

## The Parody of the Sacred in Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*

Each of Nathanael West's four novels is as surrealistic as a painting by Bosch. As a matter of fact, the main character in *The Day of the Locust* is a painter who tries to capture on canvas his vision of the world gone mad. The scene is full of disorder and depravity. It is his creator's vision as well. West mocked the American dreams: the bardic in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, the Horatio Alger dream of *A Cool Million*, the Hollywood dream in *The Day of the Locust* and, in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the Christ dream. The hero of *Miss Lonelyhearts* is left deliberately nameless. He is the columnist who answers the lonelyhearts' letters, comes to sympathize with the misery reflected in the letters, and seeks, futilely, for a personal solution to the agony in the Christ dream. Literary critics have analyzed the unidealized existence in the novel, with its juxtapositions and distortions, and have come to conclusions as varied as "blasphemy" and "dark mysticism." The novel is better understood as a paradigm for irony, the pattern of which relies on a parody of romance. Therefore, in parodying the romantic world, irony proposes "a world of repulsiveness and idiocy."<sup>2</sup>

Irony parodies all romantic forms. There is a quest in romance; in irony the hero has no objectives. There is a wish in romance; in irony the wish is continually undercut by reality. There is a lurking villain in romance, and he is defeated at the end. In irony the displaced villain acts openly because his domination is never in doubt. There is an epiphany in romance. At the end of *Miss Lonelyhearts* there is a mock epiphany. The unnamed hero thinks he has had an epiphany, but it was an hallucination induced by fever. He also acts on his vision. He believes that he hears a call for help, but the call is really a grunt from the cuckold Doyle who has come to kill Lonelyhearts. The columnist embraces Doyle, and Doyle shoots Lonelyhearts.<sup>3</sup>

Lonelyhearts has compassion for the sufferers who write the letters. He has no hope that he will alleviate the despair of the letter writers, but his compassion for them remains constant. He undergoes the inverse way of the pilgrim in that his burden of compassion becomes more ponderous the more he tries to help. To the end, however, he remains idealistic, adventurous, even visionary.

To compound the ambiguity there is the insertion of the author into the irony. According to Northrop Frye the author of irony relinquishes his right to objectivity. He is a participant in the work. He can be accused of obscenity, libel, or confusion, if his irony reflects such characteristics because authorial distance is diminished in irony. *Miss Lonelyhearts* reflects West's confusion over the Christ dream, the subject of his irony. The critic Schulz remarked that West's imagination had "an attraction for a Christ dream that it could not believe in,"<sup>4</sup> just as Miss Lonelyhearts has an attraction for that dream but never arrives at belief. The unnamed Miss Lonelyhearts initiates the process of belief, but his efforts are undercut by cynicism, the depravity of the world, and the inaccessibility of the deity. The object of this study is to examine three aspects of the parody in *Miss Lonelyhearts* in order to clarify West's ironic vision.

The object of attack in *Miss Lonelyhearts* is the Christ dream. West parodies central religious patterns: the rite, the search for the deity through symbols, and the demonic figure.

In an ironic turnabout, West combines the parody of the religious rite with Lonelyhearts' attempt to avoid his own role as scapegoat. Lonelyhearts offers a lamb as sacrifice for himself. The incident occurs in the third chapter.

In solemn rituals there are three stages: a reading from the holy book, a procession with the offerings, and a sacrifice which takes place at the holy place.<sup>5</sup> In the novel the first stage, the reading, is done while Lonelyhearts is conscious. The rest of the liturgy occurs in his dream. Lonelyhearts reads from the sacred book, here *The Brothers Karamazov*, on the subject of agape. He then comments on the reading, and the mockery begins. He recalls Shrike's "sane view" which argues that the Christ business is not serious. The mockery descends to blasphemy when Lonelyhearts admits that the uttering of the sacred name excites him sexually. He has come to the end of the mockery, he believes, since he does not believe in the existence of a god; the figure of Christ on his wall is only "calmly decorative."

He drifts into sleep where his dream has three levels. On the first level Lonelyhearts sees himself as a magician. Magic has an important place in ritual since both the magician and the priest are attempting to mitigate the laws of nature. The magician, according to Hastings,<sup>6</sup> is an initiate in the priesthood. In his dream Lonelyhearts appears on stage commanding doorknobs—which were earlier identified with the world—to bleed, flower, even speak. But the dream, which begins as wish-fulfillment, turns to nightmare. Before it does Lonelyhearts utters an offertory incantation which is a profanation of the prayer of petition. In the next level of dream Lonelyhearts changes from magician to priest. He has two attendants, both drunk, who catch a lamb for the sacrifice. One of the attendants carries the lamb while the other carries a bottle of liquor; all process through a town square. As they parade they sing an obscene version of "Mary had a little lamb." They leave the town for a meadow where the sacrifice will take place.

The third level of dream corresponds to the rite of sacrifice, which is described in *Leviticus I*: the lamb should be unblemished, there should be a laying on of hands, and the slaughter must be done with a knife while the lamb is alive. Finally, the blood should be splashed on the altar of sacrifice. Lonelyhearts builds a stone altar and decorates it with daisies and buttercups. He places the lamb on the stone and utters the sacred name, combining the ancient liturgy with the Christian God. It is here, in the holy of holies, that the rite goes wrong. He grazes the lamb with the blow, the knife breaks, and the three men tear at the animal's throat. It is only wounded and crawls off into the underbrush. As if to reflect the disapproval of a god unknown, a strange light filters across the rock of the altar and the three devotees intuit "some new violence." They run in fear down the hill and fall into the tall grass. Later Lonelyhearts returns to the meadow, finds the lamb in the underbrush, crushes its head, and leaves the carcass for the flies.

The notions of homage, prayer, communion, which are essential to the rite of sacrifice are all feigned, as if the worshippers hoped to discover some deity who would be the object of their devotion, but they found none. Lonelyhearts sought to appease a god in order to avoid further violence, but his search is futile.

It is precipitous to say that there is no deity present in this irony. He may be there, but He is so remote that He is inaccessible. The imagery of the celestial world in *Miss Lonelyhearts* is a paradigm of Frye's archetypal demonic imagery,<sup>7</sup> the imagery of the undesirable, existential, hell. The sky looks "as if

it had been rubbed with a solid eraser. It held no angel, flaming crosses, olive bearing doves, wheels within wheels" (p. 71). Lonelyhearts looks up for some sign of divine solace, but sees only a newspaper struggling in the wind.

The other levels of archetypal imagery confirm the demonic vision. The vegetable world is the sinister forest to which Betty entices Lonelyhearts in order to revive him. She is a romantic figure and her answers are romantic. For Lonelyhearts the forest has a "funeral hush" and he thinks of death when he is there. Betty believes in the curative power of nature and in the benevolence of animals. Lonelyhearts encounters animals which are monsters: vultures, shrikes, snakes, which uncoil in his head (p. 76). Even the lamb—the embodiment of the romantic animal—which Lonelyhearts sacrifices, is described as "stiff legged, all head" (p. 77). The human world is no less desirable. The tyrant leader, Shrike, has as his object the ridiculing of any ideal.

Archetypal imagery helps to define the hellish world of *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Its terrain is one of "inscrutable fate or external necessity." When Lonelyhearts examines the sky "for a clue to his own exhaustion" (p. 100), there is no clue. The soiled sky is only a further proof of his isolation and the indifference, or absence, of the deity. Lonelyhearts would like to be devout, but there is no object for his devotion; religion, he has been told by Shrike, is not serious.

In his portrayal of Shrike West has drawn an ironic displacement of the romantic, tricky, slave. In romance this figure accompanies the hero on the quest and cautions him about reality. In tragedy he is displaced into the architect of the tragedy. His place in romance is incidental since he represents practical reality; in tragedy his place is more central. Since irony is a descent into reality, the figure immersed in reality has a dominant place. His romantic cautions become displaced into cynicism, his tricks into hysterical laughter which results from sardonic jokes. Miss Lonelyhearts is the butt of Shrike's jokes about religion. Like the butcherbird for whom he is named, Shrike impales his prey on the verbal thorns and then shrieks. The imagery surrounding Shrike is closely related to the god Pan because Pan is the source for this mythic figure.

Pan was the pagan god of revelry and fertility. At the beginning of the Christian dispensation it was said that there was lamentation in the pagan world because Christ transformed Pan into the devil, tail, horns, and friskiness. In the second chapter of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, "Miss Lonelyhearts and the dead pan," Shrike counsels Lonelyhearts to "forget the crucifixion, remember the renaissance," for the renaissance was a time of revelry and "illegitimate children" (p. 71). While saying this, Shrike's face is blank: dead. With all its revelry, the renaissance did little to revive Pan because he had become, by that time, the devil on one side and the horned cuckold on the other. The parallel applies since Shrike is not only the cuckold but he forces his wife to become excited by other men so that he might enjoy her excitement; his wife Mary "has been fighting to remain a virgin" (p. 92), although her husband has never touched her. Not only has Pan's fertile power become impotent, but his revelry is vicarious.

In Frye's system the sixth stage of irony presents life in terms of unrelieved bondage. It is usually a living nightmare, but in *Miss Lonelyhearts* the vision is Lonelyhearts' fever. On the surface of the fever there are symbols of a religious conversion, but the truth is that it has all been a hoax. Lonelyhearts believes that he has had a religious experience and insists that he must share his experience. When Doyle appears, Lonelyhearts sees a way to share his conversion.

He may even believe that he can cure the cripple, since he hears Doyle's warning as a cry for help. Doyle shoots Lonelyhearts and the two tumble down the stairs. Lonelyhearts has reached the goal that was never there. This is the center of the hellish vision, but on the other side of irony, satire begins. It is not satire of the militant form, but a satire of the irony which we have just read. It is the satire which whispers at the back of the reader's mind that, in spite of all the evidence, perhaps, just perhaps, Lonelyhearts was right all along, and therein lies the reason for humor.

Robert M. Hanlon, S.J.  
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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*The Complete Works of Nathanael West* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957). Subsequent references to this book will be incorporated into the text.

<sup>2</sup>Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, (Princeton: University Press, 1957), p. 239.

<sup>3</sup>Victor Comerchero has forcibly defended Stanley Edgar Hyman's thesis that the embrace is homosexual, although the argument goes beyond the text. See Victor Comerchero, *Nathanael West: The Ironic Prophet* (Syracuse: University Press, 1964), pp. 99-100.

<sup>4</sup>Max Schulz, *Radical Sophistication: Studies in Contemporary Jewish-American Novelists* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969), p. 44.

<sup>5</sup>See James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), pp. 651-68.

<sup>6</sup>*Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1926), XI: "Sacrifice."

<sup>7</sup>Frye, pp. 147-50.