the unfinished advice is the antithesis of the novel's bleak reality. His impotent response to the readers also accents the sterility of Miss Lonelyhearts and is one way that West depicts the body as improperly functioning. It is this sterility and impotence that Shrike chooses to capitalize on when tormenting and degrading Miss Lonelyhearts.

Shrike's degradation of his employee is always verbal, but strangely enough it often evokes very physical imagery that is important to the novel's dominant themes (specifically violence and the body). Shrike never fails to deliver a good dose of mockery upon seeing the frail columnist:

"Miss Lonelyhearts, my friend, I advise you to give your readers stones. When they ask for bread don't give them crackers as does the Church, and don't, like the State, tell them to eat cake. Explain that man cannot live on bread alone and give them stones. Teach them to pray each morning: 'Give us this day our daily stone.'" (63)

Miss Lonelyhearts reflects that he has "given his readers many stones; so many, in fact," that he has "only one left," the one that forms in his gut (63). The stone in Miss Lonelyhearts's gut is something he never digests and another symbolic symptom of a body in decline. Not passing a kidney stone is another helpful way of looking at the stone imagery as well. The Christ Dream is not the answer that helps Miss Lonelyhearts, but his suffering bears Christ-like tonalities. The stone in his gut is his burden. He reluctantly carries the stone at first: "If he could only throw the stone. He searched the sky for a target" (64). Eventually he accepts the stone, as he becomes the rock towards the final chapters of the book. The stone (his degrading gift from Shrike's imagination) is Miss Lonelyhearts's cross and the letters are his crucifiers. Miss Lonelyhearts's Christ-like similarities, however, end in crucifixion without resurrection. This finality, aside from indicating the insufficiency of the Christ Dream, is another way that the novel rejects Bakhtin's regenerative notions.

Shrike's initial act of degradation precedes the novel's narrative, as it is his office (where he is feature editor) that creates the role of Miss Lonelyhearts in jest. This initial action maintains the spirit of Bakhtin's carnival world. As Bakhtin explains, laughter is seen "as man's highest spiritual privilege, inaccessible to other creatures." The formula, "Of all living creatures only man is endowed with laughter," is very popular in the carnival world because laughter is regarded so highly (Bakhtin 68). Laughter is certainly present in the novel, and as the plot reveals, even Miss Lonelyhearts participates in the novel's laughter as his role at the paper begins as a joke. He becomes the butt of his own joke, however, when he is no longer "able to go on finding the same jokes funny thirty times a day for months on end" (59). The joke may exceed its capacity for humor, but in the spirit of degradation without hope of regeneration, the nefarious Shrike finds a new joke in the irony that the letters evoke misery in Miss Lonelyhearts.

Once the joke has exceeded its humor, Shrike's treatment of Miss Lonelyhearts becomes cruel, but its verisimilitude maintains some spirit of carnival. At this point in the plot, the novel resembles the carnival set known as "hell." To Bakhtin, Rabelais's Hell is the set in carnival where the celebrants "play with terror and laugh at it; the awesome becomes a 'comic monster,' "because "There can be nothing terrifying on earth" (91). A unity is necessary between man and earth in order for earth to be able to devour "and give

birth to something larger that has been improved" (91). Miss Lonelyhearts should confront his fears at this point, but instead his laughter stops. It is here where he departs from the spirit of carnival and also where the novel proves unable to participate in regeneration the way *Balso Snell* did. Laughter exists in the novel, but it remains markedly different from the laughter of Bakhtin's carnival in which "Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people… (I)t is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants" (11). Clearly the only participant in the laughter of *Miss Lonelyhearts's* narrative is Shrike. It may seem that Shrike is persuading Miss Lonelyhearts to confront his fear, but his actions prove contrary. Shrike's presentation of laughter is gay and triumphant, but sarcastically so. His brand of laughter differs greatly from the laughter Bakhtin describes, "is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding." Bakhtin furthermore explains that carnival laughter "asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival," (11-12). When Shrike buries Miss Lonelyhearts with humorous degradation, there is no sense that he concerns himself with bringing him back from the grave.

Miss Lonelyhearts's laughter is different from Bakhtin's carnival laughter. Whereas Carnival's laughter possesses healing and regenerative qualities, Miss Lonelyheart's laughter brings pain and suffering.

Shrike is participating in the spirit of carnival, but as his ambivalence demonstrates it is a broken carnival. In this respect, Shrike's degradation of Miss Lonelyhearts is akin to a newspaper press that keeps spitting out print. The editor is relentless in the abuse that he spews. Shrike becomes another part of the American body that merely helps push it along in its downfall as it stumbles through the broken carnival. Being a victim in the novel, however, does not minimize his role as degrader. Shrike executes his role with alarming perfection.

Shrike's degrader role coheres perfectly with the abuse in Rabelais, but it is again his failure to participate in regeneration that makes his role incomplete in the carnival sense. "Abuse is death," explains Bakhtin. More specifically, abuse is "former youth transformed into old age, the living body turned into a corpse" (197). The abuse in Rabelais's world is comic and evokes laughter. In this sense laughter has a purifying quality as degradation serves to humankind "from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power" (93). Bakhtin illustrates that "cosmic fear is defeated by laughter." The laughter in *Miss Lonelyhearts* is, however, as Jonathan Veitch states, "cerebral and, hence, maddening" (36). Fear is not conquered via the diabolic carnival that Shrike's charades create; his charades instead heighten fear and in the end drive Miss Lonelyhearts mad. The editor's maliciousness, however, is not the true problem in Miss Lonelyhearts*.* The true source of the problem is in the letters themselves. It is in the letters that fear originates and persists, revealing an American body in rapid decline.

An examination of the letter writers reveals that some type of bodily ailment is present in all of their suffering. In the first batch of the novel's letters, Sick-of-it-all complains, "I am going to have a baby and I don't think I can stand it my kidneys hurt so much... I cry all the time it hurts so much and I don't know what to do." Desperate explains, "I have a big hole in the middle of my face that scares people even myself so I can't blame the boys for not wanting to take me out" (60). Harold S. writes regarding Miss Lonelyhearts about his thirteen-year-old sister Gracie who is *"deaf and dumb"* (93-94). The symptoms, defects, and deformities that the letters reveal serve as signifiers for the American people's inner sickness and mental disintegration. The physical signs of the victims appear in the novel in order to reveal a larger, spiritual illness. The victims in the novel are degraded, but their sadness comes from a lack of regeneration. This lack of regeneration does not leave them completely hopeless as their pleas to Miss Lonelyhearts demonstrate, but it is certainly a desperate hope they retain. In turn the problem for Miss Lonelyhearts is that he has no cure to offer them.

West's novel, however, does not limit illness to the human body. An examination of the cityscape reveals that the land/environment is ill as well. A relationship and understanding of humankind and earth creates a vital balance in Rabelais's world: "The struggle against cosmic terror in all its forms and manifestations" does "not rely on abstract hope or on the eternal spirit, but on the material principle in man himself (Bakhtin 335-336). Bakhtin further explains that by assimilating the cosmic elements (earth, water,

air and fire) humankind discovers the elements and becomes "vividly conscious of them in his own body." In this sense, a human becomes aware of the cosmos within itself (336 Miss Lonelyhearts observes: "As far as he could discover, there were no signs of spring. The decay that covered the surface of the mottled ground was not the kind in which life generates" (63). Like the bodies of West's characters, the cityscape is also ill.

Particularly striking about the description of the park is its similarity to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Edmund L. Volpe comments s on the similarity between the park and Eliot's poem. *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) "is the Waste Land*"* asserts Volpe. The novel is a response "to the optimism implicit in Eliot's vision of man and society." Eliot's poem is somber and depressing in its view of modern man yet, "it is a view brightened by hope." This optimism is particularly visible next to West's (91). In *Miss Lonelyhearts* there "is nothing to blame" and "no God to hold responsible" (Volpe 95). Both works have a sole protagonist, explains Volpe. Commenting on the man made Waste Land Volpe comments: "it is within man's power to regenerate his dead world" (92). This regenerative possibility already draws a drastic distinction between the two works, but Volpe furthers the argument by saying of the protagonist, "Though he is not ready to achieve his salvation, the method is available to him. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is not beyond human control. There is supreme order in the universe. Man needs only "to submit to God, the source of that order" (92). West clearly believes such order and the promises of God are missing in *Miss Lonefyhearts'*s universe.

The novel's comparative absence of God and order is also the reason Miss Lonelyhearts receives the letters to his column. As Galloway explains, West believes "that modern society, like Balso Snell in the horse's interior," moves "without direction" (39). The nation's people write the letters to Miss Lonelyhearts out of the desperation this disintegrated and directionless movement induces. Veitch explains that Miss Lonelyhearts's "readers are so debauched by sentimental clichés of American culture - home, marriage, and true love - that they cannot imagine any other response to their pain" (43).

The readers of the "Miss Lonelyhearts" column believe the dreams they are being fed and are shattered when they do not ring true, yet they still refuse to abandon all hope. Miss Lonelyhearts receives the letters when its authors have grown weary of asking God for help. Not only do the letters give human suffering a face, but they also in turn put their weight on Miss Lonelyhearts with their pleas. The confrontation of this responsibility destroys him instead of regenerating new life in him, but not before driving him literally insane.

Miss Lonelyhearts's dysfunctional sexuality is often interpreted as latent homosexuality. The nature of sex, particularly in relation to the character of Miss Lonelyhearts, in the novel makes such a reading accessible. Randall Reid specifically cites Stanley Edgar Hyman's interpretation that sums up homosexual readings of *Miss Lonelyhearts* perfectly.

> It is of course a homosexual tableau - the men locked in
> embrace while the woman stands helplessly by...
>
> It is West's ultimate irony that the symbolic embrace
> they manage at the end is one penetrating the body
> of the other with a bullet. (Reid 76)

The interpretation refers to the ending of the novel where Miss Lonelyhearts meets his end as he tries to embrace Mr. Doyle. The phallic shape of the gun is also symbolic in this context. Reid, however, discredits the reading by responding that the homosexual interpretation of the novel is "so weak that it requires us to ignore many of the novel's details and invent others." He furthermore says that the reading is "quite irrelevant to the novel's issues." Nothing in such a reading can explain the novel's "mass suffering or the reasons for Miss Lonelyhearts's response to that suffering or the ultimate failure of his mission" (77). Reid counters the interpretation pretty accurately. His retort, however, does not eliminate the presence of some of the novel's imagery that makes it easy to see why such interpretations arise. Miss Lonelyheart's disgust at potentially productive heterosexual sex makes it inevitable that homosexuality will appear as

either a desperate or preferable option/alternative. Regardless of what causes these readings to surface, homoerotic imagery is present in the novel—and it is important to acknowledge it.

West's word choices at different points in the novel are confusing in terms of determining if readings like Hyman's are valid. The novel's use of the words "gay", "Homosexual "queer" and "Phallic" with reference to Peter Doyle, Faye Doyle, Mary and Miss Lonelyhearts are confusing in particular. These words suggest homoerotic undertones and imply moral and ethical disintegration of both mind and body. Obsession with dreams is another sign of repressed sexuality and neurosis which culminate in catatonia. The word "gay" is used on his date with Mrs. Shrike: "I like this place," Mary said. "It's a little fakey, I know, but it's gay and I so want to be gay" (83). The initial use of the word is easily dismissed as Mrs. Shrike's desire for happiness. Her use of the word is only slightly odd and then perhaps only from a current day standpoint. The word, however, continues to be used in the dialogue that ensues Mrs. Shrike's statement. "Why do you want to be gay?" asks Miss Lonelyhearts. "Everyone wants to be gay - unless they're sick," responds Mary Shrike. The narration then asks, "Was he sick?" (84). The meaning of the word becomes even more ambiguous. Is he the repressed homosexual that Hyman claims he is or is the statement a simple contemplation of happiness?

After debating whether he is sick for not being gay, he proposes to Mary Shrike: "The way to be gay is to make other people gay," Miss Lonelyhearts said. "Sleep with me and I'll be one gay dog" (84).

Randall Reid's claims accurately enough, that to affirm Miss Lonelyhearts's character as latent homosexual is to ignore parts of the novel and invent others to make the reading fit (77). To make such a reading work requires the reader to ignore the cries for help Miss Lonelyhearts hears from "Desperate, Harold S., Catholic-mother, Broken-hearted, Broad-shoulders, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband," (126) as he rushes to embrace Peter Doyle. The novel's homoerotic content, however, cannot be ignored. Such imagery can perhaps be explained as a loss of artistic control, but that still does not eliminate its presence. The homoerotic undertones in actuality help the novel's main focus on dreams disintegration and disillusion instead of usurping it, which seems to be what Reid's defense seems to fear.

If at the very least Peter Doyle and Miss Lonelyhearts's hand-holding is seen as homoerotic affection, it merely demonstrates one more way in which regeneration is not possible in the novel. As Bakhtin reiterates constantly, "The material bodily lower stratum is productive. It gives birth, thus assuring mankind's immortality" (378). This immortality is threatened by homosexuality, especially when applied to Miss Lonelyhearts, who is the suffering people's last resort for help in the novel. Nothing is ever consummated in this homosexual reading, but the mere homoerotic undertone maybe seen as enough to add to humankind's impending doom in *Miss Lonelyhearts* as it threatens the act of procreation.

The novel goes to Great Plains to illustrate the dysfunctional nature of gender in its narrative; the homoerotic aspects of the novel affirm this schematic design. Miss Lonelyhearts's name alone illustrates such dysfunction. The title's duality casts its shadow over the entire novel and is present wherever gender or sex are involved.

Miss Lonelyhearts's bane is his acceptance of the Christ Dream. Marcus Smith chronicles the columnist's reluctance to accept the Christ Dream via escapist acts: "Through the seventh chapter (Miss Lonelyhearts on a field trip) we see him groping desperately for some tangible, secular escape from his morbid awareness of the worlds evil. He tries liquor (Chapters Two and Five), semi-philosophic reading - The Brothers Karamzov (Chapter Three), Betty (Chapter Four), violence (Chapter Five), sex (Chapters Four, Six, and Seven)" (80). Miss Lonelyhearts is like his readers at this point in the novel, as he has no place else to look to for help or escape. In this desperation he tries to exit the nightmarish carnival by accepting what he earlier dubs the "Christ business." This is his biggest failure, because it is the acceptance of an obsession presented, in its consequences, not a regenerative breakthrough but a false dream. To this acceptance, he adds self-delusion as the environment and the letters warn him that the Christ Dream is not the answer.

As Miss Lonelyhearts embraces the notion of the Christ Dream, and he fills himself with false "humility," he sleepwalks through the text and is numb to everything around him. This stupor (courtesy of the Christ Dream) is especially noticeable how he deals with Shrike's mockery. "The familiar jokes" no longer affect Miss Lonelyhearts. When Shrike mocks him, he smiles "as the saints are supposed to have smiled at

those about to martyr them" (108). He is no longer bracing himself against the abuse as he did earlier in the novel. His attitude has the verisimilitude of participating in the abuse, but in reality he is, as Volpe states, severing "all contact with reality." Miss Lonelyhearts's self-delusion is disturbingly similar to the defense mechanism that Shrike uses when practicing the dead pan. The Christ Dream may be Eliot's answer in *The Waste Land,* but that dream/resolution is not applicable to Miss Lonelyhearts (93). West believes that the Christ Dream "can perhaps provide personal escape, but it is not the salvation of the waste land; it is not, as in Eliot's poetry, the means of personal and thereby universal salvation" (Volpe 96). In this context, his numbness to Shrike's joking is merely self-deception as well. Instead of confronting his demons, via the abuse that Shrike serves him, he chooses to deceive himself with a false dream.

As long as the stone is a burden to the columnist, he appears normal. He is not normal in terms of being calm, collected, and well adjusted, but rather in the sense that the depression that he experiences throughout the novel seems justified given the content of the letters. Shrike's gift of the stone to Miss Lonelyhearts is itself a signifier of the Christ Dream's falseness. Miss Lonelyhearts's initial reaction - to throw the stone at the sky - is the correct one in terms of the novel. His sadness is reasonable: who is not saddened in the face of such suffering? As Veitch states, "The very process of putting pain into words forces us to recognize its power" (75). Miss Lonelyhearts definitely recognizes the power of pain. He realizes, as he carries the stone, that he is ultimately helpless in the face of the world's suffering. He strategy in the novel is "to reveal that 'unsuspected world,' to reveal it so clearly that our usual response - ignore it - is no longer possible" (Reid 49-50). The author, in typical modernist fashion, does not provide a solution beyond this recognition. The only thing that West is clear about is that the Christ Dream is not the answer. By having Miss Lonelyhearts embrace the stone, however, West shows his readers why this dream is not a viable solution to suffering. He allows the stone (a foreign, non-biological object) to remain in the novel's American body to illustrate the peril of the false dream it represents.

The choice of stone by Shrike is not random. Just as Peter is named the rock of the church prior to Christ's ascension, the stone is the foundation of the false dream. Imagery of the stone dominates the final chapters of *Miss Lonelyhearts* and as the descriptions surrounding the stone reveal; West makes use of sexual innuendo of the "rock." On his way to the party Mary Shrike sits, and "wriggles" on his lap as they ride in the car, but "the rock remained perfect" (118). Shrike pulls out letters in preparation for the party. Miss Lonelyhearts recognizes what they are but is unmoved by the realization: "The rock remained calm and solid. Although Miss Lonelyhearts did not doubt that it could withstand any test, he was willing to have it tried" (118). Paired with his complacently "happy" demeanor, the rock becomes a religious erection that invigorates Miss Lonelyhearts with a false sense of power. Shrike's abuse at the party is withstood: "with the utmost serenity; he was not even interested. What goes on in the sea is of no interest to the rock" (119). Whereas he should confront the things that Shrike is placing in front of him, he uses the Christ Dream as a shield. As Shrikes warms up to execute the degradation he is salivating to deliver, Betty exits and Miss Lonelyhearts chases after her to show her what the rock has "become," making West's sexual undertones even more comic.

The more Miss Lonelyhearts embraces the rock, the more delusional he becomes. The hand-holding scenes with Peter Doyle may be homoerotic, but they also may simply demonstrate his bizarre behavior while he is drunk on the Christ Dream. Marcus Smith claims, "West did not view his protagonist as either a saint or a psychotic; instead, he suggests that these two categories in the twentieth century at least, far from being exclusive of each other, are perhaps identical" (75). Smith's claim is accurate in that Miss Lonelyhearts only play-acts at saintliness as he lies not only to himself, but also to Betty.

> "I'm going to look for a job in an advertising agency.
> He was not deliberately lying. He was only trying
> to say what she wanted to hear" (122).

Betty believes his lie. The lying continues when Betty tells him that she is pregnant. Miss Lonelyhearts proposes and does not feel guilty about providing false hope to Betty. He feels no guilt, in fact he does not feel: "The rock was a solidification of his feeling, his conscience, his sense of reality, his self-knowledge" (123-124). The final chapter illustrates that the rock is not as solid as the columnist believes. Miss Lonelyhearts's delusion, however, is rock hard until his fatal end.

Miss Lonelyhearts experiences a fever as he lies in bed in the final chapter, but this time he welcomes it. The stone is not a digestible or nourishing object, but in his delirious fever Miss Lonelyhearts finds an alternate way to assimilate. "It promised heart and mentally unmotivated violence," the narrator says. Soon the rock becomes a furnace (125). The columnist witnesses the crucifix on his wall becomes a "bright fly, spinning with quick grace on a background of blood velvet sprinkled with tiny nerve stars" (125). He then becomes "conscious of two rhythms that were slowly becoming one." The rock, now a furnace, makes him one with God: "His heart was the one heart, the heart of God. And his brain was likewise God's." Miss Lonelyhearts believes that he is talking to God and accepts God. The doorbell rings, wherefrom he races to share and celebrate his union with open arms (125). His self-delusion is sad as he rushes to embrace the false dream. The Christ Dream only gives him what it has warned him about throughout the novel-death.

What he rushes to meet, is of course a cuckolded Peter Doyle armed with a gun "wrapped in a newspaper" and vengeance on his mind (126). The phallic nature of the gun mimics the phallic innuendo of the rock, and it is the peril of the Christ Dream (which the rock signifies) that is ultimately unmoved. As Volpe recognizes, "The shooting lacks the dignity of a deliberate act" as it "is accidental" (100). Although Doyle comes armed with vengeance, his warning shouts present the first evidence that it is an accidental shooting. Feverish and with delusion, Miss Lonelyhearts does "not understand the cripple's shout and heard it as a cry for help from Desperate, Harold S," (126) - a roster of his readers is subsequently included in the delusional cry. Miss Lonelyhearts's enthusiastic onrush along with the invocation of the names is very sexually charged and mimics and orgasmic euphoria of *Balso Snell'*s ending. Miss Lonelyheart's narrative, however, only feints at regeneration here. Doyle attempts to flee, but Betty's presence cuts off his escape, so he tries to "get rid of the package." The package explodes and Miss Lonelyhearts falls, "dragging the cripple with him" (126). The gun's ejaculatory release mirrors the ending of *Balso Snell,* but the columnist's death denies the ejaculation's regenerative possibilities. His death reiterates what he has known all along, that there is no order in the world. The unjustifiable realities that his letters present make the American people's pain a physical reality to him. By not learning from that example and accepting, a version of the dream that betrays them, he becomes the ultimate example, but it is of course too late for him to learn from this last example.

Betty is with the child at Miss Lonelyhearts's death, but the future of the child is unclear. She initially affirms control of her body in the narrative by telling Miss Lonelyhearts earlier that she is getting an abortion, but she relinquishes this control upon being coaxed by the columnist's false promises. Her pregnancy may seem like a regenerative function, but, as it is not carried out within the narrative, it is an incomplete act.

West's evolution from the body in *Balso Snell* to the American body of *Miss Lonelyhearts* is magnificent, yet terrifying. Whereas his target in *Balso Snell* is ultimately ambiguous, it is very precise in *Miss Lonelyhearts.* In this first exploration he demonstrates that religion will not cure the ailing American body. The Christ Dream is a false dream, and false disintegrated dreams are to be avoided, as they are deceitful and perilous. This initial dream, however, is merely a signifier alluding to a larger problem of physical and mental disintegration. In terms of the ailing American body, *Miss Lonelyhearts* serves as the first diagnosis. *A Cool Million*, his next novel, will not possess the vagueness of *Balso Snell.* West's third movement in his body of fiction is, instead, all too direct in describing what it seeks to attack and does it unrestrainedly on the American body. Its directness, however, provides a lucid view of the dream that West diagnoses as the most dangerous to the American people - a secularized form of religious confidence, the American Dream.

The movement of the novel is like that of Oedipus or Hamlet in that the situation which will lead to the downfall of the protagonist exists before the first scene of the work. Lonelyhearts' Christ-complex is of

long duration and it has been worn red by the letters for weeks before the book begins. The first six scenes serve to establish the struggle between the sadistic and masochistic poles of Lonelyhearts's personality, to give us a glimpse of the history of his condition, and to present its alternatives in the persons of the other characters. When Lonelyhearts receives Mrs. Doyle's letter, the reader does not foresee the train of events that will lead to the hero's death, but he does sense Lonelyhearts' personal involvement in the chaotic lives of his correspondents, the danger of this involvement, and the turning point in Lonelyhearts's inner life is caused by his traumatic mating with Mrs. Doyle. The fury of that chapter is relieved by the sickroom theorizing of Betty and Shrike in the next. There follows the one "happy" scene of the book, the Connecticut recuperation. As soon as Lonelyhearts returns, he receives the worst letter yet. In rapid succession, he meets Doyle, attends the supper that seals his doom, goes mad, pantomimes normality, and rushes to his religious experience. The catastrophe is swift, and the denouement consists of one sentence in which the grappling men and the movement of the novel roll to a halt on the stairway. West, then, varies the tempo of the book and alternates scenes of action, reflection, and dialogue. He steers the book through exposition, conflict, and catastrophe, giving an occasional respite from the progress which only enhances the feeling of inevitability.

The chapters of *Miss Lonelyhearts* have been compared to a prologue plus fourteen Stations of the Cross. While a station by station comparison would probably prove unfruitful, there are similarities. Each episode in the novel is a tableau in the sense that each incident in the Passion can be symbolized by a single picture which implies much more. Thus, we can picture Lonelyhearts reading the letters, cigarette in mouth, or Lonelyhearts killing the lamb or Lonelyhearts tearing at Mary Shrike's clothes or Lonelyhearts holding Doyle's hand or wrestling with him on the stairs. In both the novel and the devotion, there are the preliminaries, such as the Agony in the Garden and the Agony among the Letters, followed by the inevitable ascent of Calvary. There are moments of intensified suffering and interludes, such as the drying of the face by Yeronica and the Connecticut pastoral. There is, however, no resurrection for Lonelyhearts.

If the titles of the chapters recall the Stations of the Cross or the repetitions of a litany, they also recall the chapters of *Pilgrim's Progress.* This similarity supports James Light's thesis that the novel is in the form of a guest. However, the repetition of the name "Miss Lonelyhearts" in each title seems more significant. The fact that the protagonist is identified only by a female name seems to reinforce the other hints of latent homosexuality.

Miss Lonelyhearts is a novel of the Depression which is nevertheless difficult to read historically. West responded instinctively to the disintegration of socio-cultural and religious values of his time, because for him, as for few others, the collapse was evidently less a shock than it was a natural confirmation of what he had always suspected. The novel, explosive though it is, has to do with a slow, distended death, and the result is radically painful. But beyond depression, and beyond the withering of dreams, illusions, or even civilizations there is apocalypse, something which for Nathanael West is less an ultimate assertion than it is the natural consequence of an uncontrollable process of disintegration.

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