

## A Critique of Masculinity in *Miss Lonelyhearts*

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Nathanael West (1903–40) was unlike other American writers of 1930s because he did not pay attention to the typical style of the proletarian novel (which was favored in this era) and preferred the European avant-garde movements of Surrealism and Dada. He presents a tragicomedy of a newspaper columnist who has a “Christ-complex” (a desire to become Christ) in his novel *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), which is considered to be one of his masterpieces, prefiguring such black humor writers in 1960s as Kurt Vonnegut and John Hawkes.

In recent years, some scholars, such as Thomas Strychacz, Rita Barnard, and Jonathan Veitch, have examined the relationship between West’s work and mass culture. Strychacz views “West’s modernism [a ‘High Art’ tendency] in *Miss Lonelyhearts* in relation to the comic-strip form that he claimed structured the novel” (9), and Barnard treats “West’s critique of mass culture [which has a clichéd style or a hackneyed plot line] as inseparable from a critique of consumer society,” which means “what we buy: of our clothing and interior design” (140). Veitch investigates three related fields of interest through West: “the problem of representation” at the center of thirties concerns, “the possibilities and limitations of Dada and Surrealism as modes of social criticism,” and “the complicated presence of mass culture in America during the 1930s” (xvi–xix). They argue that West’s novels critique a society pervaded by mass culture and commodity fetishism. Such readings helpfully located West’s work in its historical context (1930s America).

Yet these studies do not foreground West's theme of gender. I argue that West's novel *Miss Lonelyhearts* does criticize male authority as the title shows (this title refers to an unnamed male newspaper columnist). As Veitch argues, West, who was influenced by Dada and Surrealism, undertakes "a critique of nothing less than the grand tradition of Western culture" in his first novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931), and the critique leads to "an operation that will dispense with everything from Plato to Picasso" (27). The influence of Surrealism can be seen in the opening scene of the novel in which Balso Snell, the protagonist, enters a Trojan horse through its anus. Through such radical jokes (which are mostly dirty jokes), this novel criticizes many aspects of culture, including the genteel tradition, Christianity, and metaphysics. In this sense, as Surrealism rebels against rationalism, West rebels against rational things. Seemingly, West's second novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, is less strange than his first surrealist novel in which there are a lot of loosely related episodes. *Miss Lonelyhearts* has a coherent plot and characters that have mental suffering, as well as social criticism, continuing in the Dadaistic spirit of his first novel. If West frequently considers the problem of "the legitimation of authority" (Veitch 41), we can assume that he considers the problem of male authority in the novel, which has the title that suggests a gender problem.

With regard to West's representations of gender, it is important to first survey the gender trend during West's era. West was born in 1903 and was killed in a traffic accident in 1940. He was active as a writer in the thirties, which was after the so-called Jazz Age, when the role of women had changed. Frederic Lewis Allen explains how the empowerment of women resulted in their employment and changes in their dressing and appearance. Because of women's emancipation, men had increased anxiety about their weakening status. Such male anxiety continued throughout the 1930s, especially since the Great Depression made it difficult for many men to find employment. According to Robert McElvaine, "[t]he self-centered, aggressive, competitive 'male' ethic of the 1920s was discredited" in the 1930s (340). In other words, normative masculinity had dramatically weakened during that decade.

I consider West's critique of masculinity in light of widespread male anxiety of

the 1930s, by paying attention to the gendered traits of three characters in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. The first section focuses on Shrike's exceedingly masculine character. The second section considers the moment when Betty, an anachronistically domestic woman, cannot support her boyfriend. The final section clarifies how Miss Lonelyhearts (an unnamed male newspaper columnist) is, in fact, a sexist.

## Exceedingly Masculine Shrike

Miss Lonelyhearts is a columnist of the New York *Post-Dispatch*, and reads his correspondents' letters that describe their suffering. Shrike, Miss Lonelyhearts' boss, mocks Miss Lonelyhearts in the office. Miss Lonelyhearts is advertised as a Christ-like Savior by Shrike: "Soul of Miss L, glorify me./Body of Miss L, nourish me./Blood of Miss L, intoxicate me" (59). As Robert Long argues, this prayer "is a parody of the 'Anima Christi,' or 'Soul of Christ,' from Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercise*" (60-61). Loyola was a 16th century Spanish knight who founded the Society of Jesus, and *Spiritual Exercise* is a set of Christian meditations that Loyola composed. An example of Shrike's parody of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercise* is the phrase, "Soul of Christ," which was changed into "Soul of Miss L." Therefore, Miss Lonelyhearts is used by Shrike to make a parody of Christ.

The letters that Miss Lonelyhearts and Shrike receive show how their jokes trample on the suffering of their feminine correspondents. These letters include ones from a girl with a hole in her face, a woman who is forced to have sex with her husband despite the danger of becoming pregnant, and a boy whose mentally handicapped sister is raped by a neighbor. By noting the readers' letters, well-known critic Stanley Edgar Hyman argues that "[t]he obsessive theme of *Miss Lonelyhearts* is human pain and suffering, but it is represented almost entirely as female suffering" (21). Certainly, it is possible to valorize West's attempt to represent female suffering based on Hyman's argument. However, this novel is not satisfied with such representation of female suffering, but goes further by showing that Shrike and Miss Lonelyhearts consider these letters as jokes: Miss Lonelyhearts states that "the whole staff considers it

[the columnist job] a joke” and he also used to consider the job a joke (94). In other words, this novel shows the relationship between male arrogance and female suffering.

In addition, Shrike’s masculinity is emphasized by his name. As James Light states, the name, Shrike, means “the bird which impales its prey” on a thorn (136). Symbolically, this masculine meaning of Shrike emphasizes that he embodies a phallus, which further mocks the femininity and impotency of Miss Lonelyhearts. This contrasting relationship between Miss Lonelyhearts and Shrike is reminiscent of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), where protagonist Stephen Dedalus is mocked by Buck Mulligan. In Joyce’s novel, Mulligan ridicules Christ, and Mulligan’s nickname, “Buck” means a male animal, such as a deer. According to Jay Martin, Shrike is Miss Lonelyhearts’ Buck Mulligan (178).

Furthermore, Shrike not only mocks Miss Lonelyhearts but he also haunts his mind. For example, “Although his [Shrike’s] gestures were elaborate, his face was blank. He practiced a trick used much by moving-picture comedians—the dead pan. No matter how fantastic or excited his speech, he never changed his expression” (64). This nickname of “dead pan” not only represents Shrike’s speaking style but also that he is a “dead Pan.” As Robert Andreach suggests,

The goat-god Pan, half animal and half man in appearance with a face distinguished by a sardonic smile, was a pastoral god of fertility in primitive myth and ritual. Forever playing his flute, or reed pipes, and notoriously ugly, he devoted much of his time to licentious revelry, although, like Dionysus, he was a god of pain and suffering, death and rebirth as well. (252)

However, with Shrike being the “dead Pan” and Miss Lonelyhearts seeing the images of Pan, they are connected by sterility. For example, there are “dead Pan” allusions in the scene in which Miss Lonelyhearts makes a confession (“His voice was like a flute; it did not vibrate” [76]), and in the scene in which the country is dramatized as the Garden of Eden (“Somewhere in the woods a thrush was singing. Its sound was like

that of a flute choked with saliva” [102]). In these two quotations, both quotations creates time lag that evokes romantic fertility in the first sentence (“His voice was like a flute” and “Somewhere in the woods a thrush was singing”), and the next sentence subsequently reminds the readers that such fertility is not true (“it did not vibrate” and “Its sound was like that of a flute choked with saliva”). In this manner, this novel shows the immensity of Shrike’s effect on Miss Lonelyhearts.

If Shrike is an excessive masculine character and haunts Miss Lonelyhearts’ mind as the dead Pan image, he is criticized by West for his exceeding masculinity. In the chapter titled, “Miss Lonelyhearts and Mrs. Shrike,” Miss Lonelyhearts seduces Mrs. Shrike in front of her husband. In this particular scene, the Shrikes are a married couple who experience the sexual thrill of watching a “prey” attempt to have a date with Mrs. Shrike, and Miss Lonelyhearts is the doomed prey driven by this couple.

At the same time, the relationship between Miss Lonelyhearts and the Shrikes is a parody of Christ’s family. In this case, Shrike is the symbolic father of Miss Lonelyhearts. In the Bible, Christ’s father, the Spirit of God is compared to a dove: “Then heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and lighting on him” (*Today’s English Version*, Matt. 3.16)<sup>(1)</sup>. Although a dove and shrike are different, they are both birds. This parody of Christ’s family is also suggested by Mrs. Shrike’s name, which is Mary. In other words, she is the symbolic mother of Miss Lonelyhearts. In this way, this triangle relationship is a parody of the Bible<sup>(2)</sup>.

West dramatizes this Oedipal triangle as a masculine contest between Miss Lonelyhearts and Shrike. For example, when Miss Lonelyhearts seduces Mrs. Shrike, Shrike cannot conceal his suffering about her sexual activeness: “Here the dead pan [Shrike’s face] broke and pain actually crept into his voice” (82). Miss Lonelyhearts then takes a rebellious attitude toward Shrike’s suffering: “It was Miss Lonelyhearts’ turn to laugh. He put his face close to Shrike’s and laughed as hard as he could” (82). Thus, Miss Lonelyhearts tries to defeat his father (Shrike) by acquiring his mother (Mary). West presents Christ’s family as the Oedipal triangle and changes this triangle into a masculine contest for the mother, which allows her son to become

an adult male.

After Miss Lonelyhearts and Mrs. Shrike eat dinner at a restaurant, they return and begin to caress one another, despite their anxiety about Shrike's presence. The following passage is from the final scene of the chapter:

He [Miss Lonelyhearts] heard her switch on the light in the foyer and knew that Shrike had not been behind the door. Then he heard footsteps and limped behind projection of the elevator shaft. The door opened and Shrike looked into the corridor. He had on only the top of his pajama. (85)

At this point, Miss Lonelyhearts fails to defeat Shrike since he can no longer seduce Mrs. Shrike. Miss Lonelyhearts' defeat suggests that the Christ-like figure gives in to the joker without sincerity. However, at the same time, the final sentence of this chapter ("He had on only the top of his pajama") presents Shrike, the satanic joker, as a comical character. In addition, West's arrangement of the sentences creates a certain shock by the time the readers reach the final sentence. Since West repeats compound sentences that are composed of coordinating conjunction "and" and places a simple sentence at last, the readers may be shocked at the brevity of the final sentence. West makes the reader to be impressed with the final sentence in which Shrike is caricaturized. In this manner, Shrike, who has embodied excessive masculinity as if he has risen above male anxiety, exposes his masculine symbol comically. West exaggerates and satires Shrike's masculinity, which may represent his consciousness of the time period in which normative masculinity was slowly dying.

## Betty's Gender Trouble

Betty attempts to support her boyfriend, Miss Lonelyhearts, since she wants to assume the classical gender role of a domestic woman. First, when Miss Lonelyhearts catches a cold, Betty says, "I heard you were sick, so I brought some hot soup and other stuff.'/He was too tired to be annoyed by her wide-eyed little mother act and

let her feed him with a spoon. When he had finished eating, she opened the window and freshened the bed” (94). In this scene, Betty acts not as a wife but as a “wide-eyed little mother.” Moreover, when Betty and Miss Lonelyhearts go to the country, West depicts Betty doing housework: “He sat smoking a cigarette, while she prepared supper” (100) and “He woke up with the sun in his eyes. Betty was already busy at the stove” (101).

Betty, acting as a domestic woman, embodies the attributes of “True Womanhood.” Historian Barbara Welter defines “True Womanhood” in the 19th century as the following: “The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (152). Although Betty is presented in the 1930s, she is an old-fashioned woman who attempts to observe this 19th century norm.

According to Jay Martin, the majority of the women in West’s novel “are all related, all sterile but threatening female figures” (133). In this novel *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Mary Shrike, Fay Doyle, and Miss Farkiss are all unpleasant for Miss Lonelyhearts. For example, Miss Farkiss, Shrike’s adulterous partner, has physical traits that threaten Miss Lonelyhearts’ masculinity: “She had long legs, thick ankles, big hands, a powerful body, a slender neck and a childish face made tiny by a man’s haircut” (65). Her hairstyle suggests that she was a so-called flapper, a “new breed” of women in the 1920s who wore short skirts and bobbed their hair, and broke traditional gender roles. West even emphasizes this shift in gender by stating that she had “a man’s haircut” instead of a short haircut. Furthermore, her handshake with Miss Lonelyhearts is written as “a masculine handshake” (64). In this way, Miss Farkiss deviates from the stereotypical image of a domestic woman, and she is a typical female character in West’s novel. In comparison, Betty is a peculiar woman in West’s novel since she wishes to focus on domestic role. Such a domestic woman as Betty may provoke the conservative man’s desire for nostalgia, especially during a time when men were threatened by the empowerment of women. However, West’s cynical presentation of Betty in the unfolding plot goes against this desire.

Miss Lonelyhearts emphasizes his heroism by making submissive Betty a foil. For example, Miss Lonelyhearts thinks that “[h]er sureness was based on the power to limit experience arbitrarily. Moreover, his confusion was significant, while her order was not” (71). In this case, a protagonist, who is the closest person to the readers, believes that Betty’s world is not “significant,” and thus, his belief makes the readers think she is not “significant.” As Kingsley Widmer argues, “She cannot understand the Lonelyhearts dilemma, nor can all the Betty-moralists of the bland world” (27). Furthermore, as he explains his sickness and the importance of his job to Betty, she has difficulty understanding him: “Although he had spoken soberly, he saw that Betty still thought him a fool. He closed his eyes” (94). By closing his eyes, he abandons his persuasion and realizes that significance of his heroism is not understood by Betty. As a result, Miss Lonelyhearts sees himself as a solitary hero and Betty becomes the foil.

Although Betty is a foil-like entity for Miss Lonelyhearts in this wise, the anonymous narrator reveals her unconscious attack on Miss Lonelyhearts in the country scene. However, before examining this attack, it is important to note the first scene in which Betty appears. In the chapter titled, “Miss Lonelyhearts and the Fat Thumb,” Miss Lonelyhearts goes to Betty’s room where he meets her for the first time since he had made a promise to marry her two months earlier. However, he has avoided her since that time because he remains dissatisfied with marriage without first resolving his correspondents’ emotional suffering. First, he has difficulty speaking coherently: “He tried to reply to her greeting and discovered that his tongue had become a fat thumb. To avoid talking, he awkwardly forced a kiss, then found it necessary to apologize” (71). In this scene, his “fat thumb” (which refers to “all thumb” or awkward) mocks Betty: “Betty the Buddha. You have the smug smile; all you need is the pot belly” (71). Additionally, as he becomes increasingly nervous, all he can do is simply touch her breast: “She made no sign to show that she was aware of his hand. He would have welcomed a slap, but even when he caught at her nipple, she remained silent” (72). Accordingly, Miss Lonelyhearts, with his “fat thumb,” becomes violent since Betty is too submissive for his taste.



However, Betty is not just a submissive woman in the country scene. Her covert resistance to Miss Lonelyhearts appears when she hangs the wash out: “She looked a little fat, but when she lifted something to the line [for making clothes dry], all the fat disappeared. Her raised arms pulled her breasts up until they were like pink-tipped thumbs” (101). Certainly, it is natural for her belly to become thin when she raises her hands, but this sentence attracts the readers’ attention because of the choice of words. The anonymous narrator twice emphasizes a word, “fat.” Her changing body is contrasted with earlier Miss Lonelyhearts’ statement: “all you need is the pot belly.” Moreover, the trope, “like pink-tipped thumbs,” reminds the readers of Miss Lonelyhearts’ violent fat “thumb.” In other words, her breasts may become violent like Miss Lonelyhearts. Thus, the rhetoric of the anonymous narrator suggests Betty’s covert resistance to Miss Lonelyhearts.

Corresponding to her physical change, Betty’s unconscious attack on Miss Lonelyhearts becomes manifest since she becomes pregnant after their sexual intercourse. After Miss Lonelyhearts proposes to her, this proposition is difficult for Miss Lonelyhearts to realize since he despises living with her world without resolving his correspondents’ problems. The following statement shows his humiliation: “He was just what the party dress [Betty] wanted him to be: simple and sweet, whimsical and poetic, a trifle collegiate yet very *masculine*” (123, italics mine). For making him resign his heroic attitude in this manner, Betty becomes a burden for Miss Lonelyhearts.

The final scene clarifies that Betty cannot become a domestic woman. After Miss Lonelyhearts meets the Doyles, Peter Doyle mistakes Miss Lonelyhearts as the rapist of his wife, Fay, and plans to kill him. In contrast, Miss Lonelyhearts, who has a sickness of considering himself as Christ, mistakes Peter as a messenger sent by God:

While they [Miss Lonelyhearts and Peter] were struggling, Betty came in through the street door. She called to them to stop and started up the stairs. The cripple saw her cutting off his escape and tried to get rid of the package. He pulled his hand out. The gun inside the package exploded and Miss Lonelyhearts

fell, dragging the cripple with him. They both rolled part of the way down the stairs. (126)

In the final scene of the novel, Betty contributes to Miss Lonelyhearts' tragicomedy by attempting to help him. In short, she fails to support her boyfriend as a domestic woman. West dramatizes the moment in which a hero fails to relieve the world of its corruption and a domestic woman fails to support him in the process. Normally, failure is a negative concept, but this particular failure is a positive one. Judith Butler reveals the positive aspects of a failed gender role in "From Parody to Politics," the concluding chapter of her *Gender Trouble*:

In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; [...] If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible. The injunction *to be* a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated. (198-99, italics in the original)

Corresponding to Butler's notion of "the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms," the novel presents the patriarchal society where men like Shrike are predominant over women. In addition, Betty's failure that she cannot become a domestic woman within this novel's patriarchal society may be fundamentally common with failure, which "[t]he injunction *to be* a given gender produces." Certainly, based on Butler's argument, Betty's failure does not suggest a positive result of "the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment," but a negative result whereby Betty becomes a cooperator who supports Miss Lonelyhearts' tragedy by accident (Butler 199). However, her failure succeeds in telling readers that her femininity in support of the heroic masculinity is not her true identity. In other words, West presents a

woman who criticizes men's nostalgia for having a housewife because she is not only domestic but also threatening.

## Miss Lonelyhearts as a Sexist Hero

Miss Lonelyhearts' desire to save the world suggests that a woman should be protected. He has "a Christ complex" in which he feels the need to help his correspondents (72). For the sake of understanding his Christ complex, it is important to see his hallucination of God's message: "He [Miss Lonelyhearts] submitted drafts of his column to God and God approved them" (124). In short, he is a hero in his mind and based on this heroism, his correspondents (almost all of them are women) should be helped. What is important in terms of gender is the symbiotic relationship between Miss Lonelyhearts' heroism and patriarchy. In other words, Miss Lonelyhearts' heroism needs a patriarchal society.

The scene, in which Miss Lonelyhearts meets Fay Doyle, one of his correspondents, reveals his self-righteous version of heroism. Through this meeting, West divulges three scenes in which even heroic Miss Lonelyhearts cannot escape sexism. First, after he meets Fay, they have a sexual encounter, which suggests that although he sympathizes with his correspondents, he still treats women as objects. Second, after receiving Fay's letter, Miss Lonelyhearts enters the telephone booth: "The walls of the booth were covered with obscene drawings. He fastened his eyes on two disembodied genitals and gave the operator Burgess 7-7323" (88). Third, "The detective [Miss Lonelyhearts] saw a big woman enter the park and start in his direction. He made a quick catalogue: legs like Indian clubs, breasts like balloons and a brow like a pigeon" (89). In this case, Miss Lonelyhearts judges Fay's "femininity" by seeing her body parts.

However, his sexism is destroyed by Fay's confession in which she accuses her husband Peter of being a perpetrator. She also describes how she became pregnant with "a dirty dago," and gave birth to a daughter (90). However, this "dago" left and she had to depend on Peter, a crippled man, whom she eventually married. Since she

cannot stand her marriage to Peter, she consults with Miss Lonelyhearts. Fay's story suggests that she is simultaneously a victim (cheated by the "dago") and a perpetrator (who despises her husband). She tortures her husband by expressing her discontent with the present marriage and her longing for "true love": "I was a pretty girl and could of had my pick. What girl wants to spend her life with a shrimp of a cripple?" (92). Her discontent with her husband causes a longing for romance with Miss Lonelyhearts, which is seen when Miss Lonelyhearts arrives at the Doyle residence: "Mrs. Doyle began to wink quite openly at Miss Lonelyhearts, but he still refused to pay any attention to her. The cripple [Peter], however, was greatly disturbed by her signals" (114). In this way, the patriarchal society which Miss Lonelyhearts' heroism depends on has a heretic, that is, Fay.

Moreover, to Miss Lonelyhearts, Fay is not a stereotypical woman since she is not a weak victim. The following passage, which is Fay's confession to Miss Lonelyhearts, describes how she both hates her husband and cannot live without him:

I got into trouble when the Doyles lived above us on Center Street. I used to be kind to him and go to the movies with him because he was a cripple, although I was one of the most popular girls on the block. So when I got into trouble, I didn't know what to do and asked him for the abortion. But he didn't have the money, so we got married instead. (90)

Her confession is full of self-respect and contempt for Peter. First, the self-assertion in her words, "I was one of the most popular girls on the block," deprives her reliability since she asserts herself but not in an objective manner. As Robert Long argues, "she demeans her husband through a need to assert herself" (78). Furthermore, there is an illogical leap in what she states: "he didn't have the money, so we got married instead." In this regard, there must be no relationship between Peter's economic condition and her marriage. If she actually hated Peter, then she should have looked for another man. Instead, Fay was able to keep up appearances because of her marriage to Peter.

Fay not only hates Peter selfishly in this manner but also tortures him. For example, she told Lucy, her daughter, that Peter was not her father. Then, after mentioning this to Peter, he became angry: “He went for me and hit me one on the cheek. I wouldn’t let no man get away with that so I socked back and he swung at me with his stick but missed and fell on the floor and started to cry” (91). In this scene, it is clear that Peter’s pathos is caused by Fay’s selfishness. In addition, Fay tells Miss Lonelyhearts that “he [Peter] always makes believe that he is the father of the kid and even talks to me about *our* child” as “the funniest part of the whole thing” (91, italics original). Despite Peter’s efforts to strengthen the family bond, she tramples on him by this comment.

It is important to note that the above scene shows that Fay is not a typical weak woman whom Miss Lonelyhearts desires. In fact, Miss Lonelyhearts considers Fay as “a police captain” (89) after cataloguing her physical attributes. Moreover, when she is hit by Peter, she hits him back. Based on these aspects, Fay is a character who destroys Miss Lonelyhearts’ stereotype that posits a woman as simply a victim, and therefore hinders his masculinity. Additionally, after Fay attempts to seduce Miss Lonelyhearts in front of Peter, Miss Lonelyhearts exposes his heroism by attempting to teach them about the importance of love. However, they only laugh at him in response. The following passage is from the scene in which, after Miss Lonelyhearts’ speech, Peter leaves to buy some gin and Fay seduces Miss Lonelyhearts:

When she opened the neck of her dress and tried to force his head between her breasts, he parted his knees with a quick jerk that spilled her to the floor. She tried to pull him down on top of her. He struck out blindly and hit her in the face. She screamed and he hit her again and again. He kept hitting her until she stopped trying to hold him, then he ran out of the house. (116)

In this scene, Miss Lonelyhearts hits Fay against his will due to the gap between the ideal image helping her (like the Christ) and reality in which he is sexually involved with her. This passage also contrasts their behaviors by arranging the clauses begin-

ning with “He” and the clauses with “She” alternately, which suggests the differences in her will to seduce and his will to avoid her seduction. As a result of Miss Lonelyhearts’ physical abuse, Miss Lonelyhearts simultaneously becomes a hero and perpetrator, while Fay is simultaneously a victim and perpetrator. As Jonathan Veitch argues, “West’s carnivalization of high and low participates in what Bakhtin described as a ‘continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear,’ resulting in a series of ‘comic crownings and uncrownings’” (42). To put West’s “carnivalization” in terms of gender, Miss Lonelyhearts transforms from a hero into a sexist who physically abuses woman.

## Conclusion

This study examined Nathanael West’s novel *Miss Lonelyhearts*, focusing on his criticism of normative masculinity. The findings show that there are numerous misogynic representations in West’s work. For example, there are Betty (who attempts to be a domestic woman anachronistically) and Fay Doyle (who stubbornly pursues romantic love). However, the male characters are dragged down from their superior positions through their relationships with these female characters. In this regard, Shrike is exceedingly masculine, but caricaturized by his wife’s adultery. Furthermore, Miss Lonelyhearts (who sees himself as a Christ-like figure) becomes a perpetrator after meeting Fay, who is mentally torturing her husband. In these examples, West’s misogynistic portrayals become a critique of male characters by using the comedic techniques similar to Butler’s parody and Bakhtin’s carnivalization theories. Recent precedent studies show that West criticizes a society pervaded by mass culture and commodity fetishism; however, this study maintains that he criticizes male authority during the 1930s (when normative masculinity had dramatically weakened) as well. In this way, throughout his novel, West successfully criticizes normative masculinity as a comic writer.

## Notes

- (1) We can also see this comparison in Mark. 1.12, Luke. 3.23, and John 1.32.
- (2) Hyman points out that this relationship triangle is an oedipal one. As Hyman argues, “the Shrikes are Miss Lonelyhearts’ Oedipal parents, abstracted as the father’s loud voice and the mother’s tantalizing breast” (24). According to Sigmund Freud who was popular in the United States during the 1920s, the mother’s breast excites her son’s desire while the father forbids this desire.

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