

## ANALYSIS

*Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933)

Nathanael West

(1903-1940)

“A nameless middle-aged man, the son of a Baptist minister, unable to find any other job, becomes the writer of a column of advice to the lovelorn for a New York newspaper, and is so troubled himself that he spends much of his time drinking. As *Miss Lonelyhearts* he is sought out by Fay Doyle, a woman married to a cripple, and ends up going to bed with her. Later he meets Fay’s husband Peter, toward whom he feels a sympathetic sense of communion, but Peter, torn between reciprocal love and hatred, plans to shoot him with a gun that he has concealed in a package. Upon embracing Peter, *Miss Lonelyhearts* jostles the package and is accidentally shot to death.”

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 496

“*Miss Lonelyhearts* is the story of a conscientious man hired by a newspaper to give advice to the lovelorn. Halfway through the story he explains his plight to the girl who wants to marry him. ‘The job,’ he says, ‘is a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke....’ He too considers the job a joke, but after several months at it, the joke begins to escape him. He sees that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. He also discovers that his correspondents take him seriously. For the first time in his life he is forced to examine the value by which he lives. The examination shows him that he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator.

With his talent for projecting himself into a variety of roles, West in person is *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and he is also Shrike, the cynical managing editor who keeps tormenting him. To escape from Shrike, and also from the suffering of his correspondents, which seems to him universal, *Miss Lonelyhearts* withdraws into a world of dreams and comes to believe that he is a universal savior: ‘His identification with God was complete. His heart was the one heart, the heart of God. And his brain was likewise God’s.’ That is almost the end of the story. *Miss Lonelyhearts* is a short book, but to borrow a phrase used by Henry James in another connection, it is a shameless masterpiece.

Though completely neglected by the public, it has a few admirers even on its first appearance. West was beginning to make friends in the world of writers a little older than himself—a desperately snobbish world, but one that is quick to accept a new citizen if the rumor gets around that he is talented or full of hell or a man to be liked for himself. One heard about Pep West long before meeting him. Soon afterward one learned, usually from others, that he had attended Brown University and been a classmate of S. J. Perelman, who had married his sister Laura. One also learned that he had spent the obligatory years in Paris, where *Balso Snell* was published. After returning to New York he had become the manager of a residential hotel, saying that the job gave him time for writing. There was a time when he lived in a stone farmhouse near the Delaware River. I paid him a visit there and found that he had begun to look and dress and clip his mustache like a retired English major.”

Malcolm Cowley, Introduction

*Miss Lonelyhearts* by Nathanael West  
(1933; Avon/New Directions 1959) iii-iv

“This brief, brilliant novel is the story of a man who writes the ‘advice to the lovelorn’ column in a New York newspaper. Haunted by the pathetic letters he receives, he tries to live the role of omniscient counselor he has assumed for the paper. He is harried on the one hand by the cynicism of his editor, Shrike, who regards religion, art, and love as attempts to escape reality; on the other hand by the demands of his girl, Betty, that he lead a normal bourgeois existence. The agonized hero’s fumbling attempts to reach out

to suffering humanity as a kind of modern Christ are somehow always twisted by circumstances, finally with fatal consequences. He tries to convey a message of love to the Doyles, an embittered sordid couple; but the result is merely that Mrs. Doyle tries to seduce him and her husband murders him by mistake.

Though the novel comments strongly on the decay of religion, its theme is the helpless loneliness of the individual in modern society. However, it is the style and imagery that give the book its peculiar merit. West's language is tight and compressed; to an almost monotonous extent he uses violent images to describe commonplace events, but his treatment of actual violence is almost starkly bare. At times his brilliant precision in handling symbol and image succeed in destroying the borderline between reality and nightmare, and devastating forces are presented with great power."

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962) 746

"The hero of *Miss Lonelyhearts* is—Miss Lonelyhearts. We never know his real name. He is the sob-sister of the New York *Post-Dispatch* ('Are you in trouble?' – 'Do you need advice?' – Write to Miss Lonelyhearts and she will help you'). The trouble is, the people who pour out their souls to Miss Lonelyhearts really do need help. He is appalled and obsessed by their sufferings... In his agonized helplessness in the face of the wretchedness that crowds itself upon him, he becomes momentarily the persecutor of the suffering. 'He was twisting the arm of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent. He was twisting the arm of Desperate, Broken-Hearted, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with tubercular-husband.' He is really twisting his own arm because, as he realizes himself, he is 'capable of dreaming the Christ dream.' He is indeed a Christ figure, even if an impotent one; and this is emphasized in the novel by the part played by his editor, Shrike, a man of vast cynicism who appears a sort of Satan offering him the kingdoms of the earth and exposing to him the hollowness of his illusions.

The novel ends on a note of farcical irony. Miss Lonelyhearts has a religious experience in which he becomes at one with God. His doorbell rings, and he sees coming up the stairs the crippled husband of a woman who has written to him for advice, whom he has met and who has seduced him. Miss Lonelyhearts rushes down the stairs to embrace the cripple, persuaded that when he embraced him 'the cripple had been made whole... He did not understand the cripple's shout and heard it as a cry for help...' As the cripple struggles to escape from his embrace, the cripple's gun goes off and kills him.

The human condition, for West, is outrageous and intolerable; it can be borne, one feels, only when translated into the comic, when the cosmic absurdity is as it were clowning into further absurdity. West's anguish drives *Miss Lonelyhearts* along like the propeller of a steamer. Its pulsations are never absent for a moment."

Walter Allen  
*The Modern Novel: In Britain and the United States*  
(Dutton 1965) 167-69

"The mockery which was pervasive in *Balzo Snell* has, in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, shrunk to the person of Shrike, supported by a chorus of largely anonymous newspapermen. Miss Lonelyhearts himself is a man who has 'learned not to laugh,' a man for whom the joke of fraudulent salvation is 'no longer funny' (p.12)... Where the Trojan horse of *Balzo Snell* was peopled entirely by camp-followers of the arts, the world of *Miss Lonelyhearts* includes humbler victims of a more serious misery. The sixteen-year-old girl who was born without a nose, the brother of the idiot girl who has been raped and made pregnant by an unknown man, and the mother who signs herself 'Sick-of-It-All' are victims of...life, of biological defects compounded by the cruelty of their fellows....

When West's people try to be serious, they are ridiculous; when they try to be funny, they are frightening. Thus the dual vision of the novel yields a precise statement about its characters: despite their pretensions, their pain is real. And their absurdity in no way lessens the importance of their pain. Rather, it is a symptom of it. Squalid suffering is an evil precisely because it destroys all dignity, not just because it hurts. Both pretense and pain are associated with sexuality. The newspapermen who function as a chorus for Shrike echo a familiar refrain from *Balzo Snell*—that art is just a disguise for the procreative urge. Miss

Lonelyhearts overhears them telling a series of stories about lady writers to prove that 'what they all needed was a good rape'... For Miss Lonelyhearts, sex may be a compulsion, but it is no kind of cure. Both his own sexual adventures and those of the other characters are peculiarly joyless and repellent. With Mrs. Doyle, the very personification of the life force, Miss Lonelyhearts feels 'like an empty bottle that is being slowly filled with warm, dirty water' (p.184). The 'water' is, of course, a symbol of sexual desire and the natural world from which it comes, a world which is represented throughout the novel by the conventional metaphor of the sea....

Miss Lonelyhearts regards Doyle as the test of his mission; his attempt to save Doyle is an attempt to save all the letter writers, and, significantly, he is defeated by the 'tidal, moon-driven' Mrs. Doyle, by the life force itself.... Shrike's rehearsal of all the classic forms of escape is exactly like Miss McGeeney's rehearsal of all the classic responses to seduction—it defines and destroys the available alternatives. And the parody does not end with Shrike's targets. It extends to Shrike himself—a cartoon of a satirist whose every gesture is artificial and whose stance is as derivative as it is destructive. Thus satire is, in the person of Shrike, satirized, and mockery is thereby disqualified as an adequate response to human misery....

There is...an important distinction between Miss Lonelyhearts' case and the classic pattern. It is not the sense of his own sin, or the terror of his own damnation, or the sudden perception of God's beauty and benevolence which moves him. Rather, it is the misery of others. He plays at being a redeemer, not a saint. He does not, as Bunyan did, start with the absolute conviction of God's reality and then struggle to mend his own weakness. Instead, he starts with the perception that human misery demands a divine answer and then tries to convince himself that such an answer exists. He tries to invoke God in this life, to redeem, to revivify. His fare parodies the heroic quest, not the pilgrimage... The theme of the quest has been emphasized by [the critic] Light, who connects it with West's Jewishness, and by Comerchero, who constructs extended parallels between *Miss Lonelyhearts* and the analyses of grail legend and heroic myth offered by Jessie L. Weston [who influenced T. S. Eliot in "The Waste Land"] and Joseph Campbell....

In a world where evil and unrelieved suffering are everywhere, redemption is an absolute need. There is no other answer to the cry for help. And in West's vision, that means there is no answer at all.... West was, like Dostoevski, fond of treating guilt-ridden, dualistic characters who live and act in a strangely hallucinatory world.... [West boasted] that he could rewrite Dostoevsky with a pair of shears,' and in *Miss Lonelyhearts* that is very nearly what West did. He took his structure, and the psychology which underlies the structure, intact from *Crime and Punishment*.... *Crime and Punishment* also uses three narrative devices West adopted: the set speech, the confession, and the dream. Both *Crime and Punishment* and *Miss Lonelyhearts* contain little true dialogue. Raskolnikov and Miss Lonelyhearts do not talk much, except to themselves.... Both...respond to external reality as though it were an apparition or a revelation. They superstitiously read it for clues... Miss Lonelyhearts's whole career implicitly repudiates the 'solution' of *Crime and Punishment*. It takes Dostoevskian premises and makes them yield a conclusion which denies Dostoevskian answers, even parodying, in the persons of Betty, Dostoevski's favorite instrument of salvation—the naïve representative of orthodox faith and instinctive love....

Despite some additional similarities, West's debt to [Aldous] Huxley is far smaller than his debt to Dostoevski. It consists chiefly in Coleman's mannerisms and rhetoric [in *Antic Hay*], both of which West improved. As usual, he condensed and polished his borrowed material and then gave it a meaningful twist.... West's reference to Poe merely cites, of course, the classic source for symbolist theories about the short poem and unity of effect... But West took from the symbolists more than his reliance on hallucinatory images and the ideal of a poetic, highly compressed prose. The typical symbolist hero was perhaps as important to him as any symbolist techniques. From Poe to Huysmans, the dandy reigns supreme. He is always morbidly sensitive...'

The fact of sordid misery compels Miss Lonelyhearts' quest. Though he is 'sick' himself, there is no escape for him in personal salvation. He must redeem the suffering of others to fulfill his mission, and his final delusion and death are a failure, not a martyrdom—he becomes just another victim of a world he could not change and could not escape except by ceasing to exist. The burden of *Miss Lonelyhearts* is finally, therefore, far more Dostoevskian than symbolist. Its hero attempts significant action in a context of other lives whose fate is entangled with his own—lives which may even be more important than his own.

And the emphasis upon mass suffering was only one of West's departures from the symbolists. Where Baudelaire contrasted the 'artificial paradise' of hashish intoxication with religious experience, West made them equivalent. In the world of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, all paradise is artificial. The religious faith which furnished Baudelaire and Huysmans a way out of this world becomes, in West, just another pipe dream, as fatal as it is false....

The homosexual interpretation is...so weak that it requires us to ignore many of the novel's details and invent others. It is also quite irrelevant to the novel's issues. Nothing in the diagnosis explains the fact of mass suffering or the reasons for Miss Lonelyhearts' response to that suffering or the ultimate failure of his mission. Heterosexuality is no doubt desirable, but it is hardly sufficient to permit the successful imitation of Christ, and in the world of *Miss Lonelyhearts* nothing less than the imitation of Christ can really help. To read the novel as a case of repressed homosexuality is to read it as though Betty had written it. The clinical attitude mimics Betty's blindness to evil.... Significantly, neither Hyman nor Comerchero is able to relate the homosexual interpretation to any important aspect of the novel. Its essential irrelevance can easily be demonstrated....

The world of *Miss Lonelyhearts* is a waste land. Its psychology owes far more to regenerative myths than to Freud and far more to ascetic or apocalyptic Christianity than to Jessie L. Weston. The world confirms the saint's anguished vision of this life. It reaches but to dust. Nature and sexuality are agents of death, alive only in their power to hurt. Though latent homosexuality is not relevant to the novel's major themes, universally crippled and malignant sexuality is. The two representatives of fleshly love—Shrike and Mrs. Doyle—are described in imagery which is grotesquely symbolic. Shrike's name, for example, comes from the butcher-bird which impales its living prey on thorns, and the sense of murderous penetration is in his every act. Mrs. Doyle, however, is omnivorously engulfing. The sexes are thereby given nightmarish attributes: the phallus is just an instrument of sadistic impalement, and the female genitalia are a smothering, swallowing, devouring sea. Miss Lonelyhearts is quite properly terrified of both sexes. And quite properly sympathetic to both. Like all the other forces in the novel, the sexes are, in their active forms, irreconcilable and mutually destructive. But in their passive forms, both sexes are victims—Doyle, Mary Shrike, the idiot girl, even Shrike himself. 'She's selfish. She's a damned selfish bitch.... Sleeping with her is like sleeping with a knife in one's groin'...

Miss Lonelyhearts is therefore like a child with parents so vicious and so unhappy that identifying with both is inevitable. He is the child in whom all the destructive and conflicting demands of the parents meet. Unless he can reconcile the sexes to each other, they will destroy themselves and him. His own sexual behavior exhibits the same duality of active cruelty and passive suffering. With both Mar Shrike and Betty, for example, he is sometimes as compulsively destructive as Shrike. Sexuality therefore arouses in Miss Lonelyhearts both personal terror and moral horror. His acceptance of 'castration' at the moment of conversion is a fantasy of deliverance, not a resignation to loss....The terrible paradox of *Miss Lonelyhearts* is that it accepts the saint's definition of this life but denies the saint's alternative to it. This world is indeed corrupt, dead, and irreconcilably evil, but this world is all there is....

Throughout the novel, scenic styles change like rapidly shifting stage sets.... Miss Lonelyhearts' case is 'classical.' He, like the other characters in the novel, is an archetype vulgarized into a stereotype, and West's graphic parodies underscore both the timelessness and the banality of his role. The role has been played so often that it has become as formal as a minuet. Its lines are familiar, its gestures predictable, its settings stylized into stage sets. For the actors in this drama, triteness is inescapable; their world is as artificial and as sharply bounded as a picture in a frame....

Miss Lonelyhearts is given no other name. The name is his mask; and it is created for him. His passivity is that of an actor confronted with a role. The part is dictated by the pressure of mass suffering and by the cynical fraud of his employers, and if he plays it at all he must play it according to the script. But the role is both unplayable and unavoidable. Miss Lonelyhearts cannot evade it because every attempted escape throws him back upon it. When he tries to play the gay seducer with Mary Shrike, he is instead forced to listen to one more litany of pain. His interlude with Fay Doyle involves him in the hopeless troubles of Peter Doyle, and even Fay herself insists upon turning the bedroom into a confessional.... In *Miss Lonelyhearts* the world is indeed a stage, but the script is banal and the actors are all bad. Shrike's 'dead

pan' mask, for example, identifies him with the great god Pan, and his performance is even more grotesque than Miss Lonelyhearts' imitation of Christ. Pan is not incarnated in Shrike, only embalmed. The vitality of nature is here reduced to the mechanical frenzies and artificial shrieks of a puppet. As his butcher-bird name implies, Shrike retains only the murderousness of the Bacchic orgies, not the creative power. The spokesman for fleshly love is just a killer who cannot even excite his own wife—as impotent as he is destructive....

In the world of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, all gods are dead. And the deadness of these alternatives to the redeemer role intensifies the pressure upon Miss Lonelyhearts to make his part come alive. The theatrical metaphor defines the real basis of West's psychology. Behavior is expressive gesture, the attempt to release or fulfill a compulsion whose origins remain obscure. The problem of *Miss Lonelyhearts* is that the compulsion remains alive but the expressive forms have died. All attempts at love or dignity fail. They are puerile gestures which refuse to express real emotion, trite expressions which have become meaningless through repetition. To Miss Lonelyhearts, sex itself is no longer an instinct; it is just another gesture that the mind makes, an irrelevance. Instinctual life manifests itself only in the universal fact of suffering....

Only dreams are left. Under the combined pressure of his own sickness and the desires of all his readers, Miss Lonelyhearts attempts to make the Christ dream come true. The sexual ambiguity of his name is inherent in the role itself. He is the embodiment of all dreams—of Doyle's desire for a friend, of Mrs. Doyle's desire for a lover, of Betty's wish for a husband, of Shrike's need for a foil.... He is the emotional focus for both Fay and Peter Doyle. The contradiction inherent in this double role can be resolved only by unsexing himself and by replacing Eros with Agape—only, that is, by transcending the human and invoking the divine. But he is not divine. The contradictions in his role are the contradictions inherent in life. To Fay Doyle, the embodied life force, sexless love is no more attractive than suicide. She can neither understand it nor respond to it, and the Agape Miss Lonelyhearts preaches is therefore, to her, as irrelevant as it is unreal. Miss Lonelyhearts has no message. He cannot resolve the contradictions of this life; he can only deny them and escape into delusion and death....

The triad of Doyle, Mrs. Doyle, and Miss Lonelyhearts recalls the similar grouping of Wilson, Myrtle Wilson, and Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*. In both novels, a crippled or devitalized cuckold is married to a vulgar but vital woman, and in both novels the cuckold mistakenly kills the 'spiritual' hero in revenge for his wife's betrayal. The similarities do not stop there.... Both heroes are holy fools. They take their dreams seriously and are destroyed by them. The Cinderella dream of American success produces only a self-made gangster with elegant manners and gorgeous illusions; the Christ dream is enacted by a lovelorn columnist whose crucifixion is squalid and pointless. Even the style of Fitzgerald and West are related. Both unite an acute ear for vulgar speech with an instinct for poetry and comedy. I think West learned from Fitzgerald, and I think the grotesque fate of Miss Lonelyhearts was a conscious echo of Gatsby's equally grotesque end.

But the differences are important too. Characteristically, West's world is harder than Fitzgerald's. The compulsions of his characters are more desperate, the logic of his plot is more relentless, the implications of his vision are more ominous and insistent. Acute misery, not unsatisfied yearning, is the universal human sensation in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Myrtle Wilson's vulgar vitality becomes Fay Doyle's sordid brutality, and the Keatsian sensuousness of Fitzgerald's prose yields to West's vivid and repellent hieroglyphs. There are no 'green lights' in *Miss Lonelyhearts*...

The painful farce of Miss Lonelyheart's death is unrelieved by any surviving dreamer or any surviving dream.... The double theme of helpless suffering and fraudulent claims is always relevant, and in the depression year of 1933 it had a special edge. More than the stock market had boomed in the twenties. That decade saw the real emergence of the tabloids, of feature-length films, of radio soap operas—of all those new media which helped inflate cheap emotions and sell meretricious dreams. In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the boom has collapsed. Dreams are as void as worthless stocks, and depression is a universal fact.... Unlike the cryptic illusions of 'The Waste Land,' West's generic parodies therefore require no footnotes. They are familiar and intelligible whether or not we recognize their particular sources....

The book has almost no loose ends. Its parodies are so perfectly fused, its images so cleanly ordered, its 'artificial' techniques so naturally related to its themes, that it achieves an economy which has not yet been matched in American fiction. It has all the virtues—and some of the limitations—of extreme clarity. Like syllogisms and pictures, tightly constructed novels may achieve coherence at the price of exclusion, and in *Miss Lonelyhearts* human personality is perhaps too much reduced to the common denominator of suffering. Though it is his most perfect novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts* was not West's last word.... In *The Day of the Locust*, West pursued many of the implications which remain."

Randall Reid

*The Fiction of Nathanael West: No Redeemer, No Promised Land*  
(U Chicago 1967) 41-44, 46, 49-50, 52, 63, 71-72, 77, 82-84, 88, 91-101, 103-05

Michael Hollister (2015)