Miss Lonelyhearts Short Guide

Miss Lonelyhearts by Nathanael West

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Characters

West wrote that Miss Lonelyhearts is like a comic book, with each chapter a square in which many things are happening at once. Indeed, the characters are portrayed with a cartoonist's spareness of traits. Yet in face of the novel's central issue of suffering and coping with it, each character can be seen to have a focus of suffering and a successful or unsuccessful method of staving it off. Also, each character affects Miss Lonelyhearts' crisis and quest for a universal solution, as well as representing part of the Depression world that West observed, and relating to figures in literary history. As these multiple functions derive from often sparse detail, the characters — even when unrealistic as in Shrike with his "triangular face like a hatchet" — prove to be comic but complex figures in the tragedy.

Miss Lonelyhearts, himself with no given name, at first accepting his column as a joke, then obsessed with the correspondents' suffering, feels pained by every falsity that touches them (and himself) in the spiritual wasteland of the Depression. But whatever he tries to do, Shrike ("butcher bird," actually a part of Miss L in West's early drafts) insists that nothing is really true. Although this opinion keeps Shrike's life full of pains, the pain proves him consistently right and therefore most right.

Similarly, each character, although pained, will not give up his belief. And the suffering expressed in the anonymous, archetypal letters from "Disillusioned with Tubercular Husband" and the rest remain real in face of Shrike's mock prayers and the incomplete lifestrategies of Miss Lonelyhearts' contacts.

Social Concerns

West's primary focus was the spiritual suffering of the Depression, the people's despair and purposelessness, and the culture's inability to relieve the pain. W. H. Auden wrote of "West's disease." The victims have inner lives of wishes and daydreams but no outer reference to connect them to — no way to measure progress or test discipline, no way to work toward asserting themselves; thus their weakness worsens.

Typically, Depression people escaped into movies, historical novels, dance marathons, and jigsaw puzzles, without facing their disillusionment with America's promise. West's characters, beyond this escapism, have no homes, no sense of community, no link with the past, no love beyond sexuality, and no confirming external references in their lives. And West's message that even "the Christ dream" will not solve the problems, although pessimistic, is undeniable in its own terms.

The situation and the disease, being circular, admit of no cure but apocalypse — a violent outburst that will kill the cycle. Apparently, there needs to be not merely an opiate, but some form of revolution to cure the suffering. In the absence of a cure, West's pained humor shows that the illusions used to cope — Miss Lonelyhearts' hysteria; Betty's natural blind innocence; Fay Doyle's elephantine sexuality; the cynicism of Shrike, Miss Lonelyhearts' boss; the letter-writers' pathetic pleas, and Pete Doyle's sexual morality — remain inevitable.

The male advice columnist Miss Lonelyhearts, as a "priest of our times," is in the center of this dilemma between the necessity of illusions and their falseness. His religious experience is based on William James's Varieties of Religious Experience and Starbuck's Psychology of Religion; as West noted, "Chapt. 1 — maladjustment, Chapt. 3 — the need for taking symbols literally . . . Chapt. 4 — deadness and disorder, Chapt. 5 — self-torture by conscious sinning." Miss Lonelyhearts re-enacts an ancient aspiration amid the pains of the twentieth century.

Techniques

Called a "moral satire" and a "moral detective story," the book rearranges a good many techniques to create its own vision. The effaced narrator fills out the barren style with grotesque and surrealistic imagery and jokes that undermine what a reader takes for granted. In addition, as West said, "Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events. Violent acts are left almost bald." This distortion of common expectation tends also to cast doubt on the novel's world even while individual bits of it are implacably vivid — a paradox which mirrors Miss Lonelyhearts' confusion. Psychology used like myths rather than as explanation undermines preconceptions about characters' thoughts and motives; the characters, thinned of cliche, consist almost entirely of insights. So, too, comic wit, joking, and irony, especially Shrike's, are used to deny comfort, not — as is normally expected — to reinforce it. In a sort of parody of place, Miss Lonelyhearts's church becomes a speakeasy and a "comfort station" in the park. Tortured bits of religion appear throughout — sacrificing a lamb, eating crackers, Shrike as Grand Inquisitor, Miss Lonelyhearts as Savior.

At times, a metaphor can control a whole passage, bypassing ordinary reassuring reference points. The terse colloquial style in which these complexities are presented defies the reader's disbelief: Any falsity in such ordinary dress must be obvious and easily understood. The book exhibits a perfectly executed ambiguity. As a result of all this, the reader comes to share the book's tone of desperate frustration. By using these techniques, West wrote a "lyric novel" expressing a single mood in every feature.

Themes

Many themes help define this spiritual problem as it appears in the Depression. From suffering come false visions and numb despair. The narrow innocence of Betty, Miss Lonelyhearts's girlfriend, brings a failed return to Eden on the farm. Shrike's comic cynicism, in denying all escape from suffering, fails absolutely to help. Miss Lonelyhearts's vision of religious order fails to communicate to his correspondents because, due to Shrike's omnipresent rhetoric, among other things, the language has lost the power to tell the truth. As Shrike's words emphasize, both nature and Christ fail to bring the moral order needed to deal with the people's problems. Only apocalypse promises to make a big enough change to heal this wound.

In the face of these moral questions without answers, Miss Lonelyhearts oversimplifies his mission. Chapter by chapter, he moves from compulsions to their opposites, from ascetic Christianity to sensual paganism, as simplistic visions of saving his people are distracted by emotionalism, sexuality, and violence. At the end, the real world remains disordered, unknown, undefined, unconquered, and man (Miss Lonelyhearts) a mortal threat to himself.

Adaptations

Although West did not work on it in Hollywood, Miss Lonelyhearts was eventually adapted into a B motion picture, Advice to the Lovelorn (20th Century Pictures, 1933), with little resemblance to the book. The movie It Could Happen to You (Republic Productions, 1937) is a similarly distant B adaptation, combining A Cool Million with Sinclair Lewis's It Can't Happen Here. The Day of the Locust (Paramount, 1975) was a well-received big-budget movie earning several Oscar nominations.

Literary Precedents

West's works follow in the tradition of the most famous deadly serious satirist, Jonathan Swift, who wrote, besides Gulliver's Travels, "A Modest Proposal" (1729) for improving the British treatment of the Irish by having them raise the Irish children for meat.

Swift follows the tradition identified with the Latin satirist, Juvenal.

Miss Lonelyhearts, as a holy fool, is also represented in Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov (1879-1880), A Raw Youth (1875), The Idiot (1868), and Crime and Punishment (1866); in Voltaire's Candide (1759); and in Isaac Bashevis Singer's short story "Gimpel the Fool" (1957).

Franz Kafka gives a similar intense, unnatural, disordered, violent effect using similar incredible-but-convincing imagery and a similarly deadly-serious humor. Dashiell Hammett, e.g., in The Maltese Falcon (1930), is noted for his similarly harsh stylization.

The barren world of West's books resembles that in T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land (1922). West's use of images is like that of the Imagists, including Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams. A possible model for Homer's hands in The Day of the Locust (1939) is Wing Biddlebaum of the short story "Hands" in Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio (1919).

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