



# Contextualising Dream and Disintegration of Human in Nathanael West's Miss Lonelyhearts

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**Abstract-** This essay addresses different themes which have the capacity to cause both men and women to suffer from a variety of ailments in Nathanael West's Miss Lonelyhearts. A young newspaperman who writes a lonelyhearts column is the subject of the story. The anonymous reporter's obsession is the inability to ease the readers' pain when they come to him for guidance. Without the ethereal cloak of art, culture, or religion, the hero adopts a harsh, pragmatic, and mocking view of the world. His death is monstrously ironic. The incident reveals his self-deception, shattering his dream. A dead world that cannot be brought to life is evoked by the novel's recurring theme of death. Based on his portrayal of the characters, West should not be considered a misogynist because he understands and forgives the people in the novel. They are all a part of the human misery that the West deeply empathises with.

**Keywords-** Humanity, Pain, Society, Victim, Dream.

## I. Introduction

Nathanael West is among the most important authors of American literature from the early 20th century. The American Dream and its breakdown are depicted in his novels in a nuanced and captivating way. Each of his present-day dreams resulted in anguish. In his universe, everyone has dreams and goes through periods of disillusionment and disintegration. His novels are devoid of hope. West's attitude towards women and all-American society can be discovered by a close examination of the characters in his novels. He sees women as victims of their own culture, just like he sees all Americans. He uses satire to convey these sentiments about humanity, but it is important to note that he does not criticise the characters directly; rather, he satirises society the people react to it.

West's second and most critically acclaimed novel, Miss Lonelyhearts, tells the short, brutal, and surrealist tale of an advice columnist in 1930s New York who suffers from spiritual distress and mental instability because of his own correspondents' suffering. The newspaperman protagonist, who is only known as "Miss Lonelyhearts," is also subjected to cruel taunts from his editor, Shrike, who plays a major role in the novel and gives some of its most powerful monologues.

There is no question that the names of these key individuals have allegorical meaning. As is typical in fable and metaphor, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, which is populated by characters with names like "Old Honest," "Mrs. It is possible that West was type-naming his primary characters with phrases like "Giant Slay-Good" and "Know-Nothing." "Shrike" is a fitting name for a demonic jester because it sounds like the "shriek" of a predatory bird. A person who is all too conscious of the depressing and lonely situation of suffering people in the world is referred to as "Miss Lonelyhearts," a name that can be taken just as literally as that of Bunyan's characters. It is possible



that “hearts” is a synecdoche for people, highlighting the specific organ that the protagonist focusses on when reflecting on the state of humanity and is linked to love and empathy.

Since *Miss Lonelyhearts* was published in 1933, reviewers have frequently questioned whether the novel presents a positive outlook on the world or if it is, as it more clearly appears to be, merely a profound statement of despair. The first humanist wave of Western critics, who analysed it as a Universalist investigation of human suffering and the issue of evil, addressed variations of this topic during the 1960s and 1980s. It is essentially a heartbroken lament about a society that has become corrupted. More recent critics claim that although Western art is primarily negative, it frequently possesses expressive vitality as an avant-garde satire of the excesses of mass culture. In any case, the main purpose of West’s work is seen as crucial.

At the New York Post-Dispatch, a man who goes by his feminine moniker, Miss Lonelyhearts, is seated at his desk. As the newspaper’s agony columnist, he reads and replies to letters that contain sincere appeals from the desperate, twisted, and mistreated members of humanity. In these letters, column readers ask for Miss Lonelyhearts’ assistance, as well as her counsel and consolation. His editor and boss, Shrike, wrote a humorous prayer on his desk, mocking Miss Lonelyhearts. Written on a piece of cardboard and dedicated to her, it portrays the agony columnist as a contemporary Messiah for the pathetic. Thus opens West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts*, a macabre episodic about a man’s quest to live in accordance with the spirit and resist the temptations and abominations of the flesh.

The protagonist does not accept his grotesque tendencies; rather, he is always at battle with them. Miss Lonelyhearts’ frequent obscene visions and sporadic excursions into violence or sexual misbehaviour indicate to the grotesque state of his existence. Miss Lonelyhearts hopes that his advice column will turn into a priestly attempt to wipe away humanity’s sins and mend the damaged. However, he lives in a grotesque world that is a constant obstacle to his messianic mission. This world is characterised by ferocious sexual impulses, violent outbursts, disorder that will not go away, disorderly crowds, an obsession with the female anatomy, and vulgar graffiti on bathroom walls.

Because both male and female characters in *Miss Lonelyhearts* are attempting to discover their sexual and emotional identities, it is easy to observe how West views both sexes in this novel. The fact that the characters are ignorant of the disarray in their world just makes the problem worse. The characters live in an incomprehensible environment. They are desperately seeking sanity and order, but they have no idea why. Only Miss Lonelyhearts understands how dismal his circumstances are, and this realisation ultimately drives him insane. He thinks about the solutions to life that the other characters provide, and he concludes that none of them are workable.

The characters create triads and couples as well as sets of combinations with one another in their quest for identity and order. The Miss Lonelyhearts/Mary/Shrike triangle is reversed in the Miss Lonelyhearts/Fay/Doyle triad. Mary is as cold as Mrs. Doyle is hostile, and Shrike is as slick as Doyle is defenceless. The opposing forces in the story are neatly and nearly diagrammatically defined by the two triads. West is so



further expressing his topic of despair and meaninglessness in life by using the two triads, each of which negates the power of the other. These characters create groups that are unable to save them in their fruitless attempts at emotional survival; they are helpless since their actions are counterproductive. Together, these characters are not as strong as they are alone.

The partners cancel each other out, even in one-on-one partnerships. Even while at least one partner is trying to revive the relationship in certain cases, the main partnerships—Miss Lonelyhearts/Betty, Miss Lonelyhearts/Fay, Fay/Doyle, Miss Lonelyhearts/Mary, and Mary/Shrike - are all dead. However, most of the time, one spouse is taking advantage of the other for personal gain. Miss Lonelyhearts is highly guilty of taking advantage of the ladies he interacts with, even though he is frequently unable to respond sexually. For his fleeting pleasure and muscle relaxation, a lady is a “thing.” She is not a real person. Betty is viewed by Miss Lonelyhearts as a calm, blank Buddha.

Mary is a sexual object to him, even though she irritates him. However, it should be noted that Mary is also guilty of exploitation because she exploits Miss Lonelyhearts as a sexual object. Then, to satisfy himself, Shrike turns to Mary and Miss Lonelyhearts. Miss Lonelyhearts is another sexual outlet for Fay Doyle. Her husband is unable to give her the affection she associates with sex or the sexual fulfilment she seeks. even though the characters exhibit a great degree of violence and greed. West understands their predicament. Despite being perceived almost exclusively as suffering, the obsessive topic of Miss Lonelyhearts is human sorrow and suffering. The letters that Miss Lonelyhearts receives make this anguish very evident.

The reader’s first impression of Miss Lonelyhearts links her to his correspondence. He first realises the futility of the human state of sorrow and suffering because of the steady stream of letters, the most of which are from women. West’s opinion towards the women who write the letters can be revealed by closely examining the letters that Miss Lonelyhearts receives. These women all appear to be victims of forces beyond their comprehension or control. Sick-of-it-all is pregnant once more, but due to her husband’s religious beliefs and her Catholic faith, she is unable to undergo an abortion. Naturally, Miss Lonelyhearts has no response for her; there is not one. Her ignorance, her faith, and her husband’s control over her have put her in an intolerable predicament.

The character Miss Lonelyhearts can be interpreted as someone who is experiencing the dizziness of a funfair that has gone awry if the story depicts a funfair culture. Accordingly, we might see Miss Lonelyhearts’ spiritual ill-health as a byproduct of a dysfunctional funfair that continues to foster personal and societal instability rather than fading away to allow for the restoration of social order.

Miss Lonelyhearts understands the peril of an endless funfair, just as the ancient Romans and mediaeval Europeans did. An unregulated funfair has negative effects since it turns society into a violent, painful, and ridiculous place. When Miss Lonelyhearts sees his world as a funfair that has lasted too long, he decides to put an end to it. The Shrikes of the world will not, and the suffering masses who read his column are not capable of doing so. He tries to save society from the blasphemous



chaos of an overgrown funfair because he sees himself as the possible saviour of humanity.

One could even argue that Miss Lonelyhearts views himself as a stunt double for Christ; he believes that by taking in the burdened and giving his life for a suffering humanity, he can defeat carnival on his own and save his readers from the violence, profanity, and ridiculousness that are inevitable. Miss Lonelyhearts is driven by this admirable (but unachievable) goal rather than by insanity, egoism, or self-righteousness, as many critics have suggested.

It is undeniable that funfair ambivalence has a significant impact on a person. Even Miss Lonelyhearts' most sincere spiritual goals are warped by this influence's unrelenting propensity for funfair satire, and he finds it hard to resist the irreverence and chaos. During a wild funfair, Miss Lonelyhearts plays two roles: he is a fierce rival and a forced competitor in the grotesque pageant. It is more realistic to define Miss Lonelyhearts' schizophrenic behaviour as the result of carnival ambivalence on a very sensitive, self-conflicted guy, rather than misinterpreting it as a sign of insanity.

It is true that Fay is rude and violent. She has more authority than either man, and she uses it when Miss Lonelyhearts and Doyle visit their flat. West did not denounce her behaviour. After hearing her pathetic tale, it does not seem possible that he can be too critical of her actions. West has offered a compassionate explanation for Fay's behaviour rather than passing judgement. It is only natural for Fay to take the initiative whenever she can after being duped by a man and left helpless by a critical society. She must use her power over anyone she can because she has little control over her own life. Although Fay's descriptions suggest that she is strong, she ultimately lacks the ability to govern her own life.

Mary Shrike is another character who looks to Miss Lonelyhearts for fulfilment. This woman is cold and uses sex as a weapon. Although she never gives him sexual gratification, she gives Miss Lonelyhearts the impression that she can. Her attempt to control Miss Lonelyhearts' emotions includes the game she plays with her medal. Mary both employs and is the victim of manipulation. She acknowledges to Miss Lonelyhearts that Shrike only lets her date other guys because he knows they will stimulate her enough for him to take advantage of her. However, Mary is not a very passive or weak person.

Mary confides in Miss Lonelyhearts, much like other female characters do. "I've had a tough time from the beginning," she tells him as she starts her story. "I witnessed my mother's death when I was a child" (94). The discomfort from her breast cancer was excruciating. Leaning over a table, she passed away. He does not even try to assist, and Miss Lonelyhearts is powerless to do so. He asks her to sleep with him in response to her statement over the death of her mother. Miss Lonelyhearts stops listening to her whenever she attempts to tell him about her mother or how her father mistreated her. Mary manipulates reality to endure the realities of her life.

Mary is looking for something to dream about because of a conflict between her body and mind. She ends up in a place like El Gaucho because she wants to be beautiful.



People go to El Gaucho, a land of artificiality, in search of happiness. Regarding El Gaucho, Mary remarks, “I enjoy this location. I realise it’s a little phoney, but it’s gay, and I really want to be gay” (94).

Mary finds no way to change even though she knows that the only place she can be happy is in the world of artificiality. Entangled by a miserable childhood, controlled by sexual issues, and burdened by a husband who manipulates her and goes out with other women, Mary is reduced to a hollow creature who seeks happiness with no chance of ever finding it. by displaying Mary’s history and current circumstances.

West shows that he has empathy for her character. Betty wants to offer him her answer rather than asking Miss Lonelyhearts for it, in contrast to her female counterparts in Miss Lonelyhearts. Betty views life with a passion for order, simplicity, and nature to make sense of it. Betty comes the closest to finding happiness and joy out of all the characters. Betty’s physical smoothness reflects her mental serenity, which she achieves by organising her universe.

The issue with Betty’s approach to life is that it just is not feasible. Because it ignores the misery that exists in the real world, her “order” is not genuine. The death of Miss Lonelyheart is partially Betty’s fault. Betty’s involvement is significant since, in her limited universal view, violence and suffering would be excluded. Betty’s disjointed perspective is unsustainable and untrue.

Betty relies on role-playing in her efforts to live in a chaotic world. Because of this, she is unable to assist Miss Lonelyhearts when he most needs it. He is at the height of his craziness when he leaves Shrike’s flat, and Betty is forced to play a ludicrous game of role-playing and cue-following with him. Betty travels to get a strawberry drink with Miss Lonelyhearts while posing as a “little girl in a party dress” (99). They arrange their marriage after she informs him that she is expecting a child.

Based on his portrayal of the characters in Miss Lonelyhearts, West should not be considered a misogynist because he understands and forgives all the characters, male and female. They are all a part of the human misery that the West deeply empathises with. The main female characters in the novel, Betty, Fay Doyle, and Mary Shrike, are undoubtedly not perfect. Fay uses Miss Lonelyhearts for her own sexual gratification and treats her disabled husband cruelly; Mary Shrike uses both Miss Lonelyhearts and her husband to feed her faltering ego; and Betty’s completely simplistic perspective of life prevents her from understanding Miss Lonelyhearts’ predicament and frustration. The way these characters are portrayed is either a result of how society has seen them or of Miss Lonelyhearts’ homosexual interpretation of them. Considering these two options, Miss Lonelyhearts’ homosexuality becomes a crucial issue in relation to West’s treatment of his characters in the novel.

When one understands that West is not just portraying characters who are looking for purpose in a harsh setting, but also implying that there are no completely satisfactory solutions to be found, the tone of the satire and parody shifts to one of sadness. Miss Lonelyhearts is a perfect example of West’s hopelessness and pessimism. In the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts is given several options, but none of them seem to be what he needs.



Although Miss Lonelyhearts is destroyed when he realises that all his options are inadequate, West seems to be suggesting that reality - despite its horror - is better than the blank thoughts of those people who lack it. whichever levels of consciousness the different characters have reached.

West's empathy for them never seems to fade. His hopelessness compels West to overlook his characters' transgressions since they are unable to take responsibility for their failures and are unable to come up with any morally acceptable substitutes for their actions. West uses satire to convey these sentiments about humanity, but it is important to note that he does not criticise the characters directly; rather, he satirises society by the way the individuals react to it.

The spiritual principles that formerly gave humanity hope are worthless in Miss Lonelyhearts. People in American society are pursuing the wrong ideals because of the American Dream; they are more focused on monetary success than on spiritual fulfilment. West has a generally gloomy and negative outlook; he observes his characters struggling in a chaotic and pointless world, but he is helpless to provide them with comfort or hope. As he makes clear in Miss Lonelyhearts, West rejects the idea that his characters would be rewarded in heaven when they pass away. His characters are constantly defeated in their attempts to bring order to their environment; they live in a civilisation that is artificial, strong, and unfathomable. West is unwilling to criticise his characters' actions because he recognises their dismal situation; if their actions are unreasonable, it is because they live in an irrational world.

The main character of Miss Lonelyhearts is discovered to be looking for the sword that would enable him to penetrate through to the solution to the readers' misery in the newspaper column. The newspaper columnist's deteriorating reality is only an indication of human degradation. The protagonist is looking for a corporeal reality once more. Miss Lonelyhearts is deeply troubled by the letters he receives from his readers and wants to design a program for them that would allow them to find salvation. The newspaperman is referred to as America's priest of the twentieth century. He is surrounded by the bleak landscape of America. Sexual violence is an expression of the call to live. To combat the misery of life, man develops dreams. The commercialisation of dreams, however, has put their influence over humanity in jeopardy.

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