

**Carnival Virtues:
Sex, Sacrilege, and the Grotesque in Nathanael West's
*Miss Lonelyhearts***

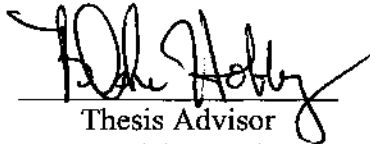
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Miss Lonelyhearts, a man known only by his female pseudonym, sits at the desk in his office at the *New York Post-Dispatch*. He works as an agony columnist for the newspaper, a position that entails reading and responding to letters that contain earnest pleas from humanity's desperate, deformed, and abused. In these letters, readers of the column beg for Miss Lonelyhearts' help and seek Miss Lonelyhearts' wisdom and comfort. On his desk, taunting Miss Lonelyhearts, is a parodic prayer written by his boss and editor, Shrike: scribbled on a piece of cardboard and addressed to Miss Lonelyhearts, it renders the agony columnist as a modern messiah for the pitiful. So begins Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, a grotesque episodic of a man's attempt to overcome the temptations and abominations of the flesh and live according to the spirit. Miss Lonelyhearts' recurring obscene visions and occasional forays into violence or sexual misbehavior attest to the grotesque status of his existence, but the protagonist does not embrace his grotesque tendencies; on the contrary, he finds himself ever at odds with them. Miss Lonelyhearts would like his advice column to become a priestly endeavor to blot out the iniquities of humanity and heal the wounds of the broken. He exists in a grotesque world, though, a world marked by virulent sexual impulses, spasmodic bursts of violence, disorder that refuses to subside, unruly crowds, obsession with the female anatomy, and vulgar graffiti on bathroom walls, and this world acts as an incessant stumbling block to his messianic mission. In critical studies, this novel is frequently described as "grotesque." Although many scholars have relied on the critical insights of Mikhail Bakhtin in order to define "the grotesque in literature," no one has directly applied Bakhtin's work on folk humor and carnival ambivalence to West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*. More so than Freudian or Marxist readings, the most common approaches to West's work, a Bakhtinian reading of *Miss Lonelyhearts* offers a unique understanding of the protagonist, a character that critics have attempted to decipher for decades. Even more than that,

an examination of *Miss Lonelyhearts* through a Bakhtinian framework not only allows for a greater appreciation of this concise novel; it also serves as a revealing commentary about contemporary society and our ambivalent humanity.

The critical perception of West and his literary vision has grown in its multi-faceted variety since the author gained prominence in the 1930s. Published over an eight-year artistic career cut short by a fatal automobile accident in 1940, West's four novels – *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931), *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), *A Cool Million* (1934), and *The Day of the Locust* (1939) – contain scenes of potent grotesquery. These scenes portray characters who commit violent acts, succumb to sexual urges, suffer torment from self or others, meet with obscene flights of the imagination, encounter or engage in mockery of things sacred, or reel back upon witnessing the mundane atrocities that occur on personal and global levels. While the critical majority has established that West's novels are significant and in some way reflect contemporary society, critics do not share a unanimous response to the author's work. Where some critics find humor in West's fiction, others find horror; where some see playfulness, others see perversity. Likewise, critics are divided in their evaluations of West's fictional characters. Consider *Miss Lonelyhearts*: does he have a genuine spirituality, or does he have a bona-fide psychosis? Does he display the qualities of a compassionate lover of humanity or those of a delusional egomaniac? The answers to such questions vary from critic to critic.

Whether or not a critic is even concerned with such questions varies as well. Certain critical frameworks do not value an exact determination of what motivates the characters in West's novels. The critics who adopt these frameworks would rather examine West's novels as commentaries on modern American society than investigate the psychology of *Miss Lonelyhearts* or Shrike, his deadpan, vulgar boss. This dissimilarity of concerns, one could

argue, is what emerges as the principle division in the critical conversations involving West. In order to form an overall idea of the scholarship on West, we can generalize many of the author's critics into two main categories: those who, in search of an understanding of West's characters, either advocate or reject the use of Freudian psychoanalytical criticism; and those who, tapping into the trend of Marxist thought, view the novels as depictions of capitalistic and mass cultural effects on twentieth-century American society and the individuals who constitute it. Within these broad categories, of course, more nuanced critical opinions exist – nuances I will discuss below. Another generalization that adds to a bird's eye view of West-based criticism concerns the fifty-year timeline on which the majority of such criticism can be placed. For the most part, critics have shifted their focus from Freudian criticism to Marxist criticism as the years have progressed. The criticism published from the 1950s to the 1980s demonstrates an occupation with literary psychoanalysis; whereas, much of the scholarship from the 1990s and the twenty-first century deals with issues related to mass production, consumerism, and the commodification of society. Needless to say, not every critical effort in the past twenty or so years has conducted a Marxist reading of West; a clear majority of those that do not, however, do read the novels as texts of literary modernism, and thus investigate modernist critical issues such as the problems of interpersonal communication, the emergence of the literary antihero, and the deterioration of the environment and humanity's connection with it.

Initially, Freudian readings did not dominate the West-centered critical scene. Ben Siegel, in his introduction to *Critical Essays on Nathanael West*, points out that Daniel Aaron produced one of the first significant critical evaluations of West, which appeared in a 1947 academic journal (13). Without demonstrating a commitment to a particular critical framework, Aaron evaluates each of West's novels as imaginative forays into the grotesque. He dismisses *The*

Dream Life of Balso Snell as “a privately printed little exercise that never should have been printed at all” (Aaron 114), chiding the work for its displays of lewdness and pretense. In his rejection of West’s first work, Aaron is a forerunner of countless critics who have brushed *Balso Snell* aside as negligible. Likewise, Aaron bemoans *A Cool Million* for its “sophomoric insolence” and judges it to be a weak and mostly unimportant work. On the other hand, the critic identifies *Miss Lonelyhearts* as West’s greatest artistic effort, with *The Day of the Locust* ranking a respectable second. This stance coincides with the critical pattern that developed in the twentieth century and has continued into the twenty-first: typically, scholars pan *Balso Snell* and *A Cool Million* and praise *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*.

Like Aaron’s article, many of the essays on West written in the first two decades after his death more closely resembled book reviews than literary criticism. It was not until 1962, when Stanley Edgar Hyman published a pamphlet that delineated a Freudian reading of West’s work, did critics begin to analyze West’s fiction through specific critical lenses. Applying psychoanalytic principles to *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Hyman compiles a “case history” of the novel’s protagonist and diagnoses Miss Lonelyhearts with “a classic Oedipus complex” and “latent homosexuality” (24), and he insists that West intended to make these factors visible in his character. Hyman does not offer Freudian analyses of West’s other novels; in fact, he hardly gives critical attention to them at all, perhaps because he considers *Miss Lonelyhearts* West’s only “authentically great novel” (39). Two years after Hyman published his pamphlet, Victor Comerchero, in a book-length study of West, confirmed Hyman’s opinion, characterizing West as a modernist after Baudelaire and a psychoanalyst after Freud. Comerchero argues that “a Freudian psychoanalytic vein that cannot be ignored” (168) underlies West’s novels, and that this quality is the source of the novels’ resonance with readers. He also presents a slightly more

generous evaluation of West's literary success than Hyman, including *Locust* along with *Miss Lonelyhearts* as enduring works.

Hyman's Freudian interpretation of *Miss Lonelyhearts* has spawned an ongoing debate over the validity of such an interpretation. Although a number of critics since Hyman have taken a firmly Freudian stance, just as many have disputed the psychoanalysis of *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Moreover, intra-Freudian conflict is not unheard of, as James Hickey represents at least one instance of a fellow Freudian critic taking issue with the readings of Hyman and Comerchero. Hickey, in his article "Freudian Criticism and *Miss Lonelyhearts*," begins with a lamentation of misguided endeavors to merge psychoanalysis and literature. Yet the blame in such cases, according to Hickey, rests not on Freud but on the critic who does not correctly employ Freudian thought. The critic goes on to call Hyman's reading "a shallow attempt to force *Miss Lonelyhearts* into a common Freudian mold" (Hickey 112), to chide Comerchero as "one of Hyman's more irresponsible defenders" (113), and finally, in a veritable chastisement, to claim that "the Hyman-Comerchero analysis falls ridiculously short of the mark" (114). Hickey follows his contentions with the Freudian critics before him with an impassioned defense of what he might call a "disciplined" psychoanalytic approach to *Miss Lonelyhearts*; only when Freudian criticism is undisciplined does it become problematic, he suggests. After rejecting Hyman's diagnosis of an Oedipus complex for *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Hickey joins his predecessor in detecting a latent homosexuality in the advice columnist, then continues to expound upon theretofore-unmentioned Freudian applications to the novel – applications that include his interpretation of *Miss Lonelyhearts*' relationship with Betty as an indication of the protagonist's "incestuous desire for his sister" (146). If this reading sounds exaggeratedly Freudian, one might wish to reconfirm the earnestness of Hickey's commitment to psychoanalytic criticism: indeed,

the critic confidently asserts that “Freudian criticism seems not only desirable but mandatory” when evaluating *Miss Lonelyhearts* (115). Such is the fervor characteristic of some Freudian critics when they analyze West’s novels.

Yes, Hickey does seem to provide a more detailed and specific psychoanalytical approach than critics before him, but nevertheless his commentary has not discouraged all critics after him from admiring Hyman’s reading of West. Consider Harold Bloom’s evaluation of Hyman: Bloom, long respected as an authoritative critical voice, calls Hyman “West’s most useful critic” (“Introduction” 2).

But let me depart from the discussion of Freudians who oppose one another over technicalities. Much more frequently one encounters critics who oppose a Freudian reading altogether. Before turning to such critics, it is helpful to contemplate some remarks from West himself that have complicated the Freudian / anti-Freudian debate surrounding his work. In a 1933 article entitled “Some Notes on Miss L.,” West writes:

Psychology has nothing to do with reality nor should it be used as motivation. The novelist is no longer a psychologist. Psychology can become something much more important. The great body of case histories can be used in the way the ancient writers used their myths. Freud is your Bullfinch; you cannot learn from him. (Bercovitch 401)

Critics of all dispositions find these remarks cryptic, and they have often quarreled over their meaning. For scholars who dismiss Freudian approaches to *Miss Lonelyhearts*, these comments serve as evidence that West intended to squelch psychoanalytic readings of that novel. Randall Reid, arguably the most outspoken rejecter of Freudian readings of West, is one of these scholars. In the chapter on *Miss Lonelyhearts* in his book on West, *No Redeemer, No Promised*

Land, Reid details his objections to the psychoanalyses of Hyman and Comerchero. Especially troubling to Reid is the notion that Miss Lonelyhearts is a closet homosexual and that “[Miss Lonelyhearts’] religious conversion is really a conversion from latent to overt sexuality” (Comerchero 99). After quoting Hyman’s hypothetical “case history” of Miss Lonelyhearts, Reid then posits that “it contains a disconcerting number of inventions, misstatements, and omissions” before offering a line-by-line rebuttal of the “case history” in question (75). As for Comerchero, Reid insists that the Hyman supporter’s approach constitutes a “flat contradiction of West’s own statement” (74) regarding psychology, and that the approach demonstrates “the assumption behind too many exercises in ‘Freudian’ literary criticism – that Freudian theory is not just an interpretive method but reality itself. Whatever the merits of such an assumption,” he adds, “West did not share it” (74). Several critics have relied on Reid’s argument to support their own dismissal of a Freudian framework. Miles Orvell, who challenges a critical insistence upon reading *Miss Lonelyhearts* as a frustrated homosexual, refers to Reid’s comments as the final words in a heated debate (111). Contending that *Miss Lonelyhearts* forms an association between the power of Christ and the power of sexuality, Orvell treats the novel not as a Freudian case history but rather as a story about Miss Lonelyhearts’ emotional reaction to suffering that he witnesses others experience and that he himself experiences (112).

Irving Malin, in a book on West’s novels, more specifically contradicts Freudian critics, portraying Comerchero in particular as a scholar who misguidedly forces West through the psychoanalytical ringer. Regarding Comerchero, Malin writes:

He searches for and discovers castration, homosexuality, and Oedipal guilt in the novels (especially in *Miss Lonelyhearts*), citing many phallic details. Comerchero, following Stanley Edgar Hyman (whom he praises for his tidy reading), becomes

obsessive about Freudianism, and neglects to observe that psychosexual overtones are not the final clue to *Miss Lonelyhearts*. (154-155)

Malin's main objection to Freudian readings of the novel arises from his opinion that West does not include enough explicitly Freudian information to justify such a reading. The critic insists that "[West] omits parental training, childhood rituals of excretion, Oedipal romance" (155) from the text. As a basis for his claims, Malin refers to West's remarks from "Some Notes on Miss L.," taking them to mean that West was "ambivalent toward Freud" (155). In the end, he suggests that narcissism, not homosexuality or any Freudian complex, fuels the behavior of West's characters. But just as Hickey has not convinced every critic to disregard the Hyman-Comerchero reading, neither has Reid, nor Orvell, nor Malin. Again one turns to Bloom, one of the more recent participants in the Freudian debate. Bloom expresses his judgment on the matter, writing:

I continue to find Hyman's argument persuasive, and agree with him that the book's psychosexuality is marked by a repressed homosexual relation between Shrike and Miss Lonelyhearts. Hyman's Freudian observation that all the suffering in the book is essentially female seems valid, reminding us that Freud's "feminine masochism" is mostly encountered among men, according to Freud himself. ("Introduction" 2)

Bloom's firm endorsement of a Freudian reading by no means settles the score between the opposing viewpoints on West; rather, it demonstrates that the debate over psychoanalysis and *Miss Lonelyhearts* remains far from resolved.

Over the past twenty years, however, a shift has taken place in the critical conversation about West. Freudian concerns, once the polarizing issue involving *Miss Lonelyhearts*, have

fallen by the wayside, as scholars have occupied themselves with different approaches to the novels. Most of the critical works from these past two decades treat West as a distinctly modernist voice, and they have adapted new concerns accordingly. Marxist readings in particular have become popular with scholars, who identify the novels as commentaries on American society in the age of mass production and mass culture. One can trace this trend at least as far back as 1987, when a Kingsley Widmer essay discussing West in terms of his contribution to American comedy appeared. In the essay, Widmer delineates an opposition between mass culture humor and high culture humor, the former being marked by unfailing optimism, the latter by intellectual pessimism. The critic identifies the commodification of such optimism, arguably “the all-American con,” as the great travesty of the mass-culture age (219). To Widmer, West embodies the “intellectual, mocking, pessimistic, radical” spirit that he insists marks “much of the good comedy of the past generation” (223). This essay marks one of the earlier movements away from Freudian readings and towards Marxist ones, a movement that has only accelerated since. Six years after the publishing of Widmer’s article, Rita Barnard introduced a reading of *Miss Lonelyhearts* that examines the implications of capitalism on art, especially literature. Barnard builds an ambitious case for reading *Miss Lonelyhearts*, “a text saturated with the language of commercial hype” (52), as an exposé of the deterioration of literature – a deterioration that occurs as a result of systematic mass-production and commodification (50). The critic determines that in a culture marked by relentless commercialism and merciless advertising, artistic endeavors meet their doom: such a culture, she proposes, absorbs authors and their literature into the blurry drone of mass media (52-53). One sees similar concerns in the work of Jonathan Vietch, who locates West within the socio-artistic climate of West’s time, the 1930s. Viewing *Miss Lonelyhearts* through a dedicatedly Marxist lens, Vietch recognizes the

novel as an exploration of mass media's role in modernity. To Veitch, this role involves commodifying culture and reinforcing hegemony. In this critic's reading, the novel becomes a gateway to the epiphany that "the capacity of mechanical reproduction – the essence of mass media – to reproduce speech endlessly, without regard either to the original site of its articulation or to the multiple sites of its eventual reception, radically problematizes the act of communication" (Veitch 72-73). Veitch's comments may provide insight to readers who are struck by the strained, contentious relationships that populate *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and by the protagonist's recurring inability to express his feelings to the other characters. They might also explain the writer's block that increasingly prevents Miss Lonelyhearts from composing his advice column: in the face of a hyper-modernized society—the impersonal nature of which frustrates any effort to achieve authenticity—compassion becomes practically impossible.

Yet, as noted above, not all critics who consider West primarily a modernist examine the novels under a Marxist microscope. Some, such as Jonathan Greenburg, prefer to explore West's work as texts of modernist comedy. In "Nathanael West and the Mystery of Feeling," Greenburg draws a distinction between satire, which he links with "the private, ironic, and aesthetic," and sentiment, which he links with "the public, sincere, and ethical-political" (594). To Greenburg, this distinction reflects several of modernism's major artistic concerns, including its devaluation of sincerity, its "suspicion that 'genuine feeling' may not be so genuine" (589), and its "effort to escape the sentimental" (589). Greenburg goes on to elaborate on his observations:

West offers a useful case to examine the relation of satire to modernism, both because he is commonly regarded as both a modernist and a satirist, and more crucially because he explicitly thematizes the problem of feeling... Although West's fiction subjects sentimental expressions of feeling to intense satiric

scrutiny, it is no less searching in its scrutiny of satire itself, and of the ironic joking or postures, often identified with modern aesthetics, that dismiss feeling. In short, the artistic quests of nearly all West's protagonists can be seen as efforts to resolve the tension between the claims of satire and sentiment. West's fiction at once manifests and resists a satiric impulse, and the push and pull of this ambivalence constitutes the central dynamic of his fiction. (590)

With his consideration of humor and satire in West's novels, Greenburg adds his voice to the chorus of critics who discuss the nature of West's comedy. These comedy-based discussions utilize some of the more subtle nuances in terminology and opinion that exist in the conversations involving West. Greenburg's identification of West as an ambivalent satirist coincides with many critics, including James Light, who insists that West "is first and foremost a satirist" (130), and John Clark, who repeatedly refers to West and his novels to illustrate characteristics of what he calls the modern satiric grotesque. Clark also associates the terms "dark comedy" or "dark humor" with both satire and West. On the contrary, other critics would dispute the use of these terms to describe West. Bloom, for instance, is explicit in his suggestion that West is not a satirist but a parodist; the difference being that satirists write for corrective purposes, while parodists have no moral motivation behind their humor (*How to Read* 249).

Much like the conversations that revolve around the presence or absence of Freudian or Marxist influence on West's novels, the conversations about West's comedy began in the mid-twentieth century and have stretched across a span of decades. But even as scholars have returned to many of the same critical issues when reading West, still new issues are being identified in the author's brief body of work. *Miss Lonelyhearts* in particular has become the source of unprecedented critical insights. Recently, scholars have become fascinated with Shrike,

the deadpan editor who acts as a proverbial thorn in Miss Lonelyhearts' pious side. Certain critics in the 1990s, namely Beverly Jones and David Madden, have suggested that Shrike, not Miss Lonelyhearts, is the most important character in that novel. Jones bases her innovative approach on the notion that Shrike functions as a Christ-like figure more so than Miss Lonelyhearts himself. According to Jones, Miss Lonelyhearts' hypocrisy and hysteria cause him to become "the agent of chaos" (196) in the narrative, while Shrike's nihilist rhetoric establishes order and stability in a tumultuous world (196). In her analysis, Shrike, who rebukes self-righteousness and exposes delusional fanaticism, is the only messiah in this novel (197-198). Unlike Jones, Madden's evaluation of Shrike as the most significant character in the novel leads to a rejection of the text's artistic success. In an essay entitled "The Shrike Voice Dominates *Miss Lonelyhearts*," Madden recognizes a discontinuity between the novel's narrative voice and Miss Lonelyhearts' consciousness, through which West filters the narrative. Madden sees the voice of the narrator as a Shrike-like voice – and on account of such an "incongruity" (203), he insists that "the reader will find the novel to be aesthetically flawed" (203). Madden concludes that this flaw was "the unconscious result of a division in his personal life and in his vision of life in general" (203) and suggests that within West there existed both a Miss Lonelyhearts and a Shrike.

Twenty-first century critics have continued to find in *Miss Lonelyhearts* the potential to illuminate poignant issues of contemporary society. One sees evidence of this in Lee Rozelle's ecocritical reading of the novel, a framework that emphasizes what a text says about the environment and humanity's relationship with it. Rozelle notes that *Miss Lonelyhearts* is "key to current ecocriticism because [it] outline[s] an ethos of unsustainability that disconnects the urbanite from the pleasures and responsibilities of place" (102). This reading demonstrates that

critics still find in *Miss Lonelyhearts* new considerations to examine in relation to the various concerns of today's society, and that the novel still affects contemporary imaginations and intellects. While recent critics have drifted away from the traditional Freudian and Marxist readings that dominated the twentieth century, scholars have not drifted away from *Miss Lonelyhearts*: the novel has proven itself as a work that has captivated and continues to captivate a broad range of audiences. And there are yet more approaches to add to the critical conversation about West: although many scholars have commented upon West's use of grotesque imagery in the novel, no one has presented a detailed application of Mikhail Bakhtin's insights on carnival grotesquery to West's fiction. By doing so, we can appreciate the roles that folk humor and carnival ambivalence occupy in West's most celebrated and debated novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*. In order to make a connection between these works, we must begin with a discussion of Bakhtin's study on the grotesque, a significant portion of which appears in his introduction to *Rabelais and His World*.

Grotesque literature takes its roots in what Bakhtin identifies as folk humor and carnival ambivalence, two aspects of humanity that the critic traces back to the Roman Saturnalia. Saturnalia was a celebration marked by revelry and abandon, a festival in which all Roman citizens became unified and equalized through their participation in ritual irreverence to cultural norms. The tradition of festival continued into the medieval period, during which celebrants directed the irreverence of such festivity towards that era's two omnipresent institutions: the Christian Church and feudalism. Representing structure, hierarchy, and cultural norms, these institutions became targets of carnival parody—that is, a mockery of sacred practices and texts, and a reversal of stately ceremonies.

Hierarchy was crucial to the Church and feudalism, and individuals were routinely classified and stratified within these systems. Social ranking, as the institutions determined and enforced them, became a staple of medieval daily life. Bakhtin suggests that the tradition of carnival developed as a means of escape from rigid social, political, and religious order. By periodically inverting this order through participation in carnival, the people fulfilled a necessary (albeit temporary) urge to depart from the realm of institutional government. Bakhtin writes:

Carnival festivities and the comic spectacle and ritual connected with them... offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year. (196-197)

This “second world,” by rejecting and defying institutions, provided relief from the oppressive force of the systems that perpetuated cultural standards. These standards included spiritual regulations and codes of social propriety, rules of conduct that the Church and State imposed on medieval European citizens. Standardized seriousness became a requirement for “official” medieval life – a seriousness often asserted through feasts sanctioned by the Church or the State (199).

This seriousness, Bakhtin notes, is precisely what folk humor intends to disrupt. Sobriety came as a mandate from institutions, which also served as the source of social hierarchy and structure. To attack seriousness, in medieval times, was to attack the Church and the State, the self-appointed establishers and preservers of social order. Folk humor thrives on humane, fleshly, earthly laughter: laughter prohibited (in most contexts) by medieval institutions. It should come as no surprise, then, that “[folk carnival humor] opposed the official and serious

tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture” (Bakhtin 196). In these disparate realms, two disparate sets of values existed. The institutional realm valued hierarchy, order, and seriousness; the carnival realm valued equality, freedom, and hilarity.

Folk humor informs grotesque literature in a variety of ways. For one, it seeks to bring all individuals to a common level, to collapse hierarchy and eliminate distinctions between social rank and class. In fact, while folk humor does not aim to destroy the notion of individual identity, it does de-emphasize the individual in favor of the collective. Carnival brings people together, and through laughter, disorder, and unusual behavior, it degrades its participants until they exist on an equal plane. Grotesque literature, too, seeks to illicit a type of laughter that equalizes its readers – a laughter that celebrates the bizarre (and perhaps disturbing) elements of life. The grotesque operates in a “second world,” an alternative realm, separate from the realm of institutionalized order and social protocol prevalent in typical daily life. In this second world, what was once considered out-of-bounds becomes fair territory: the inappropriate becomes acceptable, and the taboo becomes norm. Formal conversation and the multitude of rules that govern it give way to a new form of communication: one in which profanities and abusive language become not only acceptable, but also meaningful (204).

Bakhtin identifies degradation as “the essential principle of grotesque realism” (205). The critic defines degradation as “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; [the] transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (205). This principle, however, is not synonymous with destruction, which implies finality and death. Degradation involves descent, but it equally involves elevation. In other words, degradation leads to renewal: as Bakhtin contends, “to degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something new and better” (206). In this way, Bakhtin distinguishes folk

humor from modern satire: whereas satire criticizes and ridicules something separate from the satirist (that is, something of which the satirist is not, or believes he is not, guilty), folk humor does not distance itself from the source of its laughter. Folk humor links the laughers with their laughter, and discourages opposition among people; satire is inherently oppositional. Satire indicts, yet it does not offer a solution to the problems it exposes. Folk humor does not merely accuse, nor merely condemn; it degrades so that it can renew. According to Bakhtin, “to degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down into the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place” (206). Carnival’s departure from institutionalized order does not intend to obliterate the Church and the State, but it does intend to refresh the humanity of people smothered by the inhumane limitations of the official realm. Not a call for anarchy, but an invitation to become human again, folk humor – as well as grotesque literature – reaches into the depths of the human spirit and conspires with laughter to provide an alternative existence – an existence free from the stifling regulations of religious and political authority.

Key to the nature of folk humor is the concept of ambivalence—that is, the coexistence of conflicting attitudes or feelings. Bakhtin suggests that much of the modern scholarship regarding folk humor errs by interpreting it in one of two ways. In the words of the critic, “The present-day analysis of laughter explains it either as purely negative satire... or else as gay, fanciful, recreational drollery deprived of philosophic content. [The notion] that folk humor is ambivalent is usually ignored” (201). Grotesque literature, too, is ambivalent—especially in its use of degradation as an agent of rebirth. The grotesque in literature is not one-dimensional: it has a variety of aspects – some, perhaps, contradictory – which contribute to its purposes. These purposes, to name a few, include defying institutionally standardized notions of what is or is not

appropriate in social and artistic discourse; re-humanizing communication among all people; and embracing the irrational, bizarre, disturbing, and yet entirely natural aspects of the world.

Out of fundamental necessity, societies since the time of Ancient Rome have relied on carnival and folk humor to cope with the confusion and monotony associated with day-to-day life, the sort of life Miss Lonelyhearts knows well. He encounters them every day at his job, when he reads the letters sent to him by the most downtrodden members of society. Saturated with groans of misery, despondency, and turmoil, the letters bring agony to the agony columnist himself. The epistolary pleas for salvation from despair force Miss Lonelyhearts to come face to face with the most grotesque aspects of the human condition. A sixteen-year-old girl born without a nose writes in for advice. She describes the emotional turmoil that comes from her anomaly:

I sit and look at myself all day and cry. I have a big hole in the middle of my face that scares people even myself so I cant blame the boys for not wanting to take me out. My mother loves me, but she cries terrible when she looks at me. (2)

Ultimately, the girl wants to know from Miss Lonelyhearts whether or not she should commit suicide. A fifteen-year-old boy writes in: his thirteen-year-old sister, deaf and dumb, has been raped on the roof of her house. The boy worries that his sister will become pregnant, and he fears that telling his mother will earn his sister a vicious beating since the girl has received abusive punishment for even as little a mistake as tearing her dress (3). A mother writes in: her psychotic husband has a history of physically and psychologically abusing her, has made threats against her life, has been in and out of jail, and has recently disappeared while leaving no provision of financial support for his children. Meanwhile, to support her children, she has rented out a room in her house to a boarder – but the man often arrives drunk and makes unwelcome sexual

advances on her. She wants Miss Lonelyhearts' advice about what to do (40-43). These are the people who turn to Miss Lonelyhearts for help: the unwanted, the violated, the humiliated, the undone. Once the columnist found the letters humorous; now they trouble and disgust him. Disturbed and heartbroken by the supplicants' plight and earnestness, Miss Lonelyhearts begins to take the requests seriously. He laughs at them no longer: he wants to help them, to comfort them, to save them, and he has come to believe that the only way to do so involves adopting a life of religious devotion.

With pious persistence, Miss Lonelyhearts struggles to believe that Christ is the true source of renewal and salvation. His attempts at spiritual vitality, however, often result in underwhelming flops. Miss Lonelyhearts has dislodged a figure of the crucified Christ from its cross and nailed it to his bedroom wall, in hopes that it will serve as a beacon to guide him towards humility and righteousness. Instead, it hangs lifeless, an object of decoration rather than a conduit of power (West 8). From childhood onward, Miss Lonelyhearts has sensed a mysterious and fascinating force whenever he utters the name of Christ – but as an adult he judges that this feeling more closely resembles hysteria than transcendence (8), and eventually Christ's name becomes meaningless and empty to him (39). When the novel begins, Miss Lonelyhearts' long-developing spiritual crisis has nearly reached its apex. His agony column, which he first considered a joke, has become an obsession of utmost gravity. The desperation and severity of the readers' suffering has transformed the column from a frivolous amusement to a source of unshakable grief. Compelled by a newfound compassion for his readers, Miss Lonelyhearts resolves to bring salvation and rest to the lowly. To do so, he figures, he must either lead his readers to Christ or, through a refinement of his grotesque impurities, become a Christ for them. While his mission appears simple, it is by no means easy to accomplish;

numerous antagonistic forces either deter or dishearten him from both earnest belief in a messiah and the righteous behavior expected from a follower of Christ.

Miss Lonelyhearts finds his main antagonist in Shrike, the embodiment of the vulgarity, faithlessness, and disdain for religion that Miss Lonelyhearts fights to resist. Shrike embraces the grotesque elements of existence, and in *Miss Lonelyhearts* he functions as grotesquery's spokesman. A perpetual thorn in Miss Lonelyhearts' side, Shrike often shows up to speak words of blasphemy and discouragement, and he savors his role. When he isn't profaning Christ (repeatedly referring to him as "the Miss Lonelyhearts of Miss Lonelyhearts," a mockery of Christ's Biblical title as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords), Shrike ridicules Miss Lonelyhearts for approaching the agony column with sincerity and compassion or drunkenly rambles about the most effective ways to escape life's miseries. Often Shrike suggests that Christ is, in fact, the only hope for spiritual solace, but he always does so with tongue-in-cheek. These mock-religious speeches disillusion Miss Lonelyhearts from the idea of Christ as the savior of humanity; they parody and patronize Christ, reducing him to a punch line. Early in the narrative, readers learn that "Christ was Shrike's particular joke" (3) and that this ongoing joke "made a sane view of this Christ business impossible" (8) for Miss Lonelyhearts. As ardently as Miss Lonelyhearts strives to believe in Christ as redeemer, so Shrike derides the agony columnist as a fanatical religious idiot.

While Miss Lonelyhearts seeks to exist in the realm of the sacred and spiritual, his adversary Shrike operates in the carnival realm. Shrike, parodist of all things religious, embodies the spirit of carnival and folk humor that Bakhtin discusses in his essay on the same topic. Carnival and folk humor, the progenitors of grotesque literature, create an alternative realm to the world governed by the institutions of Church and State. In carnival, irreligion usurps religion,

disorder usurps order, and the vulgar usurps the holy; sacred ceremonies are turned upside-down, and stately processions are inverted; people from all social levels cast off their ranks and unite in festive revelry. Folk humor not only shirks the regulatory solemnity of the Church, it also actively mocks it. So, too, does Shrike: he lives according to carnival virtue, as Miss Lonelyhearts attempts to live according to conventional sacred virtue. As a result, the two men become bitter opponents. Carnival rejects piety and replaces it with fleshly, ribald laughter, and whereas the sacred realm requires seriousness, quiet, and purity, the carnival realm values folk humor, clamor, and obscenity instead. These two realms stand in stark opposition to one another – the carnival and the sacred cannot occupy the same time and space, and no one can simultaneously inhabit both realms. Reason would have it that a person who lives according to carnival virtues should oppose one who follows (or attempts to follow) institutionalized order, and so it is with Shrike and Miss Lonelyhearts.

Shrike's mockery of Christ, ridicule of Miss Lonelyhearts' piety, and inclination for obscenity demonstrate the grotesquery that pervades the society rendered in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. This society seeks sex before it seeks salvation and revelry before it seeks redemption. In the novel's second chapter, "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Dead Pan," Shrike insists that Miss Lonelyhearts turn to the pursuit of physical pleasure in order to achieve satisfaction. "You're morbid, my friend, morbid. Forget the crucifixion, remember the Renaissance" (5), Shrike tells Miss Lonelyhearts in the oft-frequented speakeasy named Delehanty's. The editor expresses his admiration for the irreverence and misbehavior of the Renaissance period (especially in the context of sexuality), and he carries this admiration into his affair with the shapely Miss Farkis, whom Shrike praises for her "great intelligence" – which he uses as a code for Miss Farkis' "enormous breasts" (6). When Miss Lonelyhearts refuses to share in Shrike's enthusiasm for the

female anatomy, Shrike seizes the opportunity to tease the columnist about his effort at chastity. “Oh, so you don’t care for women, eh? J.C. is your only sweetheart, eh? Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, the Miss Lonelyhearts of Miss Lonelyhearts...” (6), says Shrike in his patent sarcastic deadpan. Later in the scene, Shrike offers a facetious defense of his own spirituality, calling himself a “great saint,” before musing on “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. Phoooh! And I call upon you to spit. (7-8)

In this monologue Shrike not only decries religion for its oppression of humanity, but also makes a concerted movement away from the sacred towards the sexual, fondling Miss Farkis through the duration of his speech. Shrike is an exemplary carnival participant: he despises religion, parodying it mercilessly; he preoccupies himself with sex and the human body; he is loud, irreverent, and crude. In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, he is the expression of humanity’s love of the low, and his incessant hounding of Miss Lonelyhearts consistently deflates the columnist’s efforts to model Christ. The opposition of Shrike against Miss Lonelyhearts is a metonymy for the contentious relationship between the obscene and the sacred in the world that West has rendered.

Yet Miss Lonelyhearts does not find an obstacle to spiritual purity in Shrike alone: he also encounters obscene desires and religious parody within himself. In his waking life, Miss Lonelyhearts behaves with average morality—but he experiences recurring dreams and visions rich with the vulgarity of carnival and folk humor. After the first scene with Shrike in Delehanty’s, Miss Lonelyhearts returns home, agitated and exasperated. That night he dreams of a rowdy procession, consisting of himself and two college buddies, in which they drunkenly lead a lamb to its slaughter:

They paraded the lamb through the market. Miss Lonelyhearts went first, carrying the knife, the others followed, Steve with the jug [of applejack] and Jud with the animal. As they marched, they sang an obscene version of “Mary Had a Little Lamb.”... Miss Lonelyhearts was elected priest, with Steve and Jud as his attendants. While they held the lamb, Miss Lonelyhearts crouched over it and began to chant.

“Christ, Christ, Jesus Christ. Christ, Christ, Jesus Christ.” (9-10)

This sacrilegious ceremony incarnates the essence of folk humor and carnival. Miss Lonelyhearts and his friends disgrace the Church by declaring themselves clergyman, they corrupt the innocence of a children’s song, and they profane the name of Christ with Miss Lonelyhearts’ blasphemous incantation – actions fit for any Bakhtinian carnival, in the sense described by Bakhtin. For someone like Miss Lonelyhearts, who on one level strives for piety and belief in Christ, this behavior is unacceptable, even if the actions occur in a dream world rather than in reality.

The presence of this latent grotesquery in his mind is enough to disconcert Miss Lonelyhearts, to whom order becomes an ever-growing obsession (10). Confined to his room on account of a debilitating physical illness (perhaps a manifestation of his spiritual woes), Miss Lonelyhearts contemplates the perpetual war that order and chaos wage against one another:

He sat in the window thinking. Man has a tropism for order. Keys in one pocket, change in another. Mandolins are tuned G D A E. The physical world has a tropism for disorder, entropy... Keys yearn to mix with change. Mandolins strive to get out of tune. Every order has within it the germ of destruction. All order is doomed, yet the battle is worthwhile. (30-31)

Miss Lonelyhearts then launches into a grotesque vision in which he first constructs a phallus out of old watches and rubber boots, and later uses pawnshop junk and flotsam and jetsam from the sea to form a massive cross (31). This scene reveals that the carnival forces of chaos, profanity, and vulgarity—the very forces that Miss Lonelyhearts desperately tries to beat back with piety and sincerity—dwell within Miss Lonelyhearts. As one part of him attempts to wrestle these sacrilegious energies into submission, another part of him embraces these energies. While order and entropy do battle in the world, the sacred and the carnival grotesque do battle within Miss Lonelyhearts.

As this war rages on, Miss Lonelyhearts experiences periodic eruptions into carnival behavior. Contrary to his intermittent desire for pious purity, he frequently commits acts of violence and sex. Having left Delehanty's after a drinking spree, Miss Lonelyhearts enters a public restroom and finds an old man, whom he verbally and physically assaults (16-18). He participates in a bizarre affair with Shrike's wife—an affair of which Shrike has full awareness and to which he gives ambivalent permission. In one scene, Miss Lonelyhearts has a sexual encounter with Mrs. Shrike in the Shrikes' apartment building; in the elevator en route to the Shrikes' floor, he strips her naked before she rushes into her flat. A moment later, Shrike, wearing no pants, peeks out from the door into the hallway (24). Later in the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts begins another scandalous dalliance, this time with Mrs. Doyle, a married woman sexually frustrated by her crippled husband. Mrs. Doyle exudes grotesquery, with "legs like Indian clubs, breasts like balloons and a brow like a pigeon" (27). Nevertheless, Miss Lonelyhearts, in keeping with carnival virtues, immerses himself in Mrs. Doyle's sea of flesh. In these ways, he gives into the overwhelming crush of carnival that envelops him. He continues his battle to become Christ-like, however, and by the end of the novel transcends the obscene

influence of carnival and folk humor – only to suffer an attack at the hands of Mr. Doyle, who shoots Miss Lonelyhearts in a botched attempt at misguided revenge. Thus the novel ends the same way it begins: with a flourish of grotesquery, this time manifest in an act of illogical and haphazard violence.

In my discussion of West's novel, I have already compared the existence depicted to a Bakhtinian carnival. If *Miss Lonelyhearts* the novel portrays a carnival society, Miss Lonelyhearts the character, then, can be read as someone experiencing the vertigo of a carnival that has spun out of control. We recall that one of Bakhtin's criteria for carnival involves temporariness: although it exerts enormous force in society, carnival is carefully bounded in terms of time. It does not go on indefinitely. In this light, we can view Miss Lonelyhearts' spiritual malaise as a side effect of a dysfunctional carnival, which, instead of receding to allow the restoration of social order, remains to breed cultural and personal chaos. Just as the ancient Romans and medieval Europeans did, Miss Lonelyhearts recognizes the danger that lies in an eternal carnival. An unchecked carnival produces detrimental results, as it transforms society into an entropic realm of violence, suffering, and absurdity. Miss Lonelyhearts perceives his world as a carnival that has gone on for too long, and he takes upon himself the task of extinguishing it: certainly the Shrikes of the world will not, and the suffering masses that read his column have not the capacity to do so. Envisioning himself as the potential savior of humanity, he endeavors to redeem society from the blasphemous havoc of an overgrown carnival. One might even say that Miss Lonelyhearts, in a way, sees himself as a stunt-double for Christ; he imagines that, by becoming a refuge for the heavy-laden and sacrificing himself for a suffering humanity, he can single-handedly conquer carnival – and in doing so, rescue his readers from the obscenity, violence, and absurdity that comes as part and parcel. It is this noble (but impossible) ambition

that compels Miss Lonelyhearts—not psychosis, egoism, or self-righteousness, as numerous critics have proposed.

To be sure, one cannot neglect the powerful influence of carnival ambivalence on an individual. Under this influence, even Miss Lonelyhearts' most pious spiritual aspirations become distorted by a relentless tendency toward carnival parody, and he finds the spirit of irreverence and disorder difficult to resist. Surrounded by a raging carnival, Miss Lonelyhearts occupies a dual role: he is both a ferocious opponent and a compulsory participant in the pageant of grotesquery. One could misconstrue Miss Lonelyhearts' consequent schizophrenic behavior as an indication of insanity, but we can more accurately describe it as an effect of carnival ambivalence on a highly sensitive, self-conflicted man.

Trapped in a carnival with no apparent end, Miss Lonelyhearts can identify with his readers: he is equally as desperate to be pried from the merciless clutches of a grotesque existence. Even when, near the end of the novel, he becomes impervious to the temptations of carnival, he cannot exclude himself from its tendency towards violence and disorder: Mr. Doyle, driven to his wits' end by the grotesqueries of existence, becomes an agent of jumbled violence and shoots the would-be priest. The berserk carnival West has rendered culminates in destruction—contrary to the Bakhtinian carnival, which leads to degradation, a force that lowers and renews. In the novel's final scene, one can read West's vision of the world as a dysfunctional carnival: one that ends not in renewal, but in a brutal tumble down a flight of stairs. *Miss Lonelyhearts* depicts society as confusing and confused, and it shows the people who inhabit it as they cling in desperation to whatever they believe might keep them afloat while tumultuous waters toss them to and fro. This is existence as *Miss Lonelyhearts* captures it: a grotesque place

rife with ambivalent forces—forces obscene and pious, sexual and chaste—a place in which opposing realms of order and disorder, sanctity and blasphemy, collide.

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