

The world as seen by nathaniel west



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The traditional human condition plagues every individual; each suffers, and consequently, thirsts for personal freedom and utter fulfillment in whatever way possible. While Western culture recognizes this tendency as rooted in religiousness or spirituality, most Eastern philosophy understands this human characteristic as ultimate, drawing no line of separation between the “religious” individual and the truth-seeker. By whatever name, all humans walk this same path in pursuit of meaning and enlightenment amidst moral and philosophical chaos. With *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Nathanael West gives the most pessimistic account of this struggle a reader can imagine, exploring the dark fate of an advice columnist naively hopeful despite an unpromising world. Although West’s scrutinizing depiction of futile human virtues might cause Mahatma Gandhi to turn over in his grave, the novel’s real intellectual probing lies in the problematic steps the characters take to alleviate real, human alienation. All the characters in West’s novel take certain steps to cover moral isolation and confusion. Even Shrike, the most loudly vocal in his essential rejection of mankind, uses wry sarcasm and savage mockery to feign a higher status for himself in the world. Predominantly critical of religion and those faithful, he condemns spirituality as a useless hunt for the soul – a position in blind contrast with the views of the protagonist, Miss Lonelyhearts: “In this jungle, flitting from rock-gray lungs to golden intestines, from liver to lights and back to liver again, lives a bird called the soul. The Catholic hunts this bird with bread and wine, the Hebrew with a golden ruler, the Protestant on leaden feet with leaden words, the Buddhist with gestures, the Negro with blood. I spit on them all. Phooh! And I call upon you to spit. Phooh! Do you stuff birds? No my dears, taxidermy is not a religion (7-8).” Shrike initially appears to be Miss Lonelyhearts’ antagonist

and yet is not quite; while vocally hateful toward religion and the unexplainable devotion of its participants, he merely experiences in a more aggressive form Miss Lonelyhearts' same dilemma with faith. Shrike detests the notion of unfettered worship, yet he is obsessed by it. Whether or not masked with words of sarcasm, he continually assumes a God-like role himself or gives Miss Lonelyhearts the title. In the same majestic speech where he defies religion, he mockingly states, " I am a great saint. I can walk on my own water (7)." Meanwhile, he calls the advice columnist Miss Lonelyhearts one of " the priests of twentieth-century America (4)." Shrike has simplified existence to his own bare reality where all is corrupt and any romantic ideals are in vain. While he may intend for his outlandish proclamations against human gentility to be entirely believable, his constant prodding at Miss Lonelyhearts for his inability to give the suffering sufficient advice reveals Shrike's own parallel plight of despair. Neither of West's central characters has any idea what the cause of suffering is or how to stop it; while Miss Lonelyhearts will attempt spiritual redemption to live life in one piece, Shrike remains twisted in a bleak world of overcompensating cynicism. West places his characters in a world that is intensely horrible, where all individuals represent the desperate cases that write in to Miss Lonelyhearts. West's irony lies in the fact that although Miss Lonelyhearts is tormented by the pathetic displays of suffering that surround him, Miss Lonelyhearts is in fact the most desperate of them all. However, the reader only understands Miss Lonelyhearts' personal struggle by the ability to see the world through Miss Lonelyhearts' eyes. After a failed sexual experience with Shrike's wife – not surprisingly keeping with themes of corruption – Miss Lonelyhearts arrives at his office the next day, a " cold, damp city room

(24).” Looking at his desk and seeing piles of unopened letters wanting insightful advice, he sees: A desert, he was thinking, not of sand, but of rust and body dirt, surrounded by a back-yard fence on which are posters describing the events of the day. Mother slays five with ax, slays seven, slays nine...Babe slams two, slams three...Inside the fence Desperate, Broken-hearted, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband and the rest were gravely forming the letters to Miss Lonelyhearts out of white-washed clamshells, as if decorating the lawn of a rural depot (25). West repeatedly combines elements of nature with those of modern civilization that are cheap or ominous and looming, like a desert that desperate people decorate like a lawn. The city streets outside Miss Lonelyhearts’ office are putrid with impurity: “ the air smelt as though it had been artificially heated (4).” On the way to have a drink with his fellow escapists, he observes the scenery: “ 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 (4).” It is this waste land of nature’s decay and pitiful human suffering that always proves to incite guilt in Miss Lonelyhearts, even after a half-rewarding trip to the country with one girlfriend Betty. Throughout the novel, West repeatedly warns the reader that natural innocence cannot save Miss Lonelyhearts: the noise of birds and crickets is a “ horrible racket” (37) in his ears; in the woods, “ there was nothing but death -rotten leaves, gray and white fungi, and over everything a funereal hush (38).” Miss Lonelyhearts is paradoxically alienated in a world where everyone he knows and doesn’t know is alienated. In a manner somewhat similar to Shrike’s, Miss Lonelyhearts often takes on the critical eye, acknowledging all glaring flaws in the modern, material society and those who thoughtlessly

participate. In the bar Delehanty's, where his primary goal is to escape the disorganization outside, Miss Lonelyhearts cannot stomach those around him who attempt to do the same thing in a different way: But the romantic atmosphere only heightened his feeling of icy fatness. He tried to fight it by telling himself it was childish. What had happened to his great understanding heart? Guitars, bright shawls, exotic foods, outlandish costumes – all these things were part of the business of dreams ... For the time being, dreams left him cold, no matter how humble they were (22). Miss Lonelyhearts cannot fathom the idea of entertainment being a proper mode of distraction, nor does he appreciate art for the sake of art. He no longer wants to humor people like Mary who like to tell lavish tales “ because they want to talk about something poetic (23).” Miss Lonelyhearts again attributes human suffering to modern culture within the confines of his own room: in a whirlwind of delirious imagination, “ He found himself in the window of a pawnshop full of fur coats, diamond rings, watches, shotguns, fishing tackle, mandolins. All these things were the paraphernalia of suffering (30).” West, by all means, tells more than the plight of Miss Lonelyhearts; it is the terrible state of all human beings that brings Miss Lonelyhearts himself to utter despair. West sets the stage for mankind's doom, and his novel's characters heartily follow through. Extended to extremes, human alienation cries out through the inarticulate scribbles on letters to Miss Lonelyhearts, Shrike's disgusted mockery of the pleas, and the platitude responses of Miss Lonelyhearts himself. A scene beginning in the novel's opening chapter “ Miss Lonelyhearts, Help Me, Help Me” clearly defines the hopelessness of the characters' moral brokenness; Shrike mockingly dictates to Miss Lonelyhearts an answer to a letter, suggesting, “ Tell them about art. Here,

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I'll dictate: Art Is a Way Out. Do not let life overwhelm you ... Art Is One of Life's Richest Offerings (4)." West satirically capitalizes the platitudes thrown about by the characters so that they resemble headlines. The choice that his central struggling characters be the men behind the curtain of the mass media only magnifies the novel's ironic statement: modern humanity ceaselessly searches for eternal truth while their minds are conditioned by advertising and materialism. Thus, the civilization described through West's eyes is as antagonizing as any of the novel's characters; the contrast between a brutal, random world and Miss Lonelyhearts' desperate attempts to escape it is so sharp it suggests conspiracy. Despite the persistence of the opposing outside world, Miss Lonelyhearts writhes confusedly in his search for meaning and escape. While he has proclaimed modern modes of entertainment and enjoyment the "business of dreams" (22), his own idiosyncratic obsessions likewise fail to give him long-term comfort. In various instances, Miss Lonelyhearts' feelings of imbalance manifest themselves in what he calls an "insane sensitiveness to order (10)." The chapter "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Fat Thumb" closes in on his frustration with disorder, the "Fat Thumb" representing his tongue's inability to move when he tries to speak to his girlfriend Betty. Rushing through the streets to see Betty, "chaos was multiple. Broken groups of people hurried past, forming neither stars nor squares ... no scale could give them meaning (11)." In this moment still early in the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts expresses his displeasure with uneven physical characteristics while simultaneously dealing with the greater disorder - vast human suffering. Throughout Miss Lonelyhearts, the reader will find all of the columnist's romantic relationships devoid of love. He knows that love in any form could prove a soothing

escape, and yet each of his attempts fail. He clings to Betty for the sense of order she gives him: “ She had often made him feel that when she straightened his tie, she straightened much more. And he had once thought that if her world were larger, were the world, she might order it as finally as the objects on her dressing table (11).” Ironically, Miss Lonelyhearts knows the senselessness of this idea; in the same chapter of the “ Fat Thumb,” he recalls a time where he had asked Betty to marry him simply for the “ job and her gingham apron, his slippers beside the fireplace and her ability to cook (12).” Then, alluding to his greater pain, he acknowledges being “ merely annoyed at having been fooled into thinking that such a solution was possible (12).” Since West comically puts forth that Miss Lonelyhearts “ only knew two women who would tolerate him” (19), the wandering columnist is bound to travel between the empty attentions of Betty and Mary Shrike, the wife of his coworker. Again, his relationship with Mrs. Shrike largely centers on what it does for him: “ When he kissed Shrike’s wife, he felt less like a joke (19).” Miss Lonelyhearts repeatedly declares that through his dismal work of answering letters, he has become the “ victim of the joke (32).” Although he is pained by the world at large, he also bitterly refutes a reality where he must “ examine the values by which he lives (32).” The interior of Miss Lonelyhearts is a moral waste land, and he therefore seeks to satisfy himself with surface qualities and short-term pleasure. As a result of his unsteadiness, Miss Lonelyhearts predominantly concerns himself with seeming rather than with being. Not having enough of a sense of himself to just be, he focuses on what roles he must take on in order to survive. West largely equates Miss Lonelyhearts’ position as an advice columnist with that of Christ; while Miss Lonelyhearts clearly fails to fill those shoes, his feigned

compassion throughout the novel represents his useless attempts at acting virtuous and saint-like. Christ is a name which has subconscious magic for him, which expresses somehow his love and pity for humanity which he can't express and which slips off continually into futility and oblivion. Yet he is bound to fail at "the Christ dream" (39) because of the distance that separates him from the morally elevated figure. West opens the novel describing Miss Lonelyhearts as "the New England Puritan (3)."

Unfortunately, the lineal descendant has come to a spiritual dead-end road in front of the typewriter. Reading pitiful letters, he realizes, "Christ was the answer, but, if he did not want to get sick, he had to stay away from the Christ business (3)." Having no solid identity or beliefs, Miss Loneyhearts grasps on to virtuous facades and vows of humility. Discouraged by his failure to redeem himself in nature during the trip to the country, Miss Lonelyhearts again searches for a tool to cope with humanity. He feels he has failed the "Christ dream," yet only for his "lack of humility (39)." Miss Lonelyhearts vows to take on a role that is so feeble and delicate that any intrusion by another person might break it – he repeatedly acknowledges that Shrike's presence would put his humility on trial, so he avoids him. He dodges Betty "because she made him feel ridiculous" and "he was still trying to cling to his humility (43)." The ultimate test comes with the arrival of the cripple into the speakeasy; even his physical presence is an automatic threat to Miss Lonelyhearts, who battles with contrasting notions of compassion and disgust. Hobbling in, the cripple "made many waste motions, like those of a partially destroyed insect." Again and again, West forces the reader to face images of worst-case scenarios, and so incites the greatest degree of confused emotions. Thematically, the pathetic cases who

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either write in to Miss Lonelyhearts or pass him on the street have physical disabilities or deformations that are contrasted with notions of love: He saw a man who appeared to be on the verge of death stagger into a movie theater that was showing a picture called Blonde Beauty. He saw a ragged woman with an enormous goiter pick a love story magazine out of a garbage can and seem very excited by her find (39). With images like these, Nathanael West nearly screams at the suffering reader in a suffering world, “Why bother?” Miss Lonelyhearts’ attempts at satiating his desire for wholeness with love and religion can only be seen as ridiculous in the face of the inevitable fate West presents. More than just roles to fill, religiousness and holiness are distorted throughout West’s novel to represent what appears to him to be a great human misdirection of emotions. The book’s desperate cry of pain and suffering comes to a focus in what Miss Lonelyhearts calls his “Christ complex.” As he leaves the office and walks through a little park, the shadow of a lamppost pierces his side like a spear. Jesus Christ, Shrike says, is “the Miss Lonelyhearts of Miss Lonelyhearts (6).” Miss Lonelyhearts has nailed an ivory cross to the wall of his room with great spikes, but it disappoints him: “Instead of writhing, the Christ remained calmly decorative (8).” Religiousness serves Miss Lonelyhearts in more ways than one; although providing a path for him to find love, it simultaneously satisfies his lustful attraction to suffering. He remembers being a boy in his father’s church and being stirred by shouting the name of Christ. Unfortunately, he recognizes, it is not faith but hysteria: “For him, Christ was the most natural excitement (9).” Miss Lonelyhearts’ incessant attraction to the physical and spiritual being of Christ is, of course, laden with his powerful, underlying homosexuality. West includes this characteristic as a

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kind of explanation for the degree of Miss Lonelyhearts' alienation. It explains his acceptance of teasing dates with Mary and his coldness with her; he thinks of her excitement and notes: " No similar change ever took place in his own body, however. Like a dead man, only friction could make him warm or violence make him mobile (19)." It explains his compulsive gestures with Betty and Mrs. Doyle, the latter a woman he has no attraction to, and yet tells her she's pretty out of pressure to say what's expected of him. Furthermore, his only real spiritual consolation comes in a moment of hand-holding with Mr. Doyle, the slow, crippled man. After this moment, Miss Lonelyhearts delights in " the triumphant thing that his humility had become (47)." In a most clear depiction of Miss Lonelyhearts' revelation, he now feels when Mrs. Doyle comes near him, " like an empty bottle that is being slowly filled with warm, dirty water (50)." It comes as little surprise to the reader that the cripple finally murders Miss Lonelyhearts, for he is the ultimate test of both the columnist's feigned understanding heart and his attempt at spiritual escape. In the final chapter, " Miss Lonelyhearts Has A Religious Experience," West expresses his ultimate statement about the human desire for truth - in his eye, a system gone absurdly awry. In a parody of the crucifixion, Miss Lonelyhearts meets his end at last, not as a martyr, but as the victim of the joke. Burning with fever one day in his room, Miss Lonelyhearts rushes downstairs to embrace Mr. Doyle, who unfortunately carries a pistol. As Miss Lonelyhearts attempts to miraculously embrace all suffering mankind with love, Doyle tries to toss away the gun, and Miss Lonelyhearts is accidentally shot, dragging Doyle down the stairs in his arms. The image of his death is unarguably homosexual, and thus, largely focused on Miss Lonelyhearts' enduring alienation even unto his death: " He did not

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understand the cripple's shout and heard it as a cry for help from Desperate, Harold S. Catholic Mother, Broken-Hearted, Broad-Shoulders, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband. He was running to succor them with love (57-58)." There is no truth for Miss Lonelyhearts, only scribbled pleas and jumbled words. Ultimately the novel cannot justify or even explain suffering, only proclaim its omnipresence. Miss Lonelyhearts cannot answer the letters because he has found that his values do not, cannot, justify genuine suffering, even his own. Hence, he is the victim of the joke: the advice-giver is himself sick-of-it-all, in desperate need of advice. Miss Lonelyhearts' crisis is intensely personal, for he has found his values, not just wanting, but false. He becomes a misnomer; the name suits him, for his heart is as lonely as any of his correspondents. West presents the reader with an image of helplessness among humanity that is submissive and pathetic; he scorns the vast number of individuals who seek spiritual aid. For whatever reason, West chooses to put human emptiness under a microscope, and proceed to discover nothing about it except that it exists. Yet, a peculiar strength lies in the novel's uncanny depiction of the means taken by the characters to be fulfilled. Through scrutinizing the vain efforts of people to play virtuous roles, West calls upon the reader to examine his own values as Miss Lonelyhearts must. With violent, shocking pace, Miss Lonelyhearts shares the author's bitter sense of civilization's falsity. Nathanael West's world, however, leaves no room for growth.