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IN THE NOVELS OF NATHANAEL WEST

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This study shows how Nathanael West achieved structural and artistic unity in his four novels: The Dream Life of Balso Snell, Miss Lonelyhearts, A Cool Million, and The Day of the Locust.

The fictional devices West uses to help structure his novels are many and varied. The first is antithetical images, particularly appearance-reality, clothing-nakedness, sex-violence, human-animal, flesh-spirit, and performer-audience. The dream and journey motifs are two more favorites for West. In attempting to portray the sterility and decadence of man, West utilizes devices which highlight this concept: sick and sordid sex, sterile phallic symbols, wasteland settings, bizarreness and grotesqueness, disillusion and despair, pain, cruelty, and violence. Connected with this idea of perversity is West's use of religious inversion. Probably the most obvious technique that West employs in his novels is surrealism, both in his images and in his style. Finally, West uses the microcosmic method; in each of his novels, there is one pivotal scene that binds, culminates, and reflects the themes and techniques of the entire novel. These, then, are the main thematic and unifying devices West employs, and they underscore and illuminate the structure and meaning of his four novels.

West's novels are a study of human nature and the myths which makes its existence bearable. The novels are panoramic in scope and kaleidoscopic in view.

STRUCTURAL AND ARTISTIC UNITY IN THE NOVELS OF NATHANAEL WEST

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by

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TO JUDY, CHRIS,

MARGARET, AND A. Z.

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PREFACE

For many years, Nathanael West was a forgotten literary figure. Then, in 1961, James F. Light began a strain of criticism which has figuratively brought West back to life. Most of this criticism concerned either West's life or the influences and sources of his fiction. The fiction itself, however, has been neglected. Critics have more than adequately discovered what made Nathanael West tick; now, the time has arrived to discover what makes his fiction tick (a tick that instinctively makes one feel he is holding a time bomb in his hands rather than a Westian novel). West's novels should be judged within the front and back cover and not elsewhere; within its own confines, the novel is truth. This study, then, will not approach West's literature as it was influenced by other sources or by West's own personal experience but will approach the literature as a form in itself, showing how West achieved structural and artistic unity in his four novels.

To thank everyone who has helped to make this study a reality is an impossible task. Like the academy award nominee who has just won an oscar and has only a brief thirty seconds in which to thank the countless people connected and involved with his success, I find words of appreciation and debts of

gratitude inadequate to express. Whether or not I have won an oscar or achieved success remains to be seen. Nevertheless, in my thirty-second-time limit, I wish to gratefully acknowledge my gratitude and indebtedness to the following people: Judy Seaman, my wife, whose constant encouragement, advice, and love helped me through bitter times and trying circumstances and without whose help and guidance this study could not have been completed; Margaret and A. Z. Seaman, my mother and father, who taught me the value of education and instilled in me the fervent desire for learning and knowledge; Dr. Gary W. Bleeker, my thesis director, whose thoughtful guidance and innumerable helpful suggestions have improved and tightened both the structure and content of this study; Dr. Charles E. Walton, my second reader, whose suggestions concerning phrasing, diction, and mechanical problems in general were immensely helpful; Melvin R. "Duke" Ralston, my high school English teacher, who encouraged me to develop the habit of reading beneath the literal, superficial level of literature; and Annette Meier, my friend and fellow-teacher, who read proof for the final manuscript.

Hugoton, Kansas K. S.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"She made a habit of these startling declarations: a few words, but freighted with meaning."[1] Nathanael West has Beagle Darwin make this comment about Janey Davenport in his first novel, The Dream Life of Balso Snell. Likewise, this statement aptly describes the fiction of West himself. West wrote only four novels, amounting to a total of less than four hundred pages. But in this short span of pages, he has probably said as much as or more by implication than any other American author before or since concerning the false illusions, pretensions, and dreams of life and of living. Malcolm Cowley alludes to West's efficient qualities of conciseness, preciseness, and succinctness by inferring that he wrote "as if he were so composing cablegrams to a distant country, with the words so expensive that not one of them could be wasted, yet never forgetting that the message, at any cost, must be complete and clear."[2] Perhaps West himself

[1] West, The Dream Life of Balso Snell / A Cool Million, p. 48. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parenthesis within the text and abbreviated BS and CM, respectively.

[2] Malcolm Cowley, quoted by Gerald Locklin in "The Man Behind the Novels," in Nathanael West: The Cheaters and the Cheated, p. 4.

stated it best when he wrote:

> The short novel is a distinct form especially fitted for use in this country . . . . Forget the epic, the master work. In America fortunes do not accumulate, the soil does not grow, families have no history. Leave slow growth to the book reviewers, you only have time to explode.[3]

Like Janey Davenport, West has a "habit" of making "startling declarations" in "a few words" that are "freighted with meaning" in his four novels.

For many years, the novels of Nathanael West went virtually unnoticed. Aside from several sparse book reviews, there was little, if any, critical attention given to his fiction. "Perhaps," as Alan Ross contended, "the ruthlessness of West's portrait . . . was too near the bone for an American audience with a mass neurosis, and a guilty conscience."[4] At any rate, West received little critical attention until the publication of James F. Light's Nathanael West: An Interpretative Study. In this work, Light tried "to emphasize . . . the interrelationship between West's life and his art, so that the work, basically, and the life, subordinately, may be seen a little more clearly."[5] Light's study

[3] West, "Some Notes on Miss Lonelyhearts," Contempo, III (May 15, 1933), 2.

[4] Alan Ross, "The Dead Center: An Introduction to Nathanael West," in The Complete Works of Nathanael West, p. xxii.

[5] James F. Light, Nathanael West: An Interpretative Study, p. xv.

proved to be a stepping-stone for Westian criticism, and many articles and full-length studies followed.

Like their predecessor, these new studies were also based on biographical and source materials. Stanley Edgar Hyman cited Miss Lonelyhearts as one of the best works of fiction in the twentieth century.[6] By 1967, Randall Reid believed that West was an accepted figure in the blood line of American-fiction writers; Reid began his critical work by saying that "a critical study of Nathanael West is hardly a novelty," and that the name of West would crop up in any literary discussion concerning the "grotesque."[7] The bulk of Reid's commentary dealt with the sources and influences that West drew on for his fictional techniques, particularly parody (which naturally calls for imitation) and its counterparts, irony and satire. Another critic, Victor Comerchero, saw West's fiction following a certain pattern that split West's literary development in half. Comerchero asserted that the themes and techniques of Balso Snell "foreshadow" those of Miss Lonelyhearts.[8] He also suggested that West's third novel, A Cool Million, "begins his detached dissection of society . . . which culminates in The Day of the

[6] Stanley Edgar Hyman, Nathanael West, p. 27.

[7] Randall Reid, The Fiction of Nathanael West: No Redeemer, No Promised Land, p. 1.

[8] Victor Comerchero, Nathanael West: The Ironic Prophet, pp. 72-73.

Locust."[9] Even though Comerchero attempted to analyze critically the four novels, he admitted that he had "tried to point the way for other critics by suggesting West's influences as well as the dimension of his work."[10]

In the last five years, numerous scholarly articles, several editions of collected essays, two full-length critical accounts of West's fiction, and even a movie based on his novel, The Day of the Locust, have appeared. For the most part, the articles and essays are merely source and influence studies, and Jay Martin's Nathanael West: The Art of His Life is the best and most complete biographical account of Nathan Weinstein (West's real name) that has yet been published. With the help of S. J. Perelman (West's good friend and brother-in-law) and Laura Perelman (West's sister), Martin has mended the unfilled fissures of West's life. Martin states that the "West myth thrived on the combination of increased interest in West's work along with inadequate or misleading knowledge about his life. His myth has become part of our modern history."[11] Consequently, Martin sets out in his study to disprove this Westian "myth," and he succeeds in this respect. But as far as a critical account of West's fiction is concerned, the book holds no new insights, just

[9] Comerchero, p. 118.

[10] Comerchero, p. xi.

[11] Jay Martin, Nathanael West: The Art of His Life, p. 12.

the usual sources and influences that affected West. The second critical account appeared in 1972, entitled Nathanael West's Novels. Irving Malin, the author, also complains that there is an overabundance of source and biographical studies concerning West and his fiction. Therefore, he concentrates "upon the explication of texts, perhaps giving them more attention . . . than they deserve."[12] Malin does much in terms of critical analysis of West's novels, and he presents many new fascinating concepts for the Westian reader. But the constant parenthetical expressions and numerous rhetorical questions dealing with West's life, sources, influences, and fiction that are sprinkled endlessly throughout the work seem not only to undercut the purpose of his study but also to hamper and detract from his beautiful and scholarly style. Nevertheless, Malin's study is the best critical approach to Westian fiction.

Nathanael West, the author, has been reborn through several important source and biographical studies. It is now time for his works themselves to be reborn. The novels cry out for it; they plead for recognition. This study will answer the plea for Westian criticism to approach the literature as a form in itself and not as it is influenced by other sources or by West's own personal experiences. The novels should be judged within the front and back cover and nowhere else. Within its own confines, the novel is truth.

[12] Irving Malin, Nathanael West's Novels, pp. 1-2.

Consequently, this study will show in-depth how West achieved structural and artistic unity in his first two novels, The Dream Life of Balso Snell and Miss Lonelyhearts. First, however, the themes and techniques that are evident in all of West's fiction will be introduced and briefly commented upon. This discussion will be followed by an in-depth analysis of how these themes and techniques work in Balso Snell and Miss Lonelyhearts. The study will conclude with a brief sketch of how the major methods of structure and unity continue to function in West's last two novels, A Cool Million and The Day of the Locust.

Perhaps the most important technique West employs throughout his novels is antithetical images. These images are numerous, but the appearance versus reality motif is the one used most frequently. All too often for West, the world is overflowing with disillusion, despair, hypocrisy, and deceit. Therefore, what better way to begin his first literary work than with the figure of the Trojan horse--a symbol of deceit and trickery; a hollow, empty, sterile piece of wood that inevitably shatters the hopes and dreams of man. West recognized, in the world around him, the disparity between what actually is and what ideally should be, between a world of disillusion and despair and a world of dreams and aspirations. Consequently, the appearance versus reality motif was a natural mode of expression from which West could draw.

Closely related to this first technique is the clothing-nakedness motif which enables West to unveil the hypocrisy and deceitfulness of his characters.[13] Affectations and poses are stripped off like clothing until the characters stand before the reader in their true nakedness.

Another antithetical image that recurs throughout West's works is that of sex coupled with violence. Jay Martin suggests that West associated "sexuality with pain and disease" because of a case of gonorrhea when he was very young.[14] Sex is not treated normally in any of West's novels. Instead of sex being a normal passion of desire, it becomes a forced passion of sadism, masochism, and perversity. Like Hamlet who whips himself into action after the fashion of the Senecan hero, West's characters must "whip" themselves into the act of sex, and violence results.

Describing and characterizing humans in animal terms is another of West's favorite techniques. This concept ties in very nicely with the first two antithetical images. As the hopes and aspirations of man are constantly thwarted by sham, disillusion, and despair, man becomes more and more

[13] At first glance, the appearance versus reality motif and the clothing-nakedness motif may seem similar; however, the latter is a subdivision of the former. While the latter only deals specifically with the physical aspects of characters and thus characterization itself, the former includes the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual sides of man as well as those of the setting, including Nature, of course.

[14] Martin, p. 133.

like a naked, irrational animal, struggling for survival in an uncertain world, and it is this factor that lends credence and significance to West's animalistic human characters.

Closely connected with the previous techniques is the flesh versus spirit motif. There is a constant struggle in West's characters between man's physical and spiritual natures. In fact, in West's portrait of the sterile and decadent universe, one can see how his characters would be able to question the existence of God and, therefore, reduce life to merely its physical, sensual pleasures.

The final major image of antithesis that West introduces in Balso Snell is the relationship between the performer and the audience. In all of West's works, there are characters who are in the center of the action and who crave the attention of the spectators. On the contrary, there are those characters who reside on the outskirts of the action and who do not wish to be noticed at all. The performers are those characters who feel they achieve some success and gain some meaningful significance out of life while the spectators are those characters who feel they have been cheated and betrayed by the performers.[15]

[15] Other minor images of tension are also present in West's novels. Among those used are man versus woman, optimism versus pessimism, health versus illness, delusion and sentimentality versus cynicism, sanity versus insanity, past versus present, and seriousness versus grotesqueness. Although these minor antithetical images occur and recur throughout the mainstream of West's fiction, they are not used as frequently or as effectively as the major ones that have already been mentioned.

Although these antithetical images play an important role in West's art, there are other techniques which are just as important. A technique that underscores and illuminates the antithetical images is the battle motif. In all of West's works, there is a continual battle--whether the fight be between animals, characters, themes, images, philosophies, ideals, or beliefs--and this tension never ceases until the final page of the novel.

Another favorite motif that West employs is the dream. In his sterile, decadent, ambiguous universe, man has need for escape. When the real world stifles his desire to exist, he must seek a new and better existence. Of course, man turns to his dream world where he can satisfactorily exist and escape his troubled realm of reality. The dream, therefore, becomes not only an escape from reality but also a search for a better reality. In his four novels, West works with various aspects of the dream motif: the dream world in Balso Snell, the Christ dream in Miss Lonelyhearts, the American dream in A Cool Million, and the Hollywood dream in The Day of the Locust. Nevertheless, whichever aspect of dream he employs, it is there for one purpose: escape.

The journey also becomes important to West's fiction. All of his novels take the form of a journey: Balso Snell is searching for perfection, Miss Lonelyhearts is searching for Christ in everything, Lemuel Pitkins is searching for an easy fortune, and Tod Hackett is searching for the perfect

art form. The journey form relates nicely with the dream motif since both are an escape from overpowering and prevailing surroundings.

West is always attempting to portray sterility and decadence, and perhaps he presents the best portrait in the form of abnormal sex. Men are hungry animals that dwell on the pleasures of the flesh; women are presented as two-dimensional figures and are more a vehicle of violence than of pleasure. It is a sick and sordid form of sex that West presents, one in which sadism, masochism, and perversity prevail.

Several pertinent devices highlight West's picture of sterility and hopelessness. The bizarre and grotesque, the wasteland setting, and the sterile phallic images--all complement and symbolize exactly what is happening to man's condition. Connected with this idea of perversity is West's use of religious inversion. West is a master of inverting the normal scheme of Biblical events, particularly those involving Christ, His mother, and His disciples, thus giving them a perverted twist.[16] Other themes that West will use frequently are those of pain, cruelty, and violence. For West, violence was America's "highest common denominator."[17]

[16] While the first three techniques occur throughout each novel, religious inversion only plays an important function in Balso Snell and Miss Lonelyhearts.

[17] West, "Some Notes on Violence," Contact, I (October 1932), p. 132.

In "Some Notes on Violence," West remarks:

> In America violence is idiomatic. Read our newspapers. To make the front page a murderer has to use his imagination, he also has to use a particularly hideous instrument. Take this morning's paper: FATHER CUTS SON'S THROAT IN BASEBALL ARGUMENT. It appears on an inside page. To make the front page, he should have killed three sons with a baseball bat instead of a knife. Only liberality and symmetry could have made this daily occurrence interesting.[18]

Violence is a powerful theme for West; everything in his novels explodes with tension. Since pain and cruelty are natural companions of violence, they too have an equal position in West's fictive world.

Naturally, disillusion and despair are two more themes that abound in West's books. Man's dreams are lost to a hideous and overpowering realm of reality, and he has no hope of escape but the final step--death. To support these two themes, West uses images of impossibility and incongruity, an excellent method for reinforcing a lost and hopeless environment.

Probably the most obvious technique that West employs in his novels is surrealism, both imagistically and stylistically. According to Thrall and Hibbard, surrealism is "a movement in art or literature emphasizing the expression of the imagination as realized in dreams and presented without conscious control."[19] Of course, translated literally,

[18] West, "Notes on Violence," p. 132.

[19] William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature, p. 476.

surrealism means "above realism." The artist attempts to get above the real, and the only way to do so is to use the imagination. Hence, unreal and yet unimagined images are presented, and the only way these images become recognizable is through the mind, the dream world of the body. They are not recognizable in the real world; they can only be imagined or dreamed. Surrealism, like dreams, deals with the distortion of reality. Naturally, all of West's novels have surrealistic features, Balso Snell more so than the others.

Finally, in structuring and unifying his novels, West uses the microcosmic method. Throughout the history of the novel genre, novelists have sometimes used one scene as a focal point for their entire work. This particular scene, then, becomes a miniature or microcosm of the larger work. Contained within this microcosmic unit are all the fictive themes and techniques that occur and recur throughout the novel. This focal point not only helps the novelist in structuring and unifying his work but also helps the reader in gaining a better and more thorough understanding of the novelist's desired overall meaning. In each of West' novels, there is one pivotal scene that binds, culminates, and reflects the themes and techniques of the entire novel.

These, then, are the main thematic and unifying devices West employs. These elements which are present in The Dream Life of Balso Snell will be discussed and explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER II

THE DREAM LIFE OF BALSO SNELL

I. Balso Snell: A Pattern of Circularity

> . . . when searching for the Real I throw a stone into a pool whose ripples become of advancing less importance until they are too large for connection with, or even memory of, the stone agent. (BS, 14)

Like any other first novel, The Dream Life of Balso Snell is a highly important stepping-stone in West's literary development. Here, West's structural techniques are not as well-defined and evident as they are in his later novels. "The Westian way," as Kingsley Widmer suggests, "appears set but not perfected in his first work."[20] However, Balso Snell is structurally unified even though it may not appear to be. The problem West had to overcome is obvious: how does one give order and unity to a dream? Like a dream, Balso floats in the air; it is difficult to grasp. Anything and everything enters and exits, appears and disappears, forms and transforms, capriciously. The circle metaphor, West's choice for the controlling metaphor of his novel, is one that is universal in its meaning; one that combines pity, fear, and anxiety; and one that frequently accompanies the dream state itself.

[20] Kingsley Widmer, "The Sweet Savage Prophecies of Nathanael West," in The Thirties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama, p. 99.

The controlling metaphor of Balso, however, is not just a singular circle: it becomes a series of circles within circles.[21] When a stone is dropped into a calm pool of water, circular waves advance in an outward direction from the point at which the stone strikes the surface of the water. The circles widen, accumulate, and swell farther from the center, almost becoming a never-ending pattern of circles within circles. So, too, Balso is layered with circle after circle; the reader is so many layers removed from any recognizable reality that at times the circular pattern becomes a whirlpool and the dream becomes a nightmare. In fact, Malin suggests that West uses the circular structure to produce "irritation"; the reader is caught in a "circular trap" and the repetition brings boredom, annoyance, and claustrophobia.[22] For Balso, the circle "symbolizes desired perfection,"[23] and perfection is what Balso the artist searches for throughout the novel.

The structure of the novel, then, is circular. After all, Balso enters the circular opening of the horse's posterior and wanders around in the circular-shaped intestines of the wooden horse. Furthermore, in its beginning and ending

[21] Professor Malin also sees the circle as the controlling metaphor for the novel, yet his discussion is quite different from mine. See Nathanael West's Novels, pp. 11-30.

[22] Malin, p. 20.

[23] Malin, p. 12.

the novel comes full circle. The story begins in the "tall grass" near the city of Troy (BS, 3) and ends behind a "thick clump of bushes" inside the intestines of the Trojan horse (BS, 58). The story begins with the Trojan horse--a symbol of deceit and trickery--and ends with a bodily army performing the "mechanics of decay" (BS, 61). The story begins with tension and anxiety as Balso searches for perfection and ends in calm relief and relaxation as Balso finds "precision" and perhaps perfection in the "ceremony" and "ritual" of ejaculation (BS, 62). Finally, the story begins and ends with an image of waste: a horse's ass and a wet dream.

Within this external circular structure are other inner circles. Balso meets one guide after another, each of whom has an art form to present to an audience and each of whom does not satisfy Balso's quest. Usually, Balso must use some form of violence to escape and move on. There are dreams within dreams, stories within stories, letters within letters, narrators within narrators. And yet, within these are still more cyclical images.

As the novel opens, Balso finds three openings into the Trojan horse: the mouth, navel, and posterior--all circular openings. Balso's frequent use of the words "O" and "Oh" underscores the structure of the novel. Balso's opening poem contains numerous references to circular images: "Round," "Anus," "Buttons," "Wheels," "Belly," "Perfect Circles," "Navel," "Mouth," "Holes," and "Nails" (BS, 4-5). Even the

two titles of the poem echo this circular significance: "Anywhere Out of the World, or a Voyage Through the Hole in the Mundane Millstone" and "At Hoops with the Ani of Bronze Horses, or Toe Holes for a Flight of Fancy." Eventually, Balso recalls the Phoenix Excrementi, a tribe of men he had created who were perfectly cyclical in their existence: they "eat themselves, digest themselves, and give birth to themselves by evacuating their bowels" (BS, 5).

Balso's first guide, a man with the word "Tours" sewn on his hat which gives a twentieth century atmosphere of commercialism to the Trojan horse, reinforces the cyclical image. "Art is not nature," he says, "but rather nature digested. Art is sublime excrement" (BS, 8). Balso unmistakably perceives his meaning: art is cyclical. The guide later lists numerous philosophic statements and principles that affirm the circularity of nature. Balso's second meeting is with a Catholic mystic who is writing a biography concerning St. Puce (a flea) who has written A Geography of Our Lord after exploring "that fathomless well, the Navel of our Lord" (another circular image) and charting "every crevasse, ridge, and cavern of Christ's body" (BS, 12). Balso's third companion has written a diary or journal and a pamphlet. Biographies, biographies of a biographer, diaries, journals, and pamphlets are all cyclical images. The implication is, of course, that literature is likewise cyclical.

Later, Balso meets Miss McGeeney, who is trying to fulfill her part of the "literary chain" by writing "the biography of the man who wrote the biography of the man who wrote the biography of the man who wrote the biography of Boswell" (BS, 33). Not only does the chain reiterate the circular image but the phraseology of her statement also reinforces the idea. Furthermore, Samuel Perkins, the subject of her biography, experiences sensations which form a circle:

> Perkins went, along the circumference of the circle of his senses, from anticipation to realization, from hunger to satiation, from naïveté to sophistication, from simplicity to perversion. He went . . . from the smell of new-mown hay to that of musk and vervain . . . and from vervain to sweat and excrement . . . and, finally, to complete the circuit, from excrement he returned to new-mown hay. (BS, 35-36)

Again, the cyclical pattern is reinforced by the phraseology of her statement.

Next, Balso encounters the letters of Beagle Darwin which contain many cryptic quotations and clichés, three of which are too important to the structure of the novel to ignore. Each of the quotations concerns cyclical patterns: "Life is but the span from womb to tomb . . . the comedy is over, the song is ended, ring down the curtain, the clown is dead" (BS, 50); and secondly, "Life is of course the absence of Death; and Death merely the absence of Life" (BS, 52); and finally, "He means the worms have eaten Dives; and that, in their turn dead, the worms have been eaten by other

worms" (BS, 54). In this case, the pattern of life becomes cyclical. The tomb replaces the womb, death replaces life, and one generation replaces another.

The novel rushes on toward its climax with two final images of circularity. Beagle's letter ends with his performing a juggling act in which various items from Christ's Passion are kept in a moving pattern of circularity, much like the novel itself. The final image of circularity occurs during the wet-dream finale of the novel. Here, the image refers to the limpness-rigidness-limpness cycle of the male penis. In the final three paragraphs, one can almost see the cycle itself through the style of West's words:

> An army moved in his body, an eager army of hurrying sensations. These sensations marched at first methodically and then hysterically but always with precision. The army of his body commenced a long intricate drill, a long involved ceremony. A ceremony whose ritual unwound and manoeuvred itself with the confidence and training of chemicals acting under the stimulus of a catalytic agent.
>
> His body screamed and shouted as it marched and uncoiled; then, with one heaving shout of triumph, it fell back quiet.
>
> The army that a moment before had been thundering in his body retreated slowly--victorious, relieved. (BS, 61-62)

One can almost feel the excitement and experience the sensation of rigidity in the first paragraph as the object unwinds and maneuvers itself. The jerkiness in the rhythm of the second paragraph imitates the exact moment of ejaculation. The quick flow of words in the final sentence parallels the rapid flow of sperm as a result of ejaculation, while the

punctuation and syllabic rhythm of the last part of the sentence parallels the calm spurting and slow return to normalcy, limpness.

The novel is overloaded with cyclical images. In fact, everywhere Balso seeks, he finds things that have a beginning and an ending: stories, diaries, pamphlets, journals, letters, speeches, journeys, songs, dramas, biographies, dreams, art, religion, literature, sex, life, history--all are unlike the perfect circle that has no beginning nor ending for which Balso searches. Balso more and more realizes he is trapped in a never-ending pattern of circles within circles or a cyclical pattern of whirlpools. Unfortunately, the closest thing to perfection that Balso finds is not within the confines of the wooden horse nor within the confines of art (for West exploits every literary genre in the novel), but within his own body. Again, unfortunately, this ritualistic and instinctive machine-like sex organ reacts in the same manner everytime it performs.

Circles within circles, circles on top of circles, and circles blending in with circles all help structure the novel. Like a dream, the novel is a distortion of reality--layer upon layer upon layer of distortion. Richard Kostelanetz cites Balso Snell as a "progenitor" of the absurdist movement wherein the author creates an absurd series of events which, because of their frequent repetition, become the form for the structure of the novel and, thus, "depicts the ultimate

absurdity (i.e., meaninglessness) of history and existence."[24] Hence, novels of this type achieve a fusion of form and content by envisioning a total absurdity from a series of smaller absurd events. Even through the distortion, the meaning of the circles begins to take shape, and the meaning becomes even more clear when one examines the title of the novel.

The Dream Life of Balso Snell implies that Balso has yet another side: his Real Life existence. The circularity in the novel points out the absurdity of merging dream world and real world or, more importantly, of trying to sustain completely the existence of one without the existence of the other. Furthermore, the unproductive orgasm suggests that the dream world is just as unproductive in the search for perfection as is the real world. Balso Snell is, then, a collage of circularity, and West will use many themes and techniques to support and supplement his collage.

Accentuating the pattern of circles and echoing the previously mentioned metaphor of the stone and the pool of water are the recurrent images of swelling, accumulating, and bursting. In Balso's poem, everything is "Full," "Ringing," or "Brimming" (BS, 4-5). The tour guide shows Balso "a beautiful Doric prostrate gland swollen with gladness and an over-abundance of good cheer" (BS, 6). Later, John Gilson

[24] Richard Kostelanetz, "Fiction," in The New American Arts, pp. 202-203.

kills the idiot to assuage his fear, but a new fear occurs accompanied by obvious images of swelling, accumulating, and bursting:

> While dressing I became conscious of a growing fear. A fear that as it grew seemed likely to burst me open; a fear so large that I felt I could not contain it without rupturing my mind. Inside of my head this expanding fear was like a rapidly growing child inside the belly of a mother. I felt that I must get rid of the fear or burst. (BS, 21)

After disposing of the murder weapon, Gilson returns to his apartment, but the murder in his conscience was like a grain of sand in an oyster shell; he becomes obsessed with the idea of the events covering the murder just as the oyster's "secretions . . . cover an irritating grain of sand" (BS, 22). He fears that the "accumulations" might "grow" and become solid so that the irritation leaves; he wonders if the growing will become so large that "just as the pearl kills the oyster," it might kill him (BS, 22). Still later, Miss McGeeney continues the imagery of swelling, accumulating, and bursting when she speaks of "warts, tumors, pimples, corns, nipples, sebaceous cysts, hard and soft chancres" (BS, 32). She attempts to seduce Balso with more of the same imagery: "Soon the hot seed," she says, "will come to thwart the knife's progress. The hot seed will come in a joyous burst-birth of reeking undergrowth and swamp forest" (BS, 32). This episode foreshadows the most poignant and dramatic portrait of swelling, accumulating, and bursting which occurs during the wet-dream sequence that ends the novel.

The figure "O" supplies West with another theme complemented by several techniques. The figure itself is self-enclosed, but in the middle it is empty and hollow. Thus, within the circular structure, West artistically fuses the wasteland setting: a picture of sterility and decay. Like a zero, there is "nothing" in the offing. Even Balso's name doubly echoes this nothingness: Balls O (round objects and a zero). The mere fact that Balso wanders around in the bowels of the Trojan horse is surely enough waste and decay for even the strongest of stomachs. Further proof that Balso wanders within a wasteland is the lack of descriptive setting. There is "nothing" to describe. The surroundings are nondescript, nothing but "a great tunnel" (BS, 9) or "a seemingly endless corridor" (BS, 37). In fact, the narrator only gives two clear descriptions of any setting. One is a hernia, and the other is a hollow tree, both images of decay and sterility, and these two passages occur within the first thirteen pages of the novel. Very early in the novel, Balso reacts to his surroundings with the following outburst: "O the Rose Gate! O the Moist Garden! O Well! O Fountain! O Sticky Flower! O Mucous Membrane!" (BS, 5). Obviously, the wet, seeping images imply that he is wading around in a giant sewer system. Three paragraphs later, this implication proves true. Balso tells the guide that the prostrate gland is "simply an atrophied pile" (BS, 6). "You call this dump grand and glorious, do you?" he continues, "Exposed plumbing

. . . that's all I see--and at this late date. It's criminally backward . . ." (BS, 6). But these passages also occur early in the book, even before the narrator's two descriptions. The remainder of the book contains no description of setting within the intestines of the Trojan horse. West obviously leaves the description of the setting up to each individual's imagination. Logically, the imagination can only fill in the setting with images of decay and sterility, simply because West has already set that particular pattern.

To help the imagination produce a suitable setting and to help influence the setting that the imagination produces, West employs two recurrent literary devices: excremental images and sterile phallic symbols. The bowel images are numerous and abundant. "The whole is," argues Bruce Olsen, "characterized by a scatological fury, a toilet image of disgust for every conceivable human aspiration or institution."[25] Stanley Edgar Hyman believes the novel "is no less than a vision of the whole world as one vast dungheap."[26] The excremental imagery begins with the name Balso Snell. The initials "B. S." are an abbreviation for bull shit.[27] Victor Comerchero states that the "double-entendre" of B. S. is

[25] Bruce Olsen, "Nathanael West: The Use of Cynicism," in Minor American Novelists, p. 92.

[26] Hyman, p. 15.

[27] Reid, p. 16.

suggested in the following quotation: "The world was getting to be a difficult place for a lyric poet. He felt old. 'Ah Youth!' he sighed elaborately. 'Ah Balso Snell!'" (BS, 22-23).[28] This short, frequently overused American idiomatic phrase symbolizes more than West's attitude toward youth. Appropriately, this phrase for West brings to mind "the scatological, anti-intellectual label that summed up for him art, dreams, and perhaps life itself."[29]

The name merely begins the excremental imagery. Balso wanders around inside a horse's ass. The other two openings on the wooden horse (the mouth and the navel--normal life-giving and life-sustaining organs) are not accessible; the only passable opening is the posterior. This image is closely followed by "O Anus Mirabilis" (BS, 3), by Balso's lyric song "Round as the Anus" (BS, 4), by the Phoenix Excrementi, by the "Sticky Flower" and the "Mucous Membrane" (BS, 5), and by Balso's cryptic nickname for the guide: "Stinker" (BS, 6). Art becomes a "sublime excrement" (BS, 8).[30] Balso reprimands the guide by telling him not to "pooh-pooh" the idea of mystical circularity (BS, 9). John Gilson's

[28] Comerchero, p. 177.

[29] Comerchero, p. 178.

[30] Professor Light suggests that "the central scatological conceit of the novel is that art is excrement, more closely aligned to bull shit (note the initials of Balso's name) than to 'sublime excrement' romanticized by such writers as George Moore" (p. 63).

diary is "Written while smelling the moistened forefinger of /his7 left hand" (BS, 14). He claims that the beginning diary-writers have a "constipation of ideas," but the "white paper acts as a laxative" resulting in "a diarrhoea of words" containing a "richness of . . . flow" that is abnormal (BS, 14). In "The Pamphlet," Gilson searches "into the bowels of /his7 compassion" for some sort of feeling (BS, 24). Later, as he sadistically beats his sex partner, he shouts: "O constipation of desire! O diarrhoea of love!" (BS, 27). Finally, he pictures a theater whose ceiling may be opened to "cover the occupants with tons of loose excrement" (BS, 31). Then there is Samuel Perkins' nose which has an "excrement period" (BS, 34). In Beagle Darwin's first letter, he pretends to take on the personality of Janey in Paris. At one point, he says that even if she were not pregnant, "mother would make an awful stink" is she returned to America (BS, 44). And lastly, there is the "O" formed by Balso's mouth "with lips torn angry in laying duck's eggs from a chicken's rectum" (BS,57). These are only a few of the excremental images in the novel. There is no "movement" to gain any "relief" from the images of waste in Balso Snell. In fact, there are so many waste images that the stuffiness and dampness which they create are reminiscent of the boring, annoying, claustrophobic atmosphere mentioned by Irving Malin (see above, page 14).

Phallic symbols, particularly the sterile ones, also enhance the message of waste and decay. These symbols begin

with Balso's penknife. He carves a valentine heart amidst the other writings near the entrance of the posterior. Along with the heart he carves the inscription "O Byss! O Abyss! O Anon! O Anan!" but omits the arrow and his initials (BS, 4). The inscription and the omission refer to decay and emptiness, respectively. The next symbol appears in the derby of Maloney the Aeropagite. According to Sigmund Freud, the hat is a phallic symbol, particularly in the interpretation of dreams.[31] Balso Snell is a dream; hence, when Maloney places a crown of thorns in his derby, the association is one of pain rather than pleasure. This association continues with the symbolism of two more knives, one in Gilson's journal and one in Miss McGeeney's transformation episode. The former knife is real and is used to murder a victim. The image of death and decay is obvious and literal, here. The latter knife is figurative but the symbolism remains constant: "Feel, oh poet, the warm knife of thought swift stride and slit the ready garden" (BS, 32). Again, the invitation here is to pain rather than pleasure, a pain which will end with the knife's "hot seed" coming in a "joyous burst-birth of reeking undergrowth and swamp forest" (BS, 32).

Other phallic symbols also appear. There is the "hollow tree" (BS, 13) in which Balso finds Gilson's "Crime Journal." The implication is clear: a sterile phallic symbol

[31] Sigmund Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams," in The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, pp. 375-376.

made to be further sterile by the implantation of crime. There is also the perverse symbol of Perkins' nose. The structure of the novel itself--circle upon circle upon circle--becomes a huge sterile phallic symbol because of the emptiness inside the enclosed circles. Similarly, the empty saucer plates that pile up on Beagle's table at the cafe take on phallic symbolism. Finally, of course, the phallus itself with its unproductive orgasm at the end of the novel becomes the most poignant image of phallic sterility and waste.

With such a portrait of waste, decay, and sterility, the theme of disillusion and despair becomes significant. Disillusion and despair abound everywhere in the novel: Balso in his search for perfection, Maloney in his attempt to crucify himself with thumbtacks, Gilson in his criminal and sexual exploits, Miss McGeeney in her attempt to preserve permanently her name in the literary chain, Janey Davenport in her case of unrequited love, and Beagle Darwin in his egotistical manner. Balso is always "fleeing" in desperation from some inhabitant of the wooden horse. As each character helps to shatter Balso's dream, he in turn violently shatters theirs. Again, the pattern of circularity becomes evident: the disillusion and despair that the wooden horse brought to the city of Troy is now brought to twentieth-century man and is seen in his philosophy, religion, literature, and art.

Images of the incongruous, the impossible, and the grotesque highlight this theme of disillusion and despair.

There are two types of incongruity in the novel. One is the incongruity of style, as seen in the line "And with a high heart he entered the gloom of the foyer-like lower intestine" (BS, 4). The contrasting elements (high heart / gloom) produce an atmosphere of surprise and, in this case, a hint of foreboding. Secondly, there are images of incongruity; for example, a naked Catholic mystic wearing a derby hat crowned with thorns and attempting to crucify himself with thumbtacks. Other weird couplings appear following Balso's seduction speech:

> Tiger skin on divan. Spanish shawl on grand piano. Altar of Love. Church and Brothel. Odors of Ind and Afric. There's Egypt in your eyes. Rich, opulent love; beautiful, tapestried love; oriented, perfumed love. (BS, 60)

Here, the incongruity results because of the coupling of primitive society and civilized society, an echo of the novel's own mixture of Trojan horse and modern society.

Images of impossibility and grotesqueness also help underscore the disillusion-despair motif. Impossibilities in the novel are numerous: a flea proclaiming to be a saint, a mystic attempting crucifixion with thumbtacks, a hunchback carrying a baby in her hump, and a poem containing mountaintops whose conquests are severely difficult. Even the constant search for perfection in any art form becomes an image of impossibility. The bizarre and the grotesque are also evident. The novel is set in the bowels of the Trojan horse. The commercialization of the Trojan horse, the advanced

precocity of Gilson, the laugh and mask-like face of the idiot, the nose of Perkins, the chauffeur within Gilson, the physical features of Janey Davenport, the letters of Beagle, the wet dream--all are portraits of the bizarre and grotesque in this world of surrealistic distortion.

Returning to the controlling metaphor of the novel, the circle presents another fusion of form and content in its structure. This fusion concerns the appearance versus reality motif. A circle looked at with the naked eye appears to be perfectly round. However, when the circle is subjected to a much closer view through the lens of a microscope, it is no longer perfectly round but becomes a fragmented line with jagged and disjointed edges around its rim. Consequently, the appearance versus reality motif ties in very nicely with the novel's main metaphor. Like the false front the circle poses, hypocrisy and deceit haunt the pages of Balso. The Trojan horse itself is an age-old symbol of sham and illusion. The overall dream structure of the novel heightens the silhouette of illusion: dreams are false hopes and sterile mirages that only produce more disillusion and despair (the unproductive orgasm at the end of the novel, for example). What appears to be is only an illusion of what really is.

Poses and affectations are evident everywhere in the novel. John Gilson becomes Raskolnikov and Iago in his crime journal; Beagle Darwin becomes B. Hamlet Darwin. When Balso calls a rupture of the stomach wall a hernia, his guide "began

to splutter with rage and Balso tried to pacify him by making believe he had not meant the scenery" (BS, 7). Later, when Balso kisses a naked woman who turns into a mannish Miss McGeeney, Balso "wanted to bash her jaw in" but could only stammer and say, "How interesting" (BS, 32). Janey Davenport, the grotesque Lepi, knew that "No one had ever before forgotten her strange shape long enough to realize how beautiful her soul was" (BS, 38). Nevertheless, as Balso tries to seduce her, he keeps a straight face because "he knew that if he even smiled the jig would be up" (BS, 39). Beagle writes two letters to Janey; each is a representation of what might have happened, but not what really did happen, if he would have taken her with him to Paris. In the first letter, he pretends to be Janey giving Beagle the news she is pregnant. However, when she relates the news, her French pronunciation spoils the atmosphere of the situation. The whole concept begins to look like a joke. Beagle then describes Janey's reaction: "Despite your desire to appear casual you let a note of heartbreak into your voice" (BS, 43). In his next letter, Beagle attempts to decide how to feign sadness when he hears the news of Janey's death, news that he already knows about. He eventually decides to "feign madness" as Hamlet did "for if they discover what lies in my heart they will lynch me" (BS, 52). Furthermore, his passage in the form of a drama becomes as much a fake as his "tear-jerker" fainting routine which follows it (BS, 56).

Two lengthy quotations concerning poses and masks are too important to let slip by without notice. The first occurs in Gilson's pamphlet:

> I have forgotten the time when I could look back at an affair with a woman and remember anything but a sequence of theatrical poses--poses that I assumed, no matter how aware I was of their ridiculousness, because they were amusing. All my acting has but one purpose, the attraction of the female. (BS, 26)

Here, Gilson's main concern is not regret for having displayed an untrue appearance but rather self-conceit for so easily duping so many females. The second quotation occurs in Beagle's second letter:

> . . . you are backstage, hiding in the shadow of an old prop. Clutching your bursting head with both hands, you hear nothing but the dull roar of your misfortunes. Slowly there filters through your clenched fingers the cries of your brother clowns. Your first thought is to rush out there and cut your throat before their faces with a last terrible laugh. But soon you are out front again doing your stuff, the same superb Beagle: dancing, laughing, singing--acting. Finally the curtain comes down, and, in your dressing room before the mirror, you make the faces that won't come off with the grease paint--the faces you will never make down front. (BS, 51)

Here, Beagle concerns himself with the duality of man, a duality that everyone has experienced: the disparity between the what is and the what should be, between good and evil, between flesh and spirit. Even the Trojan horse symbolizes this dual nature: it is an animal, but it was created by the mind of man.[32] Man's greatest handicap is his dual nature.

[32] Gerald Locklin, "The Dream Life of Balso Snell: Journey into Microcosm," in Nathanael West: The Cheaters and the Cheated, p. 26.

Everyone has a good side which he tries to preserve in the public eye, and everyone has an evil side which he tries to hide from the public eye, only reserving it for his own private self. The resulting tension produces the appearance versus reality motif and gives it a universal meaning.

II. Gilson's Murder: Focal Point of Discovery and Understanding

> The source of these rumors lay in the peculiar shape of his body: all the veins, muscles and sinews flowed toward and converged at one point. In a like manner the wrinkles on Perkins' face, the contours of his head, the lines on his brow and chin, seemed to have melted and run into his nose. (BS, 34)

As mentioned earlier, West uses the microscopic method to structure and unify his novels. In each novel, he has one unique small scene that acts as a focal point for the whole novel; it becomes a miniature of the larger work, mirroring all the fictive themes and techniques that are present within. In Balso, the focal point is Gilson's bizarre murder of the idiot. This scene binds, culminates, and reflects the themes and techniques of the entire novel.

Themes and techniques already traced and discussed are evident in this scene. The circular structure is present. The scene begins with Gilson's fear of "all the horrors attendant" (BS, 20) with the crime of murder and ends with the fear that he might disclose the murder. The scene begins with Gilson's worrying about committing a murder and ends with Gilson's worrying about having committed a murder. The scene

comes full circle, moving from the fear of the unknown to the fear of the known. Within this circular structure, other circles abound. There is a narrator within another narrator. Gilson moves from his room, to the idiot's room, and back to his room. While roaming the streets, the boy Gilson transforms into a girl prostitute and then changes back to his normal self. During this transformation, he has an orgasm, another cyclical pattern. Round images appear frequently; sprinkled throughout this scene are genitals, breasts, the idiot's throat, the sink drain, an opened mouth, the shell of an oyster, and a pearl. Just as this scene has a pattern of circularity, so does the entire novel.

Other events in this focal episode are also consistent with the action of the whole novel. The wasteland motif prevails. This scene lacks description thereby suggesting sterility, and, like the novel, this scene also has an unproductive orgasm. The sterile phallic symbol, the knife which brings death, is present. The excretory imagery is present in the secretions of the oyster. The fear that continually grows and expands as it threatens to burst and rupture Gilson's mind is an instance of the swelling, accumulating, and bursting imagery that occurs throughout the novel. The disillusion and despair motif is everywhere present in this scene as it is throughout the book. Desperate for something to do in order to keep his sanity, Gilson plots the killing of the idiot. Disillusion sets in as he discovers that the idiot locks his

door at night. When he commits the crime, Gilson botches the throat-cutting and desperately saws at the throat "in a panic" (BS, 22). The bungled butchery itself mirrors the bizarre and grotesque features of the novel. Later, when Gilson poses as prostitute, the appearance versus reality motif comes into focus. Finally, Balso's brief journey in this scene echoes the larger overall journey that he makes within the novel.

However, there are other themes and techniques in this microcosmic scene that occur throughout the novel. These devices also recur so often that they help structure and unify the novel. As Gilson goes to commit the murder, he notices that his "genitals were tight and hard, like a dog's" (BS, 21). Later, he compares his mind to the shell of an oyster. Just as Gilson describes himself in animal terms, West's narrator and his narrators within narrators use animal imagery to describe humans. The first guide that Balso meets "stalked" out of the darkness (BS, 5). Gilson and Beagle-Janey (his first letter) describe the idiot and Beagle as "pig" (BS, 18 and 46, respectively). In "The Pamphlet," Gilson likens his predicament "to that of a bird called the Amblyornis inornata" (BS, 26). In the same manuscript, he later confesses that he is two men: himself and "the chauffeur within" whose shoes are soiled with "animal ordure" (BS, 29). Then, there is Janey with her "dog-leg spine" (BS, 38). Beagle has a "horse laugh" (BS, 41), a "howl" (BS, 42), a protective "literary coloring . . . like the brown of the rabbit or the checks of the quail" (BS, 47), a

"brooding white bird" in his spirit (BS, 52), and "eagle's eyes" (BS, 56). Even the first name of Beagle and the surname of Darwin are both obviously animal oriented, and when the name changes in his second letter, it becomes "Tiger Darwin" (BS, 50). Balso's lips are, at one point, "torn angry in laying duck's eggs from a chicken's rectum" (BS, 57). Finally, when Balso seduces Mary McGeeney, she tries to fend him off by saying, "Down, Rover" (BS, 60). Indeed, the tone and force of the novel seem to be directed at reducing man's complacent position to a level that equals that of the animal.[33]

Gilson's murder scene contains another event that coincides with the action of the novel: the coupling of sex and violence. As Gilson pretends he is a girl, a sailor passes by and Gilson has an orgasm. Immediately after, he "sat down on a bench and was violently sick" (BS, 22). This same occurence happens frequently in the novel. Saniette is sadistically beaten in bed by her sex partner. Later, after Balso discovers he has not been kissing a luscious naked lady but rather Miss McGeeney, he "wanted to bash her jaw in" (BS, 32). Balso has a similar experience with Janey. He repeatedly tries to seduce the Lepi, and eventually Janey says that she wants him to kill Beagle Darwin. "After you have killed him," she continues, "I shall yield up my pink and white body to you, and then commit suicide" (BS, 39). The association of

[33] Locklin, p. 31.

sexuality and pain is too obvious to be mistaken or overlooked. Finally, the sexual orgasm that ends the novel is likened to the "mechanics of decay" (BS, 61), and it is accompanied by the military imagery of an army marching into battle.

The violence, pain, and cruelty that pervades the murder scene--such things as the blundered throat-cutting, the bloody knife, and the sickness following the orgasm--are also evident throughout the novel. Balso's shoes are always hurting his feet. He twice uses violence to escape from an inhabitant of the horse. "With a violent twist, Balso tore loose and fled" from his first guide (BS, 9). Later, he slugs Miss McGeeney "in the gut and hove her into the fountain" (BS, 36). Maloney attempts to crucify himself with thumbtacks and believes in St. Hildegarde's creed that "The lord dwells not in the bodies of the healthy and vigorous" (BS, 10). The characters of the wooden horse are not only continually tormented by the desire to find an audience for their art, but are also continually tormented by their extreme self-centeredness. There is the painful laugh of the idiot and the opera basso, the sadistic beating of Saniette, and the violent fall of Janey. Two violent portraits of violence and pain occur in Gilson's pamphlet. The first results from irritation:

> "I go to a mirror and squeeze the sty with all my strength. I tear off the cold sore with my nails. I scrub my salt encrusted nostrils with the rough sleeve of my overcoat. If I could only turn irritation

> into pain; could push the whole thing into insanity and so escape. I am able to turn irritation into active pain for only a few seconds, but the pain soon subsides and the monotonous rhythm returns. Oh how fleeting is pain!" (BS, 28)

For West, pain was second nature, maybe even similar to the chauffeur within Gilson:

> "He sits within me like a man in an automobile. His heels are in my bowels, his knees on my heart, his face in my brain. His gloved hands hold me firmly by the tongue; his hands, covered with wool, refuse me speech for the emotions aroused by the face in my brain.
>
> "From within, he governs the sensations I receive through my fingers, eyes, tongue and ears.
>
> "Can you imagine how it feels to have this cloth-covered devil within one? While naked, were you ever embraced by a fully clothed man? Do you remember how his button-covered coat felt, how his heavy shoes felt against you skin? Imagine having this man inside of you, fumbling and fingering your heart and tongue with wool-covered hands, treading your tender organs with stumbling soiled feet." (BS, 29-30)

The chauffeur inside West's body must have tormented him endlessly, as Wells Root suggests: "He was like a large, amiable lion wandering around with a thorn in his paw. Most of the time it didn't hurt . . . . But when he sat down to write, the paw that picked up the pen was the one with the thorn in it."[34] West's works are saturated with pain, cruelty, and violence.

Perverse sex is another theme that appears twice in the murder scene. The first instance concerns the manner in which the murder was performed. "One can hardly overlook the sexual implication of the murder," suggests Light, "how

[34] Martin, p. xxi.

skolnikov had undressed beforehand, and how he had gone to mmit the murder with his sexual organs tight, like the nitals of a dog."[35] The second occurs when Gilson imaginatively transforms into a girl; he caresses his "breasts like a oung girl who has suddenly become conscious of her body on a ot afternoon" (BS, 22). He begins to walk like a girl, and n the shadows he hugs himself. Passing some sailors, he poses s a prostitute and eventually has an orgasm when he thinks one of the sailors is following him.

This perversity of sex is also present throughout the novel. Balso's entering the ass of the wooden horse itself is an image with perverse sexual overtones (sodomy). A similar action occurs when Balso's first guide tells him a story in which a snake crawls into a philosopher's asshole. The guide immediately continues with a joke about Moses and the burning bush. The story ends "A hand in the Bush is worth two in the pocket" (BS, 7). Again the sexual overtones of perversity are clearly evident. Perverse sex occurs in Gilson's pamphlet when Saniette is sadistically and violently whipped. Gilson writes his crime journal "while smelling the moistened forefinger" of his hand (BS, 14). A young girl, washing her private parts in a fountain, seductively entices Balso and then turns into a mannish figure when Balso kisses her. According to Miss McGeeney, Perkins' nose is so large because

[35] Light, p. 55.

Furthermore, Raskolnikov's spiritual desire, symbolized by his imagination, is trapped within his fleshly body and tortures him by its wailing for liberty.[38] Thus, by murdering the idiot, Gilson attempts "to gain the victory of the spirit over the flesh."[39] Light goes on to suggest that Gilson's murder of "animal flesh" in another body also symbolizes the attempt to eradicate the same flesh in his own body.[40]

This battle of flesh versus spirit continually occurs throughout the novel; indeed, Light calls it the "basic theme" of Balso.[41] Balso's early poem is a contrast between material and religious images. However, if the poem appears too religious and if anyone misses the point, Balso gives his song two titles: "Anywhere Out of the World, or a Voyage Through the Hole in the Mundane Millstone and At Hoops with the Ani of Bronze Horses, or Toe Holes for a Flight of Fancy" (BS, 5). Maloney is trying to emulate Christ or the great saints by living a spiritual existence and shunning all material goods. The story of St. Puce the flea echoes this behavior. St. Puce dwelt in the body of Christ; the flea thrived on His Spirit until His death. After Christ died, the flea also died, "refusing to desert to lesser flesh, even to that of Mary who

[38] Light, p. 49.

[39] Light, p. 49.

[40] Light, p. 50.

[41] Light, p. 50.

stood close under the cross. With his last strength he fought off the unconquerable worm" (BS, 12-13). The battle continues with the third section of the novel, Gilson's crime journal. Light explains the flesh versus spirit motif for this section in the following statement:

> It describes the pull of the spirit away from the man of physical sensations. This spiritual pull lures each man toward a false personality, one other than that of the natural man governed by simple cause and effect and basic physical drives. This spiritual pull attempts to substitute some Iago or Raskolnikov for mere honest John; and though John Gilson tries to cling to the simple physical man by smelling his own excrement, the attempt is unsuccessful. John assumes a false personality, a spiritualized cardboard nose, and in his diary writes a tale in the form of a journal. He writes this tale under the pseudonym of John Raskolnikov Gilson, and he calls it "The Making of a Fiend."[42]

The spirit versus flesh theme continues in Gilson's pamphlet. Just as children choose sides to play "Cowboys and Indians," Gilson claims he is "on the side of intellect against the emotions . . . of brain against the heart" (BS, 24). Later, he imagines the death of Saniette as she screams her last words, "The will is master o'er the flesh" (BS, 25). The chauffeur sitting inside Gilson's body further explores this motif. The chauffeur's shoes are soiled with animal manure, and he is wearing a derby hat. Here, the animal flesh is not only evident in the odor of the shoes but also in the phallic symbol of the hat. Moreover, Gilson names the chauffeur "The Desire to Procreate" (BS, 29). Outwardly, Gilson has a distinct sense of and yearning for spiritual aspirations, yet

[42] Light, p. 48.

inwardly, the desires of the flesh are torturing him endlessly. At another point in the novel, Beagle expounds upon the tragedy of life:

> "Who among us can boast that he was born three times, as was Dionysius? . . . Or who can say, like Christ, that he was born of a virgin? Or who can even claim to have been born as was Gargantua? Alas! none of us. Yet it is necessary for us to compete . . . with Dionysius the thrice born, Christ son of God, Gargantua born 'midst a torrent of tripe at a most memorable party. You hear the thunder, you see the lightning, you smell the forests, you drink wine--and you attempt to be as was Christ, Dionysius, Gargantua! You who were born from the womb, covered with slime and foul blood, 'midst cries of anguish and suffering.
>
> "At your birth, instead of the Three Kings, the Dove, the Star of Bethlehem, there was only Doctor Haasenschweitz who wore rubber gloves and carried a towel over his arm like a waiter.
>
> "And how did the lover, your father, come to his beloved? . . . Did he come in the shape of a swan, a bull, or a shower of gold? No! But with his pants unsupported by braces, came he from the bathroom." (BS, 55)

Comerchero notes that this tragedy is the universal "disparity between men's spiritual aspirations and their physical reality."[43] The final battle takes place at the end of the novel; the wet-dream sequence symbolizes the victory of the flesh over the spirit. With it comes a lustful peace which will be only temporary. Ironically, it is likened to the release that death brings when the spirit is victorious over the flesh.

The battle of flesh and spirit introduces another device which West uses: religious inversion. The murder of the idiot has already been referred to as the victory of spirit over

[43] Comerchero, p. 70.

flesh. But this victory is fleeting. After the murder, Gilson experiences a "very physical, animal fear."[44] Later, he transforms into a young girl fondling her breasts. Eventually, Gilson has an orgasm which is followed by physical sickness. The animal flesh continues to rise to the surface as the fear becomes "like a grain of sand inside the shell of an oyster" (BS, 22). This complete inversion of the spirit's victory over the flesh, which is contrary to religious doctrine, is similar to the religious inversion that occurs several places in the novel.

The most obvious portrait of religious inversion is found in the person of Maloney the Aeropagite. He is a perverse Christ-figure who is completely naked, wears a derby hat crowned with thorns, and attempts to crucify himself with thumbtacks. Indeed, the name Maloney rhymes with and, in this case, brings to mind the term baloney. When Balso asks if he might be of some assistance, Maloney politely rejects his offer, a very unChristlike behavior. Furthermore, the mystic begins to preach a parable to Balso. The parable concerns the life of St. Puce, a flea who lived on the body of Christ. (The idea of a flea being named a saint is an absurd religious inversion in itself.) Unlike Christ's parables, this one has no spiritual symbolism or moral guidelines. It simply deals with the images of Christ's flesh. Moreover, the parable

[44] Light, p. 50.

becomes not a method of moral instruction but a ridicule of the Roman Catholic belief that the Church is Christ's Mystical Body and each member is a part of that Body. The instances of religious inversion are numerous in this early section.

In a later section, Balso discovers that Miss McGeeney is his old sweetheart, Mary. The religious associations of this name are too obvious to be overlooked. Mary McGeeney becomes a perverse inversion of the Virgin Mary. This Mary is more like a whore: when Balso leads her behind the shrubbery, she lies "on her back with her hands behind her head and her knees wide apart" (BS, 58). This use of the name Mary in such a perverse fashion also explains her whorish behavior when she entices Balso and then turns into a mannish figure. The inversion, here, is clear: the Virgin Mary is anything but mannish; she is the perfect picture and model not only of femininity but also of motherhood.

Finally, Balso's orgasm, like Gilson's, inverts the religious tenet of spiritualism. Even though the victory is not total and lasting, the flesh presides in this instance. Moreover, the military imagery of the army marching into battle helps accentuate the religious inversion, for it is not war that Christ strived to promote but peace and brotherly love.

Another technique that West employs is presented in the following action of the murder scene:

> I imitated the mannered walk of a girl showing off before a group of boys . . . .

> On my way back to Broadway I passed some sailors and felt an overwhelming desire to flirt with them. I went through all the postures of a desperate prostitute; I camped for all I was worth. (BS, 22)

In this situation, Gilson becomes an actor performing for an audience of spectators. This performer-audience relationship similarly occurs throughout the novel. The most obvious instance is the relationship of Balso to each inhabitant of the wooden horse. Throughout the book, Balso becomes the audience for each inhabitant as he listens to almost every form of literary genre that exists. Eventually, Balso himself performs for Mary McGeeney in his final seduction speech. He performs, remarks Malin, "so that he will not have to perform sexually."[45] He becomes like a cheerleader or athlete pumping pep into his body as Mary watches. Finally, Balso throws himself to the ground beside her. Now, it is her turn to play the innocent maiden of whom advantage is being taken. Eventually, the "miracle was made manifest. The Two became One" (BS, 61).

The performer-audience relationship also exists elsewhere in the novel. John Gilson can only win a woman by the use of his poetry. In "The Pamphlet," Gilson states, "My relationships with Saniette were exactly those of performer and audience" (BS, 25). The girl's casual acceptance of his performances forces him into more desperate feats. Consequently, he wears his life-giving organs (his heart and his genitals) around his neck like a medal on a chain. He calls

[45] Malin, p. 27.

himself a "tragic clown" whose acting has but only one intent: "the attraction of the female" (BS, 26). Other instances are evident. Halfway through the novel, Balso realizes that the horse is "inhabited solely by writers in search of an audience" (BS, 37). Beagle-Janey comments that she and Beagle could be happy "if he would only stop acting" (BS, 42). In his second letter, Beagle sees himself as a clown performing for "thousands of sweating, laughing, grimacing, jeering animals out front" (BS, 51). In fact, he carries the relationship a step further: "And when I say clown, I mean you. After all, aren't we all . . . aren't we all clowns? . . . Life is a stage; and we are clowns" (BS, 50-51). The performer-audience technique is again evident in Beagle's letter where he includes a passage in the form of a drama. Here, the audience even becomes part of the act as Beagle ends his performance by juggling various articles associated with Christ's Passion and Death. The performer-audience relationship is one of West's favorite techniques.

A final technique that occurs in the focal episode is West's surrealistic style. The surrealistic images, the distortion to create a dream-like state, and the sudden transformations that occur during the murder scene, recur throughout the entire novel. Since the entire novel is a dream sequence, West's use of surrealism creates the usual distortion and disjointedness of the dream state. Haziness hangs over the events of the novel; everything is recognizable, yet indistinct.

The reader is not really ever sure where he is: from the very beginning, he is taken further and further away from the real. Layer upon layer of dreaminess exports him from any recognizable actuality. Accompanying this realm of distortion and disjointedness are the constant and sudden transformations that accompany the dream state. John Gilson becomes Raskolnikov; Beagle Darwin becomes Hamlet; Balso Snell becomes a social lecturer; a nude woman in a fountain becomes a fully-clothed woman in a man's suit; and a penis becomes an army marching into battle. Wild surrealistic images also pervade the novel: a philosopher with a snake living in his bowels, a mystic crucifying himself with thumbtacks, a man existing with a body that is all nose, a crippled woman carrying a child in the hump on her deformed back. But perhaps the most startling surrealistic image follows: "The hot sun of Calvary burnt the flesh beneath Christ's upturned arm, making the petal-like skin shrivel until it looked like the much-shaven armpit of an old actress" (BS, 12). Throughout the entire novel, West has woven the threads of surrealism into the fabric of dream.

Appearance-reality, human-animal, sex-violence, flesh-spirit, performer-audience, disillusion-despair, dream content-surrealistic style form a pattern of circles, vicious circles that, like the Phoenix Excrementi, almost feast upon themselves. Each helps to elucidate the circular structure of the novel. Obviously, the structural devices of Balso Snell

are many and varied; and even though at times they may seem obscure, these devices work together to form a unified and organic whole. In Miss Lonelyhearts, West's second novel, the structural and unifying devices will become less obscure and more mature.

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CHAPTER III

MISS LONELYHEARTS

I. Miss Lonelyhearts and "The Stations of the Cross"

". . . his voice was that of a conductor calling stations."[46]

One of the structural devices West uses in Miss Lonelyhearts is that of religious inversion and perversion. At times, it appears as if Miss Lonelyhearts is a Christ-figure.[47] But one soon perceives that Miss Lonelyhearts is an inverted and perverted Christ; he is not only a priest-figure but also a con man, deluding himself and others into thinking that he has the answers. He becomes, as Leslie Fiedler suggests, "the comic butt who takes upon himself

[46] West, Miss Lonelyhearts & The Day of the Locust, p. 9. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parenthesis within the text and are abbreviated ML and DOL, respectively.

[47] Early in the novel, West has Shrike replace the name of "Christ" wherever it appears in the Anima Christi (Soul of Christ) prayer with the name of "Miss L" (ML, 1). Later, in the park, West has the "shadow of a lamp-post that lay on the path" pierce Miss Lonelyhearts "like a spear" (ML, 4). Eventually, as he goes to his death, Miss Lonelyhearts does so in the posture of Christ crucified: "with his arms spread" (ML, 57). Furthermore, Shrike's constant references to Miss Lonelyhearts as "priest" and "savior" demonstrate that he is a modern Christ-figure. Even Miss Lonelyhearts' brief attempts to be the "miracle worker" reinforce his desire to assume the Christ-role.

the sins of the world: the schlemiel as Everyman, the skeptical and unbelieved-in Christ of a faithless age."[48] Miss Lonelyhearts truly lives in a "faithless age," a society plagued by corruption and decadence. This type of society calls to mind an earlier one which crucified Christ. In effect, both the structure and movement of the novel also call to mind an earlier historical action: Christ's Passion and Resurrection. Hence, the structure of the fifteen chapters of the novel can be interpreted as a religious inversion and perversion of "The Stations of the Cross,"[49] a Roman

[48] Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, p. 488.

[49] Martin writes: "West compressed into the person of Miss Lonelyhearts suggestions of several roles and figures of religious tradition. In fifteen chapters, the first of which is a prologue, he made a parallel, as Robert M. Coates has suggested, 'to the symbolism of the fourteen Stations of the Cross, for the progression does become a kind of modern Calvary'" (Nathanael West: The Art of His Life, p. 183). Apparently, Coates makes this observation in the Introduction to the New Directions publication of Miss Lonelyhearts. Since I have not read this particular Introduction, I do not know what Coates did with this concept; however, I assume that my discussion is totally alien to his. While he sees the novel and the Stations as a "parallel" in symbolism, I see them as inversion-perversion. While he sees the first chapter as "prologue" and each successive chapter as one of the Stations, I see the first chapter as inversion-perversion of the first Station and follow them through progressively, right up to the final chapter which I see as an inversion-perversion of the fifteenth Station, "The Resurrection." In other words, while Coates sees only fourteen Stations, I see fifteen. Furthermore, the Roman Catholic publication of The Way of the Cross, the book used for the Lenten penitential service, substantiates my view. Reverend Charles J. Keating, compiler of the book, writes: "A 'fifteenth station' of the Resurrection is added, since the Passion of Christ is meaningless unless the Resurrection is kept in mind. Passion, Death, and Resurrection is the new Passover, from the death of sin to the life of freedom in love" (from the "Forward" in The Way of the Cross, p. i).

Catholic Lenten Devotional Service.[50]

This analysis takes on added significance when one considers West's ideas while writing the novel:

> As subtitle: "A novel in the form of a comic strip." The chapters to be squares in which many things happen through one action. The speeches contained in the conventional balloons. I abandoned this idea, but retained some of the comic strip technique: Each chapter instead of going forward in time, also goes backward, forward, up and down in space like a picture. Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events. Violent acts are left almost bald.[51]

In the Roman Catholic Church, "The Stations of the Cross" are presented in a series of pictures, usually square pictures, both on the walls of the Church and in the prayer booklet that is used for the service. Moreover, one can hardly argue that there are any more "violent images" or "violent acts" than those portrayed in the first fourteen Stations: (I) "Jesus is condemned to death"; (II) "Jesus carries his Cross"; (III) "Jesus falls the first time"; (IV) "Jesus meets his

[50] It seems safe and logical to assume that West was familiar with "The Stations of the Cross." All one has to do is consider the other Roman Catholic beliefs that West uses in his literature. In Balso Snell, for example, he satirizes the Roman Catholic doctrine that the Church is the "Mystical Body" of Christ, and he also has Beagle Darwin juggle assorted paraphernalia of Christ's Passion and Death. In Miss Lonelyhearts, West parodies the Anima Christi, another Roman Catholic penitential prayer. During his meeting with Peter Doyle, Miss Lonelyhearts, "like a priest . . . turned his face slightly away" (ML, 46), as if he is hearing a parishioner's confession, another Roman Catholic practice. Finally, Miss Lonelyhearts' consumption of crackers and water is vaguely reminiscent of the Roman Catholic Communion of bread and wine.

[51] West, "Notes on Miss Lonelyhearts," p. 1.

fflicted mother"; (V) "Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to carry his Cross"; (VI) "Veronica wipes the face of Jesus"; (VII) "Jesus falls the second time"; (VIII) "Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem"; (IX) "Jesus falls a third time"; (X) "Jesus is stripped of his clothes"; (XI) "Jesus is nailed to the Cross"; (XII) "Jesus dies on the Cross"; (XIII) "The body of Jesus is taken down from the Cross"; and (XIV) "Jesus is laid in the tomb."[52]

Like each of the Stations of the Cross, every chapter of Miss Lonelyhearts is a "single unit" that carries out only one action.[53] Like the wordless story of Christ's march to Calvary, Miss Lonelyhearts has, as Reid notes, "a plot reduced to allegorical simplicity, stereotyped characters whose features are exaggerated into masks, and physical actions which become, in the absence of words, violent expressive gestures."[54] Like "The Stations of the Cross," each chapter becomes an isolated picture of a series of causally related portraits that tell a story; each chapter, like the pictures retelling the story of Christ's Passion and Resurrection, captures and synthesizes the qualities of language, time,

[52] Station headings are taken from The Way of the Cross, compiled and composed from Biblical texts by Reverend Charles J. Keating, S. T. D., pp. 3-31.

[53] Carter A. Daniel, "West's Revisions of Miss Lonelyhearts," in Nathanael West: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 55.

[54] Reid, pp. 86-87. Reid's use of the term "allegorical" is particularly interesting and significant in the context of this discussion.

space, and action. The world of the characters in this novel "is as artificial and as sharply bounded as a picture in a frame."[55] Each successive chapter, then, becomes a religious inversion and perversion of its corresponding "Station of the Cross."

The first Station is "Jesus is condemned to death." In the first chapter of the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts is condemned to live in a corrupt society full of human pain and suffering. Christ, who was willing and able to help miraculously alleviate the suffering, was sentenced to death by a society that despised and discredited Him. Miss Lonelyhearts, on the other hand, is besieged by a multitude of letter-writers who honestly believe and trust in him, yet he can do nothing to help ease their pain. The first three letters Miss Lonelyhearts reads reveal his tragic world.[56] Each correspondent pathetically states the same thing: "I do not know

[55] Reid, p. 91.

[56] In the first letter, Sick-of-it-all is a Roman Catholic woman who cries all the time. In the past twelve years, she has had seven children. The doctor has advised her that she might die if she has another. Unfortunately, her husband broke his promise, and she is again pregnant. If this hardship is not enough, she is in constant, agonizing pain from a kidney ailment. In the second letter, Desperate, a sixteen-year-old girl, was born with a cavernous hole in the middle of her face where her nose should be. Now, she wants to be like other girls and have boyfriends. She ends her letter by asking if she should commit suicide. In the third letter, Harold S. writes for his deaf and dumb sister, Gracie, who has been raped on the roof of the house where she plays. Harold is afraid to tell his mother what happened because she will undoubtedly whip Gracie for tearing her dress and lock her in the closet for several days.

what to do" (ML, 2, 3). Neither does Miss Lonelyhearts; unlike Christ, the columnist has no answer to the multitude's anguished cries. Besides, religion is meaningless for him: ". . . if he did not want to get sick, he had to stay away from the Christ business" (ML, 3). Miss Lonelyhearts "finds the panacea he has to offer turning sour in his hands."[57] The letters no longer hold any humor. Even Shrike's obnoxious joke that art is the answer only further proves "that there can be no serious attempt to grapple with the problem (for there is no answer), but merely an attempt to sugar the pill,"[58] in order to achieve some sort of escape from the problem. Furthermore, in his stabbing, piercing, and taunting rhetoric, Shrike gives Miss Lonelyhearts his symbolical scourging and crown of thorns as the columnist begins his walk towards the modern Calvary.

The second chapter of Miss Lonelyhearts is an inversion-perversion of the second Station, "Jesus carries his Cross." Like Christ, Miss Lonelyhearts also shoulders the problems (sins) of a corrupt world. Decay is everywhere present. In the park, the columnist notices the wasteland atmosphere of the "mottled ground" (ML, 4). There has been little rainfall since the beginning of spring (the symbolical season of rebirth), and only a few patches of green grass have fought their way up through the "exhausted dirt" (ML, 5). Even

[57] Ross, p. xiii.

[58] Ross, p. xiv.

Shrike is described as a "dead pan" with facial features that are "huddled together in a dead, gray triangle" (ML, 6). But unlike Christ, Miss Lonelyhearts does not carry a cross on his shoulder; rather, he carries a "stone that had formed in his gut" (ML, 5). Moreover, the columnist's journey does not begin by climbing a difficult upward path to Calvary but by descending into the confines of Delehanty's speakeasy[59] where he can drown his problems with alcoholic water,[60] not blood. In this perverse sanctuary, Shrike shows Miss Lonelyhearts and Miss Farkis[61] a newspaper clipping about a funeral service

[59] Martin writes: "The speakeasy is used repeatedly to suggest the final degradation of the Church. Here Miss Lonelyhearts goes for refreshment, here he has virtually the only 'drinks' in the sterile land that he inhabits. It was a brilliant choice, for . . . the speakeasy had a mystic, initiatory glamor in the twenties and thirties. At the entrance, bells were to be rung in a special way, and a face would suddenly appear as a panel slid away, behind an iron grill. (Miss Lonelyhearts 'pressed a concealed button and a little round window opened in its center. A blood-shot eye appeared glowing like a ruby in an antique iron ring.') . . . This is, in West's broad joke, the place where the modern everyman is obliged to seek his spiritual refreshment" (Nathanael West: The Art of His Life, p. 182).

[60] Water, particularly dirty water, becomes a perversion of the pure and sanctified "holy water" of the Roman Catholic Church. Alcohol, or fire water, is one example. After three drinks, Miss Lonelyhearts settles "into the warm mud of alcoholic gloom" (ML, 5). Later, Shrike claims to be "a great saint" because he can walk on his "own water" (ML, 7). "Holy water becomes urine," then, as Malin notes (Nathanael West's Novels, p. 36). Impurity is the implication.

[61] Throughout the novel, a number of perverse trinities occur. This one is the first. Furthermore, the allegorical representations of the three main characters in the novel also become a perverse triad: Miss Lonelyhearts--spiritual sentimentality, Shrike--cynical intellectuality, Betty--nonchalant naïvety.

in which an adding machine will offer numerical prayers for the deceased.[62] Like Christ who speaks very little during the last hours of His life, Miss Lonelyhearts does not talk much in this chapter or throughout the novel. Unlike Christ, who willingly accepted His cross in a passive manner, the columnist complains about his situation and actively grapples for some form of escape.[63]

Escape is the main theme of Chapter Three. The third Station is "Jesus falls the first time." In this chapter, Miss Lonelyhearts, too, fails (falls) to escape his first time. But unlike Christ who was forced to the ground by the unbearable weight of the cross (a weight which continually increased with the weight of the sins of the world), Miss Lonelyhearts throws his symbolical cross aside. Christ climbed back on His feet and again shouldered His cross because He had a dream of redeeming mankind. Miss Lonelyhearts, however, attempts to escape and walk away from his situation altogether. He realizes that "even if Shrike had not made a

[62] Malin adroitly points out that the newspaper functions for Miss Lonelyhearts as the Bible does for Christ. In addition to the perverse Biblical text of the newspaper, "both the machine and the letters written by Miss Lonelyhearts are programmed (and stonelike); they cannot save others. They remain abstract and universal, not concrete" (Nathanael West's Novels, p. 36).

[63] Christ's passive manner seems to be echoed by the Station headings, five of which are written in the passive voice. Interestingly enough, five of the chapter titles seem to bear out the inversion that is apparent in the novel proper and the Stations proper. However, those Stations that are "passive" do not all necessarily correspond to the same "active" chapter titles.

sane view of this Christ business impossible, there would be little use in his fooling himself. His vocation was of a different sort" (ML, 8). For him, religion is "hysteria, a snake whose scales are tiny mirrors in which the dead world takes on a semblance of life" (ML, 9).[64] He fears that the snake might uncoil and strike. He escapes to the peace of sleep, but his escape fails. Unlike Christ's dream of redemption which keeps him trudging onward, Miss Lonelyhearts dreams of a failure to redeem. In his first dream, he is a magician performing tricks with doorknobs: "At his command, they bled, flowered, spoke" (ML, 9). But when he tries to lead his audience in prayer, he struggles and at length fails by falling into his archrival's rhetoric: ". . . his prayer was one Shrike had taught him and his voice was that of a conductor calling stations" (ML, 9). His dream then changes to his college years. He finds himself accompanied by Steve Garvey and Jud Hume (the second perverted trinity).[65] In a drunken state, the three decide to buy a lamb and barbecue it over an open fire.[66] Miss Lonelyhearts sees it as a sacrifice to God; however, he botches the whole affair when, with his first blow,

[64] Another religious inversion is imminent here: Christ as a snake, the traditional symbol of Satan.

[65] By a simple process, the name Jud easily becomes Judas.

[66] The religious implications of the lamb make it an excellent vehicle for religious inversion and perversion. For example, note the perversion in the boys' "obscene version" of the song "Mary Had a Little Lamb" (ML, 10).

he misses the lamb and breaks the knife's blade on the rock altar. He tries to "saw at its throat, but only a small piece of blade remained in the handle and he was unable to cut through the matted wool" (ML, 10). The sacrifice is a failure; the crippled lamb crawls into the brush, and the frightened boys escape down the hill. Eventually, Miss Lonelyhearts returns and crushes the lamb's head with a stone. The lamb cannot be sacrificed in the modern age; there is no hope for rebirth in a sterile society and world. Nevertheless, with the end of sleep and the return of reality, Miss Lonelyhearts, contrary to Christ's actions, unwillingly must take back his cross and continue his journey.

The fourth Station is "Jesus meets his afflicted mother." In the fourth chapter, Miss Lonelyhearts meets his lover, a perverted mother-figure. Betty, like a mother, brings order out of chaos, calm out of the storm. Undoubtedly, the Virgin Mary came to Christ as He carried His cross and offered Him consolation and encouragement. Inversely, Miss Lonelyhearts himself goes to Betty in a "panic [that] had turned to irritation" (ML, 11) for comfort and assurance. Betty greets him at the door; she is dressed in the symbolical robe of a perverse Madonna: ". . . a crisp, white linen dressing-robe that yellowed into brown at the edges" (ML, 11). The white purity has turned to a mildewed and soiled decay. Furthermore, since Betty is nude under the robe, she is more of a seductress than a mother-figure. Nevertheless, when

Miss Lonelyhearts makes advances toward her, Betty, in a characteristic motherly fashion, puts her hand on his forehead and asks, "What's the matter? . . . Are you sick?" (ML, 12).

The inversion and perversion continue. Roman Catholics have enshrined the image of the Virgin Mary in a statue which depicts her as not only the Mother of God but the Mother of the Church, as well. Miss Lonelyhearts also sees Betty as an image of adoration; he calls her "Betty the Buddha" (ML, 12). The chapter ends on another note of inversion. Unlike the Mother Mary, the lover Betty drives Miss Lonelyhearts away from her without finding the comfort and assurance which he sought. In addition, his visit only serves to frustrate and complicate Betty's world: "Why don't you leave me alone? . . . I felt swell before you came, and now I feel lousy. Go away. Please go away" (ML, 13).

Chapter Five of Miss Lonelyhearts progressively heightens the religious inversion and perversion of "The Stations of the Cross." The fifth Station is "Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to carry his Cross." Because the weight of the cross continually increased with the weight of the sins of the world, Jesus quickly tired. According to the Bible, the soldiers met "a man named Simon of Cyrene . . . coming in from the fields, and they pressed him into service to carry the cross."[67] Miss Lonelyhearts also becomes too overwhelmed by a decadent

[67] Mark, 15:21. All Biblical quotations are taken from the St. Joseph Edition of The New American Bible.

mankind (rapers, three-named-women-writers, story tellers, and brawlers). He, along with Ned Gates, seeks temporary sanctuary in a comfort station[68] where they find a "clean old man"--the third perverse trinity (ML, 16). Miss Lonelyhearts' torture of the old man does not parallel the action of the fifth Station. As Miss Lonelyhearts twists the old man's arm, he feels as if he is "twisting the arm of Desperate, Broken-hearted, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband" (ML, 18). Clearly, the columnist forces his pain and suffering on the old man by torturing him, unlike Christ who asked for no relief at all. In addition, critic Robert Edenbaum observes that Miss Lonelyhearts inflicts pain upon the old man "because the old man (and the letter-writers) are living proof that he is not the Messiah, that salvation is not at hand."[69] Malin sees the old man as a father-figure; thus, when Miss Lonelyhearts strikes out at the old man, he "rebels against his own father,"[70] a totally opposite reaction of the Christ who was trying to please His Father. The chapter ends with somebody symbolically placing the cross

[68] Another religious inversion of the Church is evident here. Martin writes: "West's vivid mock presentation of the comfort station in terms of a church--with the toilets as altars and the booths as confessionals--suggests how low the Church can be reduced in modern life" (Nathanael West: The Art of His Life, p. 182).

[69] Robert I. Edenbaum, "To Kill God and Build a Church: Nathanael West's Miss Lonelyhearts," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Miss Lonelyhearts, p. 69.

[70] Malin, p. 43.

back on Miss Lonelyhearts' shoulders by hitting him "from behind with a /wooden/ chair" (ML, 18).

In Chapter Six, Mary Shrike becomes a perversion of the Biblical Veronica who "wipes the face of Jesus" in the sixth Station.[71] Unlike Christ who accidentally meets Veronica on His way to Calvary, Miss Lonelyhearts purposely seeks out Mary. He knows the outcome of his visit before he even leaves for the Shrike home: "No matter how hard he begged her to give Shrike horns, she refused to sleep with him" (ML, 19). After Miss Lonelyhearts arrives, Mary furthers this notion by saying: "Do you know why he lets me go out with other men? To save money. He knows that I let them neck me and when I get home all hot and bothered, why he climbs into my bed and begs for it" (ML, 22). The notion becomes reality in two instances: (1) when Mary fights off Miss Lonelyhearts' sexual advances with her dreams[72]; and (2) when Mary teasingly lets Miss Lonelyhearts strip her outside the door of her apartment, deceitfully tells him to let her

[71] The name Mary naturally carries with it religious implications. Mary Shrike also becomes a perverse Virgin Mary. She, too, is the eternal virgin, as Shrike implies when he says, "She was a virgin when I married her and has been fighting ever since to remain one. Sleeping with her is like sleeping with a knife in one's groin" (ML, 21). In addition, she is married to an anti-Christ figure. Finally, the perversion of the Mother Mary is clear when one realizes, as Hyman notes, that "Shrike's wife . . . is one vast teasing mammary image" (Nathanael West, p. 18).

[72] Edmond L. Volpe, "The Waste Land of Nathanael West," in Nathanael West: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 97.

go in and see if Shrike is there, and threateningly sends Shrike to the door in only his pajama tops.[73] Miss Lonelyhearts loses the game. Rather than wiping his face as Veronica did for Christ, Mary, in the closing moments of this chapter, figuratively slaps the face of Miss Lonelyhearts. Veronica acted out of compassion; Mary, however, acts out of selfishness. Finally, legend has it that the Holy image of Christ's face was miraculously imprinted on the cloth Veronica used. Miss Lonelyhearts leaves no "holy countenance"; instead, he receives an indelible scar from Mary.

In the seventh Station, Jesus falls for the second time as again the weight of His cross with the sins of the world becomes too heavy to bear. In Chapter Seven, Miss Lonelyhearts for the second time throws down his symbolical cross and tries to walk away from it rather than facing up to his problem as Christ did. Before his visit and evening with Mary, Miss Lonelyhearts felt that sex might be the answer. Since he does not achieve his goal with Mrs. Shrike, sex is still possible as an avenue of escape. Miss Lonelyhearts realizes that ever since God gave His kingdom to the poor and humble, misery is part of the work of salvation. Furthermore, he knows that the only way for men to counteract their miseries is through dreams.[74] Again, he feels the overwhelming

[73] The fourth perverted trinity occurs throughout this chapter in the persons of Miss Lonelyhearts, Mary, and Shrike.

[74] Light, "Miss Lonelyhearts: The Imagery of Nightmare," American Quarterly, VIII (Winter 1956), 318.

weight of his situation unbearable. He cannot write his column; he feels inadequate. He looks to Fay Doyle, who has just written him a letter, for an answer. As he calls Mrs. Doyle from a phone booth covered with graffiti, he stares at the obscene drawing of "two disembodied genitals" (ML, 26), which only serves to heighten his feeling of inadequacy. The drawing reminds him that he, too, is like a castrated man; he is impotent because he cannot help relieve the pain of suffering humanity. From the first sight of Mrs. Doyle, Miss Lonelyhearts begins to suspect that sex might not be the answer for which he is looking. He sees her in the image of a police captain who has arms that feel like thighs. When they climb the stairs to his apartment, Miss Lonelyhearts watches "the action of her massive hams; they were like two enormous grindstones" (ML, 28). His fears are verified when they reach the interior of his apartment. In a perverse act of sex, Mrs. Doyle becomes the pursuer; Miss Lonelyhearts, the pursued. The natural roles of man and woman are perversely reversed. When Fay puts her hand on his knee and reaches for a kiss, a fearful Miss Lonelyhearts draws back. When Fay grabs his head and passionately kisses him, he pulls away "with a rude jerk" (ML, 28). After intercourse, Miss Lonelyhearts crawls "out of bed like an exhausted swimmer leaving the surf" (ML, 28). Sex is not the answer; the affair turns into a confession as Fay relates her life's story. The escape is a failure: "The life out of which she spoke was even heavier than her body.

It was as if a gigantic, living Miss Lonelyhearts letter in the shape of a paper weight had been placed on his brain" (ML, 29). Once more in a symbolical fashion, the weight of the cross returns to Miss Lonelyhearts, and again, unlike Christ who shouldered His cross with the renewed vigor and strength of redemption, an unwilling and impotent Miss Lonelyhearts must resume his tribulations.

Miss Lonelyhearts again carries his symbolical cross in the next chapter. His affair with Fay Doyle leaves him physically sick. For two days, he sleeps; on the third day, his imagination comes to life.[75] He sees himself constructing an enormous cross in a pawnshop window. The cross continues to grow, and he must move it to the ocean shore where it still continues to increase in size. Perversely, then, Miss Lonelyhearts' cross becomes heavier, not with the weight of the sins of the world, but with an overabundance of pawnshop paraphernalia and marine waste. The rest of this chapter becomes an inversion and perversion of the eighth Station, "Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem." In the large crowd following Jesus as He carried His cross, there were women grieving for Him. Scripture records that Jesus turned to these women and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me. Weep for yourselves and for your children. The days are coming when they will say, 'Happy are the sterile, the wombs

[75] Obviously West is here toying with the two days of Christ's entombment and with His resurrection on the third day.

that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.'"[76] In the midst of His inevitable predicament, Christ humbly shunned the sympathy of the women and funneled that sympathy to a future age of decadent men. Unlike Christ, Miss Lonelyhearts is more than ready to welcome any sort of sympathy. He looks for compassion when Betty and Shrike visit him in his sickly condition. Unlike the women following Jesus, neither Betty nor Shrike offers Miss Lonelyhearts (another perverse trinity) any sympathy. As Randall Reid notes, when Betty comes to visit the ailing columnist, "Veneration of nature and success replaces veneration of love and sacrifice. Instead of 'Take up your cross,' Betty's advice is: Go into advertising."[77] Later, Shrike bursts into Miss Lonelyhearts' room and tortures him with various escape methods which only serve to frustrate him by reminding him not only of his problem but also of his previous failures at escaping it.[78] Shrike vocally destroys the dreamy vision of the country, the South Seas, Hedonism, art, suicide, and drugs. He even dictates a fictitious letter from Miss Lonelyhearts to Christ. The sharp rhetoric and harsh clichés further frustrate Miss Lonelyhearts, who pretends to be asleep, hoping that Shrike will stop his ever-piercing barbs. As Christ warned, Miss Lonelyhearts' sympathy remains unanswered.

[76] Luke, 23:28-30.

[77] Reid, p. 52.

[78] Shrike is always bursting in somewhere; he never just politely comes in.

The inversion and perversion continue in Chapter Nine. In the ninth Station, Jesus falls for the third time. But once again, in view of His resurrection, the Lord finds the strength to raise Himself up and continue in His sacrificial endeavor. Chapter Nine presents Miss Lonelyhearts' third failure to toss his symbolical cross aside and escape; he merely raises himself out of bed for his own selfish ends. He believes the peace and tranquility of the country might be the coup de theatre for his problem. He accompanies Betty to her aunt's farm in Connecticut. For a while, it seems as if the columnist may be correct in his assumption. Nature does not seem to be a "complete wasteland."[79] The serenity even impresses Miss Lonelyhearts: "He had to admit . . . that the pale new leaves shaped and colored like candle flames, were beautiful and that the air smelt clean and alive" (ML, 36). This Edenic image continues when later that night they sit by the pond and watch the heron, frogs, and deer in their natural, unmolested habitat. But like the other two escape attempts, this one also begins to sour. A gas-station attendant tells Miss Lonelyhearts that it is not the "hunters" but the "yid" who drive away the deer. The earlier fertility of the wooded forest transmutes into sterility. Under the "deep shade" of the trees, there was "nothing but death--rotten leaves, gray and white fungi, and over everything a funereal hush" (ML, 38). The water in the stream is too cold for swimming. The leaves

[79] Malin, p. 54.

of the trees begin to shine "like an army of little metal shields" (ML, 38). A thrush sings with a voice "like that of a flute choked with saliva" (ML, 38). An ambivalent nature now threatens rather than hides Miss Lonelyhearts. Once again, he begins to feel the weight of his symbolical cross return, but he does not accept it without a fight. In an effort to revive this lost innocence of the country, he blows a kiss to Betty, who accepts it in a sexually inviting manner. He runs to her, and as they fall to the ground, Miss Lonelyhearts smells "a mixture of sweat, soap and crushed grass" (ML, 38). This final disagreeable mixture intimates that he has not only failed to rejuvenate nature but that he has also blundered in his attempt to escape the weight of his cross.

At the beginning of the next chapter, Miss Lonelyhearts shoulders his cross again: "Miss Lonelyhearts knew that Betty had failed to cure him and that he had been right when he had said that he could never forget the letters" (ML, 38). This chapter also inverts the tenth Station. Jesus was "stripped of his clothes" and prepared for crucifixion. Perversely, Miss Lonelyhearts is stripped of his delusions of escaping his dilemma. As he watches the suffering people in the streets, he is "overwhelmed by the desire to help them, and because this desire was sincere, he was happy despite the feeling of guilt which accompanied it" (ML, 39). Christ was stripped by the soldiers. Inversely, Miss Lonelyhearts clothes himself in a robe of humility. His robe proves to be of thin

material, though. He is overjoyed when he is "spared an immediate trial" because Shrike is not in the office (ML, 39). Later, he sickens when he reads several letters and decides to do the column "without reading any of them. He did not want to test himself too severely" (ML, 39). But he cannot write the column; he must read the letters for inspiration. He picks up a smudged envelope, and "for the same reason that an animal tears at a wounded foot: to hurt the pain," he reads the letter (ML, 39). Symbolically, Miss Lonelyhearts, the perverse Christ, reluctantly consents to be crucified.

The eleventh Station is "Jesus is nailed to the Cross." Soldiers drove large spikes into the sacred hands and feet of Our Lord, and although the pain had to be excessively excruciating, Christ did not once cry out in agony. He knew that it was necessary to be lifted up in order for Him to lift the world from its sinful condition. Miss Lonelyhearts' crucifixion in the eleventh chapter is the opposite of the Lord's. In the speakeasy, he meets Mrs. Doyle's husband, Peter.[80] Once again, Miss Lonelyhearts' humility wears thin. After being left alone with the crippled Doyle, Miss Lonelyhearts is "still smiling but the character of his smile had changed. It had become full of sympathy and a little sad" (ML, 45). Staring at Doyle, the columnist notices how disordered the

[80] The name Peter becomes a religious corruption of the rock on which Christ built His Church. The rock in Miss Lonelyhearts' gut surfaces after meeting Peter, but this is the rock that destroys the columnist instead of promising rebirth as Christ's rock did.

cripple's face is: unbalanced eyes, unaligned mouth and nose, inverted chin and forehead. The columnist finds it "very difficult to keep his smile steady" (ML, 45). Eventually, Peter hands him a "Miss Lonelyhearts letter" that tells in writing what the cripple cannot say in words. In this letter, Doyle asks Miss Lonelyhearts to unite him and Fay with love and devotion. While reading this letter, Miss Lonelyhearts feels Doyle's hand brush against his, underneath the table. He rudely jerks his hand out of the cripple's grasp. Realizing his mistake, he "then drove his hand back and forced it to clasp the cripple's. After finishing the letter, he did not let go, but pressed it firmly with all the love he could manage" (ML, 47). Miss Lonelyhearts' crucifixion is not an act of self-sacrifice but an act of selfishness. The act of crucifixion is not performed by others but by Miss Lonelyhearts himself. He reluctantly "nails" or unites himself to Peter Doyle. In addition, this symbolic crucifixion is made even more perverse by the homosexual implications of the scene as the two men sit "hand in hand" at the table (ML, 47).

A negative concept of Christ's dying on the cross, the twelfth Station, occurs in Chapter Twelve. Miss Lonelyhearts figuratively dies when he fails to convey an adequate message to the Doyles. Comerchero states that the "symbolic cry that rings throughout the novel is the loud cry of Christ crucified: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Matt. 27:46)"[81]

[81] Comerchero, p. 78.

While eating dinner with Fay and Peter, Miss Lonelyhearts has the same "beatific smile" (ML, 48) that he had used earlier at Delehanty's.[82] When Fay presses her knee against him and even when she puts her thigh under his, Miss Lonelyhearts pays no attention to her. He is seeking a message that will reunite the couple, as Doyle had earlier asked. The columnist knows the time has arrived for his message when the couple begin to scrap like animals. The message comes, but it is a disappointment. The Doyles are embarrassed by his words, and even Miss Lonelyhearts himself feels ridiculous. Hysterically, he tries again, this time by shouting. He fails miserably this second time as his words do nothing but resemble Shrike's rhetoric. Out of loyalty rather than because of what the columnist said, the Doyles kiss and make up. Miss Lonelyhearts' second failure produces a feeling "like an empty bottle that is being slowly filled with warm, dirty water" (ML, 50). Unlike Christ whose body became a symbol of the baptism of purification, Miss Lonelyhearts' body fills with "dirty water" in a baptism of putrefaction. Whereas Christ's death gave eternal life and meaning to His words, Miss Lonelyhearts' figurative death conveys nothing. Even his own means of redemption, the Christ dream, remains uncommunicated.[83] The chapter ends on another note of perversion. Contrary to the passive manner of Christ's death, Miss Lonelyhearts brutally fights off his symbolic

[82] Still another perverse triad.

[83] Volpe, p. 99.

destruction by vainly gasping for breath when he rejects Mrs. Doyle's cry for help and hits her repeatedly in the face until she stops trying to hold onto him.

The thirteenth Station is "The body of Jesus is taken down from the Cross." Like Christ, Miss Lonelyhearts, in Chapter Thirteen, no longer actively participates in society and the world. The earlier stone in his gut now becomes "an ancient rock smooth with experience" (ML, 51). He moves and acts in a state of catatonia. Even Shrike's piercing jokes do not irritate him. The final lines of the chapter, however, present an inversion of the thirteenth Station. Shrike ends his "Miss Lonelyhearts game" with a rendition of the love-lorn columnist's history in what he calls "The gospel according to Shrike":

> "Let me tell you about his life. It unrolls before me like a scroll. First, in the dawn of childhood, radiant with pure innocence, like a rain-washed star, he wends his weary way to the University of Hard Knocks. Next, a youth, he dashes into the night from the bed of his first whore. And then, the man, the man Miss Lonelyhearts--struggling valiantly to realize a high ideal, his course shaped by a proud aim. But, alas! cold and scornful, the world heaps obstacle after obstacle in his path; deems he the goal at hand, a voice of thunder bids him 'Halt!' 'Let each hindrance be thy ladder,' thinks he. 'Higher, even higher, mount!' And so he climbs, rung by weary rung, and so he urges himself on, breathless with hallowed fire." (ML, 54)

Christ's body was taken from the cross down a ladder so that He could achieve His final glory. Shrike helps Miss Lonelyhearts ascend a ladder, climbing more and more towards obscurity. Furthermore, whereas the Lord's mourners awaited Him at the

foot of the cross, Miss Lonelyhearts has no one awaiting his arrival at the top of his ladder.

In the last of the garish images associated with "The Stations of the Cross," Jesus is laid to rest in His tomb. In the next chapter, the rock that appeared in the previous chapter becomes the main vehicle for the perversion and inversion of the fourteenth Station. Miss Lonelyhearts entombs himself in this rock. A different Miss Lonelyhearts now walks the streets of New York:

> He did not feel guilty. He did not feel. The rock was a solidification of his feeling, his conscience, his sense of reality, his self-knowledge. He could have planned anything. A castle in Spain and love on a balcony or a pirate trip and love on a tropical island. (ML, 56)

He plans to marry Betty since he has discovered that she is pregnant. Another ironic twist becomes clear: in an act of selfish love, Miss Lonelyhearts gives temporary life to one member of the human race, much unlike Christ who, in an act of unselfish love, gave eternal life to all members of humanity. The rock, however, becomes a perversion and inversion of the stone rolled in front of the entrance to Christ's tomb. Whereas Christ miraculously displaced the stone on the morning of His resurrection, Miss Lonelyhearts will be unable to move his stone: "The rock had been thoroughly tested and had been found to be perfect" (ML, 56). His rock will eventually bring suffocation rather than new life like the Seed which was buried in the earth twenty centuries ago.

The final Station, "The Resurrection," stands in complete contrast to the earlier fourteen frames of grotesque and violent images. As the stone rolled back and Christ emerged, the tomb overflowed with the radiant and luminous light of Christ's glory. God's promise to man was fulfilled: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."[84] The final chapter of the novel does not stand in contrast to the previous fourteen; rather, it is an extension of the violent images and acts of the earlier chapters. Naturally, no one knows what occurred within Christ's tomb before His resurrection, but one can hardly believe that He went mad and insane as Miss Lonelyhearts does before his symbolic rising. Towards noon,[85] Miss Lonelyhearts becomes feverish: The promise was soon fulfilled; the rock became a furnace" (ML, 56), not a cornerstone. He begins to halucinate: the figure of Christ on the wall transforms into a spinning fly, the furnishings in the room are dead, the deadness of the room rises up as a fish going after the fly spinning on the wall. The fish imagery, of course, brings to mind Christ, and the earlier snake image in his brain uncoils and strikes as he shouts his long-sought-for answer, "Christ! Christ!" (ML, 57).

[84] Psalms, 118:22. This scriptural concept of Christ as "stone" is particularly interesting when one considers West's rock imagery which surrounds his protagonist.

[85] West is playing with the idea of Miss Lonelyhearts as a late riser, another inversion of Christ's early-morning resurrection.

His resurrection is at hand:

> He felt clean and fresh. His heart was a rose and in his skull another rose bloomed.
>
> The room was full of grace. A sweet, clean grace, not washed clean, but clean as the inner petals of a newly forced rosebud. (ML, 57)

The blossoming flower imagery is self-explanatory. Particularly interesting, though, is the type of flower that blooms: a rose. Christ also "rose" from a tomb of stagnation (another play on words for West as well as another religious inversion).[86] In a fit of insanity, Miss Lonelyhearts finds his identification with God: "His heart was the one heart, the heart of God. And his brain was likewise God's" (ML, 57). The doorbell rings; Doyle is climbing the stairs with a pistol hidden beneath a newspaper.[87] He has come to revenge the beating and attempted rape of Fay. Miss Lonelyhearts, too blinded by a feverish rage, thinks the cripple has come as a sign from God. He wants to perform a miracle and make the

[86] Barbara Seward proposes that the rose symbolizes "Paradise, grace, and Divine Love" (The Symbolic Rose, p. 3). Hence, the rose image at this "religious" point in the novel seems quite appropriate. But the rose is also generally accepted, in terms of Freudian criticism, to represent the female sexual organs (The Symbolic Rose, p. 7). That the "miss" of this episode under discussion undergoes a purification in terms of rose imagery becomes, then, an intensely and highly ironic religious inversion: "Miss" Lonelyhearts' religious conversion is a sexual encounter rather than a spiritual experience.

[87] Ironically, Miss Lonelyhearts is destroyed by a weapon concealed beneath the medium of communication that he used so ineffectively. A second irony is also evident: the relief Miss Lonelyhearts has looked for from so many humans comes from a cold, mechanical object.

cripple "whole" (ML, 57).[88] As the columnist runs to succor the cripple with God's love, Doyle shouts a warning to him. Miss Lonelyhearts hears only the anguished cry for help from all his letter-writers. Doyle becomes frightened and tries to escape, but Miss Lonelyhearts catches him. As the two men struggle, Betty enters the stairwell and helplessly watches as the gun explodes.[89] Miss Lonelyhearts falls and drags Doyle "part of the way down the stairs" (ML, 58). In a perversion of the fifteenth Station, Miss Lonelyhearts arises to new meaning only to be ironically destroyed by him whom he hopes to redeem. The earlier rose image withers and dies. Whereas Christ's resurrection promised rebirth, Miss Lonelyhearts' death promises only destruction and decay. As Marcus Smith suggests, it certainly "means additional suffering for Doyle, Betty, and the child within her."[90] Miss Lonelyhearts' religious experience brings added significance to the subtitle of Reid's work: No Redeemer, No Promised Land.

Miss Lonelyhearts' passion and death conclude without a successful resurrection. The fifteen chapters of the novel symbolically oppose and negate the fifteen Stations.

[88] Malin writes: "West uses the word whole in a subtle manner. It is a pun on hole (an opening or wound) and holy. The word joins the three meanings, suggesting that holiness is a wound. The religious experience is bloody" (Nathanael West's Novels, p. 65).

[89] The final perverse trinity.

[90] Marcus Smith, "Religious Experience in Miss Lonelyhearts," in Nathanael West: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 90.

Other inversions and perversions between the two works are present. While the imagery surrounding Christ is associated with light and life, that used to characterize Miss Lonelyhearts is associated with darkness and death. Whereas Christ was killed by humanity, Miss Lonelyhearts is killed by a mechanical object. After His death, Christ descended into limbo and rose again on the third day to lead the waiting souls into heaven. Miss Lonelyhearts goes down to a symbolical limbo, suspended somewhere between his apartment and the ground, but never rises again. Unlike Christ, Miss Lonelyhearts loses all sense of self-identification. Moreover, Christ knew what and why He was undergoing His sufferings and needed no one to show Him the way. Miss Lonelyhearts is exactly the opposite. According to Roger Abrahams, "Though he cannot actively find an answer to his problem, he does allow himself to be spoon fed, led by the hand to the speakeasy, the country, the bed; he seems to hope that someone will show him the way."[91]

II. Miss Lonelyhearts and the Couples

> With a great deal of laughter, they decided to have three beds in their bedroom. Two beds for sleep, very prim and puritanical, and between them a love bed, an ornate double bed with cupids, nymphs, and Pans. (ML, 56)

Another structural technique that West uses in Miss Lonelyhearts is that of the protagonist's involvement with the

[91] Roger D. Abrahams, "Androgynes Bound: Nathanael West's Miss Lonelyhearts," in Seven Contemporary Authors: Essays on Cozzens, Miller, West, Golding, Heller, Albee, and Powers, p. 57.

two couples, the Shrikes and the Doyles. Miss Lonelyhearts' involvement with the Shrikes contrasts with his involvement with the Doyles. Critics Jay Martin and Randall Reid support this assumption. Martin suggests that Miss Lonelyhearts is "balanced" between the two couples and each couple is an "inversion of the other."[92] Reid mentions that Miss Lonelyhearts' "involvement with the Doyles is matched by his involvement with the Shrikes, but this second triad inverts the first . . . . The two triads define the novel's opposed forces with almost diagrammatic neatness."[93] There are, in fact, three triads and movements in the novel: (1) Miss Lonelyhearts and the Shrikes, (2) Miss Lonelyhearts and the Doyles, and (3) Miss Lonelyhearts and the male members of each marriage. Along with these movements is the placement of Betty between each triad. In effect, the novel follows this structural pattern: (1) Shrike-Betty-Mary, (2) Fay-Betty-Peter, and (3) Shrike-Betty-Peter.[94]

While the first two triads stand in contrast to one another, the third stands in contrast to itself. In the final Shrike-Betty-Peter triad, Shrike's treatment of Miss Lonelyhearts opposes that of Doyle's. Shrike takes Miss

[92] Martin, p. 182.

[93] Reid, p. 99.

[94] See Table I for a list of contrasts between the two males, Table II for a list of contrasts between the two females, and Table III for a list of contrasts between the two couples in general.

Lonelyhearts to a party and plays a vulgar joke on him; during these events, Betty leaves. Doyle brings Miss Lonelyhearts the chance to perform a miracle and gives him the final joke or escape; during these events, Betty enters.

Furthermore, in the center of each triad, Betty plays an important role in her development with Miss Lonelyhearts. In each triad, their relationship changes. During the Shrike triad, Miss Lonelyhearts seeks out Betty for assistance; during the Doyle triad, Betty seeks out Miss Lonelyhearts to offer her help; and during the final triad, Miss Lonelyhearts becomes the one who can lend assistance to Betty. According to James Hickey, their "psychological roles have been reversed."[95] During the first two triads, Miss Lonelyhearts regards Betty as his symbol of stability, but in the final triad, since their roles are reversed, Miss Lonelyhearts "regards himself as the embodiment of stability for the irritable and frightened (due to her pregnancy) Betty."[96] This entire structural pattern of the novel is too well devised to be haphazard meddling, and it is supported by the many and various other triadic images throughout the book.

[95] James W. Hickey, "Freudian Criticism and Miss Lonelyhearts," in Nathanael West: The Cheaters and the Cheated, p. 148.

[96] Hickey, p. 148.

III. Miss Lonelyhearts and the Bed

"He had only to climb aboard the bed again." (ML, 56)

Besides religious inversion and the opposing triads, West also uses a recurring activity to structure his novel. Throughout the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts seeks an escape from his dilemma. More and more, he comes to rely upon the refuge of his bed for this escape. Not only does his bed become a device for escape from everyday living and suffering, it becomes a device for structuring the novel. Six times throughout the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts goes to bed; six times throughout the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts undergoes a significant transformation in mind and characterization when he arises from his bed. The bed, then, becomes a simple catalyst and signifies that a mental and charaterizational metamorphosis in Miss Lonelyhearts is imminent. This recurring activity of Miss Lonelyhearts' retiring to the refuge of his bed gives added significance to the meaning and structure of the novel. Each bed scene highlights and symbolizes a change in the development of Miss Lonelyhearts' character.

The very first sentence of the novel gives the reader a clear picture of Miss Lonelyhearts' present state of mind and stage of development: "The Miss Lonelyhearts of the New York Post-Dispatch (Are you in trouble?--Do-you-need-advice?--Write-to-Miss-Lonelyhearts-and-she-will-help-you) sat at his desk and stared at a piece of white cardboard" (ML, 1). West's use of "Miss" and "she" balanced against the "his" not only

introduces Miss Lonelyhearts' antithetical position and life-style but also suggests his chaotic and indecisive state which can only be lessened by a proper search for balance and order. Furthermore, his act of "staring" complements his lackadaisical and immobile actions in this first section. He is mentally and physically "tired"; his actions almost remind one of watching the slow-motion-stop-action camera technique. He is tired of his new joke-machine job. He realizes that his column is not sincere; in fact, his answers are just as much a parody of meaningless belief as is Shrike's parody of the Anima Christi prayer. Miss Lonelyhearts' life runs on deadlines (another inference to his immobility) as the copyboy reminds him. But before he can finish his column, Shrike enters and his barbed rhetoric leaves the reader with the impression that Miss Lonelyhearts quickly tires of Shrike and his jokes. Leaving the newspaper office, Miss Lonelyhearts decides to walk to Delehanty's for a drink. While walking through the park, he becomes "suddenly tired" and sits down on a bench to rest (ML, 5). After resting, Miss Lonelyhearts walks to the bar where Shrike immediately appears and begins to cause trouble, but Miss Lonelyhearts is "too tired to argue" (ML, 7). When he leaves the bar, the columnist goes home in a taxi; he is now too tired to walk as he has done previously. Once home, he immediately undresses and goes to bed. Obviously exhausted, he seeks rest from his confusion and indecision with a Dostoevski novel in the refuge of his

bed. While in the bed, Miss Lonelyhearts experiences his first catalytical change.

When Miss Lonelyhearts leaves his bed the next morning, the change is complete. Chaos and indecision are replaced by a sincere concern for order and neatness, and the tiredness is replaced by hyperactivity. Both changes are evident at the beginning of Chapter Four:

> Miss Lonelyhearts found himself developing an almost insane sensitiveness to order. Everything had to form a pattern: the shoes under the bed, the ties in the holder, the pencils on the table. When he looked out of a window, he composed the skyline by balancing one building against another. If a bird flew across this arrangement, he closed his eyes angrily until it was gone. (ML, 10)

The hyperactivity becomes more apparent when Miss Lonelyhearts begins to lose his order. One day everything works against him, and he flees out of his room and into the streets to escape. All of his escape attempts fail, however. Still searching for order and attempting to alleviate the hyperactivity, he goes to Delehanty's bar again and begins to drink steadily. At this point, he acquires a peculiar characteristic: "He was smiling an innocent, amused smile, the smile of an anarchist sitting in the movies with a bomb in his pocket" (ML, 14). The smile quickly disappears when he backs into another man who punches him in the mouth before he can apologize. His anger begins to grow; order and balance are not easily acquired. He leaves with Ned Gates, and they find an effeminate old man whom they drag back to Delehanty's.

Here, Miss Lonelyhearts grabs the old man's arm and twists it violently, unceasingly. To make him stop, someone has to smash a chair over Miss Lonelyhearts' head. The hyperactivity ends in violence, and somebody, presumably Gates, takes Miss Lonelyhearts home and dumps him on his bed where he again undergoes a process of metamorphosis.

When Miss Lonelyhearts leaves his bed the next morning, his transformation is again evident. The hyperactivity is replaced by coldness. Another change is also evident: his earlier cheap clothes are now replaced by a "clean shirt and a freshly pressed suit" (ML, 18). After a warm bath, a drink of whiskey, and two "scalding" (ML, 18) cups of coffee fail to appease his coldness, Miss Lonelyhearts remembers sex: "What he really needed was a woman" (ML, 19). Sex becomes, then, not only another solution to the coldness but also a more provocative method to find order and neatness in his life: "Like a dead man, only friction could make him warm or violence make him mobile" (ML, 19). Since he has already ruined his chances with Betty, Miss Lonelyhearts tries two other possibilities, Mary Shrike and Fay Doyle. The former encounter ends without satisfaction when Mary teases Miss Lonelyhearts into a fever of sexual excitement and leaves him standing at the door. The latter encounter also ends without satisfaction when Fay becomes overly aggressive and leaves him physically sick and confined to bed. Once again, the bed becomes a catalyst, and he undergoes another change.

When he awakens three days later, the cold iciness is replaced by confusion and uncertainty. He is visited by Betty, who wants him to give up the letter business and retreat with her to the country, and he is visited by Shrike, whose satirical barbs and taunts of escape only serve to spur Miss Lonelyhearts into proving his column is not a joke. His head and brain are besieged from all sides. He is anxious to get out of bed; he wants to go back to work but is thankful when Betty gets Shrike to extend his sick leave. Uncertain as to what to do, Miss Lonelyhearts agrees to go with Betty to her aunt's farmhouse in Connecticut. On the way to the country, Miss Lonelyhearts even admits that the scenery is beautiful and the air "smelt clean and alive" (ML, 36). But in several days, this view has deteriorated to a love bout which smells like "a mixture of sweat, soap, and crushed grass" (ML, 38). Rather than curing him, the country escape has only heightened his confusion and ends in a symbol of ambiguity.

Several days later, they drive back to the city, and upon arriving, Miss Lonelyhearts "knew that Betty had failed to cure him, and that he had been right when he had said that he could never forget the letters" (ML, 38). For the first time in a long time, he begins to feel better. Desperate and confused, he anxiously decides to help the struggling mob of torn and desperate people. He begins to generalize that mankind has always fought misery with dreams, but now the newspaper,

movies, and radio have made the once powerful dreams "puerile" (ML, 39). This betrayal is the worst among them all:

> The thing that made his share in it particularly bad was that he was capable of dreaming the Christ dream. He felt that he had failed at it, not so much because of Shrike's jokes or his own self-doubt, but because of his lack of humility. (ML, 39)

Miss Lonelyhearts experiences a considerable change, here. Always before he has placed himself above his letter-writers, but now, uncertain as to where he is, he goes home and gets into bed vowing sincerely to become humble. While in bed, Miss Lonelyhearts experiences yet another metamorphosis.

When he awakens the next morning, he starts for the office and his letters, and he renews his vow of humility. His previous confusion and uncertainty are now replaced by modesty. At the typewriter, his modesty begins to peel off; after reading about a dozen letters, he decides to do the column and not read any of them. He begins to type but stops quickly as his humility has built back up; he could not write about Christ because now "even the word Christ was a vanity" (ML, 39). He looks out of a window and sees "a slow spring rain . . . changing the dusty tar roofs below him to shiny patent leather" (ML, 39). This imagery cannot be overlooked: appearances are deceiving. Humility must come from the soul, and it must have real meaning. Miss Lonelyhearts attempts to shed his "dusty tar" garments and clothe himself in a "shiny patent leather" cape of humility. There is no better way than to grovel in the mire: he picks up a letter and reads it.

Escape is not the answer. Miss Lonelyhearts' reality sorely returns, as the chapter title suggests, with the reading of the letter.

The changes in Miss Lonelyhearts are twofold at this particular time. First, never before has he attempted to continue reading the letters after they begin to "hurt"; secondly, never before has he remained completely silent following the reading of any letter. Usually, he reaches for a cigarette or bangs the typewriter keys or indulges in verbal battle with Shrike, but this time there is nothing, just total silence as the chapter ends. For all practical purposes, it would appear that "through humility," as Light states, Miss Lonelyhearts "has united himself to suffering humanity, has accepted a universe whose order he cannot comprehend."[97]

All too quickly, however, Miss Lonelyhearts' humility becomes a pretense, as Smith suggests:

> He finds that "the farther he got below self-laughter," the easier humility is to practice . . . . Back in the second chapter, Miss Lonelyhearts had said that self-laughter was a device he often used to protect himself . . . . Self-laughter is a defense against taking oneself too seriously. Therefore, Miss Lonelyhearts' "humility" is not humility at all but a kind of egotistical obsession. The contradiction is apparent also in the statement that "Miss Lonelyhearts dodged Betty because she made him feel ridiculous." That he should want to keep from feeling ridiculous is the result of pride, not humility, for the truly humble man is filled already with a sense of the ridiculous.[98]

[97] Light, Interpretative Study, p. 94.

[98] Smith, p. 81.

Previously, Miss Lonelyhearts' actions have been very egotistical. He has always tried to find some cure, some escape for himself from the suffering and the cries for help from others. Now, through humility, he hopes to find a cure for these others and disregard his concern for self-preservation. Ironically, when he assumes this mask of humility, he withdraws even further into himself. Like Herman Melville's scrivener, Bartleby, he "would prefer not to." Even though his humility is false, he has once again found a means of escape in the shape of a spiritual guise.

Miss Lonelyhearts' ironical "humility" continues in the next chapter. He accepts an invitation to accompany Goldsmith for a drink and makes himself "so humble that Goldsmith was frightened and almost suggested a doctor" (ML, 43). They go to Delehanty's bar where they meet Shrike. At this point, three changes are very evident in the columnist's "humble" character. In the first place, Shrike's "familiar jokes no longer had any effect on Miss Lonelyhearts. He smiled at Shrike as the saints are supposed to have smiled at those about to martyr them" (ML, 44). This is hardly the same Miss Lonelyhearts who earlier cringed whenever Shrike was around. In the second place, after Miss Lonelyhearts is alone with Peter Doyle, the cripple, this same smile changes again; it now becomes "full of sympathy and a little sad" (ML, 45). Again, this is quite a change from his earlier smile at Delehanty's bar back in Chapter Five when it was "an innocent,

amused smile, the smile of an anarchist sitting in the movies with a bomb in his pocket" (ML, 14). In the third place, Miss Lonelyhearts changes in his treatment of a cripple. In his first encounter with a cripple, the clean old man, Miss Lonelyhearts is motivated towards torture and violence; the suffering is placed entirely upon the cripple. Here, with Doyle, Miss Lonelyhearts' intentions are more "ethereal" and "platonic";[99] here, too, the suffering is not done by the cripple but by Miss Lonelyhearts. When the columnist reads Doyle's letter, their hands touch under the table; Miss Lonelyhearts "jerked away, but then drove his hand back and forced it to clasp the cripple's . . . he did not let go, but pressed it firmly with all the love he could manage" (ML, 47). Again, this action marks a substantial change from the previous Miss Lonelyhearts, the escape artist.

When they leave the bar together, Miss Lonelyhearts is ironically proud of his "triumphant . . . humility" (ML, 47). He begins to mentally call on Christ, but for the first time, "his call was not a curse, it was the shape of his joy" (ML, 47). They go to Doyle's apartment where they have dinner with Fay. If Miss Lonelyhearts' humility begins to take the form of meaningfulness with Peter in the speakeasy, its falseness is reaffirmed at the Doyle household. This pretension is supported first by the "bizarre and messianically hysterical"

[99] Lawrence W. Distasi, "Aggression in Miss Lonelyhearts: Nowhere to Throw the Stone," in Nathanael West: The Cheaters and the Cheated, p. 94.

style with which Miss Lonelyhearts pleads for Fay to love her crippled man[100] and secondly by the frustrated violence which the columnist inflicts upon Fay as the chapter ends. Hysteria and violence are not traits of humility. Having no idea of where he is, a frightened and disillusioned Miss Lonelyhearts retreats to the "impregnable fortress of his bed"[101] where another character change is imminent.

Returning to the sheltered confinement of his bed, Miss Lonelyhearts withdraws deeper into himself by trying to avoid external intrusions: "Before climbing aboard, he had prepared for the journey by jamming the telephone bell and purchasing several enormous cans of crackers" (ML, 50-51). The bed scene this time is appropriately given the form of a journey: "This time his bed was surely taking him somewhere, and with great speed. He had only to ride it quietly. He had already been riding it for three days" (ML, 50). That there is a change in Miss Lonelyhearts is evident in two immediate instances. First, he experiences a "calm . . . so perfect that he could not destroy it even by being conscious of it. In three days he had gone very far" (ML, 51). Never before has Miss Lonelyhearts had a single minute of peace and tranquility. Secondly, when he answers a knock at the door, a mixed group of Shrike's friends enter, but Miss Lonelyhearts makes no

[100] Smith, "The Crucial Departure: Irony and Point-of-View in Miss Lonelyhearts," in Nathanael West: The Cheaters and the Cheated, p. 106.

[101] Abrahams, p. 56.

effort to conceal his nudity. He has no sense of modesty; his humility is gone and is replaced by a sense of imperviousness. Miss Lonelyhearts' latest sojourn in his bed has transformed him into an impervious and "impersonal 'rock' in the sea of humanity."[102]

That West would use the "rock" image which stands impervious to the crashing waves of the sea seems obvious, especially in terms of the Christ-complex. As Edmund Volpe observes:

> West's use here of the symbol of despair, the rock, to symbolize his protagonist's withdrawal from reality makes clear his attitude toward the Christ dream. (The symbol may also be a satirical reference to the effectiveness of the Church in aiding suffering mankind.) And the sea, the regenerative symbol, is now, ironically, applied to the world from which Miss Lonelyhearts has withdrawn.[103]

Again, this change, like all the others, is simply another attempt to escape. Yet this inward escape is quite different from the previous outward escape to the country. Here, Miss Lonelyhearts is limiting his "sensual intake"[104] to the small confines of his room and "eating crackers, drinking water, and smoking cigarettes" (ML, 51); he is engaged in a "sensory deprivation through withdrawal."[105] In the country, Miss Lonelyhearts was trying to enlarge his sensual and sensory

[102] Smith, "Crucial Departure," p. 106.

[103] Volpe, pp. 99-100.

[104] DiStasi, p. 95.

[105] DiStasi, p. 95.

perceptions by a return to the more simple and more natural elements in life. Gratification through artificial means contrasts with gratification through natural means.

The first crucial test of the "rock's" stability comes from Shrike, one of the visitors who disturbs Miss Lonelyhearts' calm sleep. The inebriated Shrike angrily insists on fighting Miss Lonelyhearts, whose nudity has insulted his wife. But a different Miss Lonelyhearts now remains immovable in the face of Shrike's bitter attack: "Shrike dashed against him, but fell back, as a wave that dashes against an ancient rock, smooth with experience, falls back. There was no second wave" (ML, 51). Realizing his ineffectiveness, Shrike becomes "jovial" and invites Miss Lonelyhearts to a party (ML, 51). Miss Lonelyhearts remains calm and casually eats crackers while pretending to ignore Shrike, something he has not previously been able to accomplish. Shrike struggles to get through to Miss Lonelyhearts, and he also changes, quite appropriately, from the butcher bird to a "gull trying to lay an egg in the smooth flank of a rock, a screaming, clumsy gull" (ML, 51).

Eventually, Miss Lonelyhearts dresses and decides to accompany them because "with his rock identity," as James Hickey suggests, "ML [sic] believes he can now save crippled humanity because he can now believe the shallow truisms he has been struggling with for so long."[106] Ironically, however,

[106] Hickey, p. 138.

Miss Lonelyhearts is now probably more impotent than before because his rock identity implies that he has lost all regard for sympathy.[107] Moreover, he is almost worse than impotent; he has become a potential danger to those he wants to save.[108]

While riding in the cab on the way to the party, Mary Shrike sits on Miss Lonelyhearts' lap, "but despite her drunken wiggling the rock remained perfect" (ML, 52). This is quite a transformation from the earlier Miss Lonelyhearts who almost tried brutally to rape her. When they arrive at Shrike's apartment, the crowd cheers Miss Lonelyhearts and surges up to greet him, but "he stood firm and they slipped back in a futile curl" (ML, 52). Miss Lonelyhearts smiles at his effectiveness--not the humble, innocent smile that he had used with the Doyles but the smile of pride: "He had turned more than a dozen drunkards. He had turned them without effort or thought" (ML, 52). Still enthralled by his potency, Miss Lonelyhearts hardly notices a small splashing of attention from Betty. Shrike begins the "Miss Lonelyhearts game" by distributing the letters. He even reads some of them aloud, but the pain and sickness which previously stifled and overpowered Miss Lonelyhearts now have no effect: he "stood it with the utmost serenity; he was not even interested. What goes on in the sea is of no interest to the rock" (ML, 53). Shrike even hands a letter to Miss Lonelyhearts who holds it

[107] Hickey, p. 138.

[108] Hickey, p. 138.

for a short time and then drops it without reading it. After another harangue by Shrike, in which he repeats the word pain five times, has no effect on Miss Lonelyhearts, Betty leaves, and Miss Lonelyhearts quickly follows her because "she too should see the rock he had become" (ML, 53).

Miss Lonelyhearts' involvement with Betty becomes the second crucial test of the "rock's" stability. Miss Lonelyhearts is so far withdrawn that he does not recognize Betty the person. Instead, the object "rock" recognizes the object "party dress" which Betty is wearing. They go for a soda, and the rock begins to tell the party dress lies; he does not lie deliberately but simply because "he was only trying to say what she wanted to hear" (ML, 53). This is not the Miss Lonelyhearts of the earlier stages in the novel. Betty's laughter dissipates into tears; consequently, Miss Lonelyhearts begins to search for the rock: "It was still there; neither laughter nor tears could affect the rock. It was oblivious to wind or rain" (ML, 55). After hailing a cab, Miss Lonelyhearts forces Betty to get in, and she begins to babble endlessly through her sobs. She tells him that she is pregnant, and he "put the rock forward and waited with complete poise for her to stop crying" (ML, 56). Eventually, he asks her to marry him, but she insists on having an abortion. At this point, Miss Lonelyhearts literally pleads not with Betty but with the object:

> He begged the party dress to marry him, saying all the things it expected to hear, all the things that

> went with strawberry sodas and farms in Connecticut. He was just what the party dress wanted him to be: simple and sweet, whimsical and poetic, a little collegiate yet very masculine. (ML, 56)

Betty succumbs to his pleas and consents to marry him and have the baby if, in return, Miss Lonelyhearts will quit the column and the paper and find another job. When Miss Lonelyhearts leaves Betty, he has (for the first time in the novel) no guilt pangs; in fact, "he did not feel. The rock was a solidification of his feeling, his conscience, his sense of reality, his self-knowledge. He could have planned anything" (ML, 56).

Another change is obvious in Miss Lonelyhearts at this time. In the previous episode with Betty, she is the one who is confident that everything will be all right in the country, and he is the one who is determined that "he could never forget the letters" (ML, 38). In the present instance, according to Marcus Smith, Miss Lonelyhearts is the one "who believes (foolishly) that everything will turn out all right if only he thinks it will, if only he believes strongly enough that he can override the unpleasant, ugly facts of the situation."[109] Miss Lonelyhearts is no longer the morbid-minded individual who cannot get the letters out of his head. After he leaves Betty, he is filled with self-gratification: "The rock had been thoroughly tested and had been found perfect" (ML, 56). Because the rock has withstood its two crucial tests, rejecting Shrike and appeasing Betty, Miss Lonelyhearts feels he is now

[109] Smith, "Religious Experience," p. 85.

ready to associate and identify with suffering humanity, something he has not yet been able to accomplish. He is more determined than ever to ride it out to its end: "He had only to climb aboard the bed again" (ML, 56). The bed has become an increasingly important crutch in his search to find Christ.

When Miss Lonelyhearts awakens the following morning, the bed has again been instrumental in his transformation. He is experiencing a fever which "promised heat and mentally unmotivated violence" (ML, 56). It does not take long; the "rock" soon becomes a boiling "furnace" (ML, 56). Miss Lonelyhearts' withdrawal from the external world has driven him mad, and the bed has provided the journey for this final metamorphosis. (West's surrealistic style during this episode complements and symbolizes Miss Lonelyhearts' trip towards insanity.) The boiling furnace begins to purify him so that he will be ready to accept Christ. Ironically and pathetically, the only way Miss Lonelyhearts can discover Christ is by going mad and insane. With madness and insanity, the union becomes feasible:

> He was conscious of two rhythms that were slowly becoming one, his identification with God was complete. His heart was the one heart, the heart of God. And his brain was likewise God's.
>
> God said, "Will you accept it now?"
>
> And he replied, "I accept, I accept."
>
> He immediately began to plan a new life and his future conduct as Miss Lonelyhearts. He submitted drafts of his column to God and God approved them. God approved his every thought. (ML, 57)

At this point, the ringing of the doorbell returns Miss Lonelyhearts to reality. He sees Peter Doyle slowly

hobbling up the stairs and believes the cripple's entrance to be a sign from God. He knows that he can cure the cripple with an embrace; this miracle would affirm his conversion. The irony is highly and tensely dramatic, here, as the converted Miss Lonelyhearts goes to "save" the cripple who has come to blow his brains out. As Miss Lonelyhearts charges down the stairs, Doyle yells a warning at him, but Miss Lonelyhearts does not comprehend the situation and continues his charge down the stairs. Frightened, Doyle tries to escape, but Betty enters at the bottom of the stairs and closes off his exit. Miss Lonelyhearts grasps the cripple, and as they struggle, the concealed weapon explodes. Miss Lonelyhearts falls and drags Doyle with him as he rolls "part of the way down the stairs" (ML, 58).

Appropriately, Miss Lonelyhearts does not even fall all the way down the stairs. This action echoes his whole existence which has steadily been a "part-of-the-way" journey. Whether or not he survives this shooting is uncertain; presumably, however, he does die since the novel ends here. With this idea in mind, the stairway becomes his final resting place. Ironically, this "death bed" is the only bed that does bring him the peace and tranquility for which he has so desperately sought. At any rate, Miss Lonelyhearts' progressive change has been carefully structured around these crucial transformational bed scenes. Miss Lonelyhearts' bed becomes more than a protective fortress, more than a sheltered hideaway,

indeed, throughout the entire novel, Miss Lonelyhearts' bed has been a magic carpet, taking him to exotic states of mind and through captivating modes of characterization.

IV. Miss Lonelyhearts and the Microcosm

> 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. Man against Nature . . . the battle of the centuries. 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 worth while. (ML, 30-31)

Miss Lonelyhearts, like Balso Snell, also contains a microcosmic scene. The focal episode, here, is the sacrifice of the lamb. This scene binds, culminates, and reflects the fictive devices that West uses throughout the entire novel; thus, the scene becomes an important clue to understanding and interpreting the structure and unity of Miss Lonelyhearts.

Once again, themes and techniques previously traced and discussed are evident in this scene. The religious inversion and perversion of "The Stations of the Cross" are present. The entire scene is a miniature modern Calvary: a lamb paraded through the public streets and led to a hill to be sacrificially murdered. But, inversely and perversely, this scene is comparable to the ritualistic Black Mass or the hedonism of the Satan cult. The narrative device of both this scene and the novel are similar: the action of each is filtered through Miss Lonelyhearts' consciousness. The dream motif

that prevails throughout the novel is present in the focal scene. This entire scene itself is a dream, and Miss Lonelyhearts is elected priest, attempts to play the Christ-role, and blunders the whole experience. This visual illusion also illustrates the appearance versus reality motif present in the novel. The small journey Miss Lonelyhearts makes in this scene reflects the larger search for Christ he makes during his modern Calvary march throughout the novel. The antithetical images of stone and flower appear in this scene.[110] Furthermore, the struggle between the boys and the lamb mirrors the physical, mental, emotional, psychological, and spiritual battles that occur within and among the characters in the novel.

In addition to these devices, others are also present. The spirit versus flesh motif echoed throughout the novel in Miss Lonelyhearts' alternating searches for the spiritual fulfillment of Christ and the material means of escape also appears in the argument concerning the existence of God and the decision to barbecue a lamb and "sacrifice it to God" (ML, 19). The book's light and dark imagery which accentuates the spirit-flesh dichotomy is present in this scene's bright rays of sunlight and threatening shadows. The violence, pain, and cruelty that occur within the focal episode also prevail throughout the book. This dream scene also contains sexual

[110] For a discussion concerning the rock imagery as a structural device, see DiStasi, pp. 97-99. For a discussion concerning the flower imagery in relation to Miss Lonelyhearts' "sexual ambivalence," see Hickey, p. 134.

overtones: both the lamb and its offering are referred to in terms that suggest "virgin rape."[111] Thus, sex becomes coupled with violence just as it does again and again in the pages of the novel. In this microcosmic scene, the lamb slips free and hides in the underbrush, and the boys attempt to escape the reality of their situation by fleeing down the hill. These actions echo the escape motif that recurs in the novel: all the characters, particularly Miss Lonelyhearts, try to escape and hide from reality. The disillusion and despair of the boys after botching the sacrifice coincides with the disillusion and despair of the characters who inhabit the pages of the novel. Finally, the botched throat cutting reflects the grotesque and bizarre features of the novel.

There are, however, other fictive devices in this microcosmic scene that are also consistent with the action of the entire novel and also help to structure and unify the work. Throughout the sacrificial attempt, the action of the three boys is barbaric and inhumane. They work themselves into a "frenzy" (ML, 10) and become so irrational that they blunder the ritual while the suffering, mutilated lamb struggles to escape. Their actions are animalistic; in fact, at one point "they bolted" (ML, 10), another animal-like response. Throughout the novel, humans are likewise described in animal imagery. Miss Lonelyhearts himself has a chin which

[111] Comerchero, p. 91.

is "shaped and cleft like a hoof" (ML, 4), and his hysteria takes the form of a snake. While talking to Betty, his laugh becomes a "bark" (ML, 13); while talking to Mary, he promises to "be one gay dog" if she will only sleep with him (ML, 23).

Shrike, too, is surrounded with animal imagery. His name itself refers to the butcher bird. His face is a triangular form, the shape of a poisonous snake's head. Near the end of the book, he becomes a "gull" (ML, 51). His wife calls him a "skunk" (ML, 20), a "pig" (ML, 21), and a "swine" (ML, 21). His girlfriend, Miss Farkis, is "cow-eyed" (ML, 6). Shrike is also the dead pan, a reference to the goat god of flocks and shepherds who was half man and half animal.[112]

The Doyles are also described in animal terms. Fay has a "brow like a pigeon" (ML, 27) and buttocks that are "hams" (ML, 28). Peter walks with motions that resemble a "partially destroyed insect" (ML, 44), and his wife refers to him as a "shrimp of a cripple" (ML, 30).

The characters in the novel also react at times with animalistic responses. Both Betty and Mary behave "kittenish"

[112] In "Nathanael West's Miss Lonelyhearts: Between the Dead Pan and the Unborn Christ" from Modern Fiction Studies, XII (Spring 1966-Winter 1967), Robert J. Andreach points out that many characters in the novel "are part-Pan . . . the clean old man has a voice 'like a flute' and the cough of a goat; Broad Shoulders' husband's face is 'like the mask of a devil,' the sight of whom temporarily paralyzed her from the 'waist down'; the woman with rheum in her eyes 'wears heavy boots on her torn and bleeding feet'; the boy with the violin is a 'kid'" (p. 254). Indeed, many "goat" and "kid" references appear throughout the novel.

in Miss Lonelyhearts' presence (ML, 13 and 22, respectively). Mary gives Miss Lonelyhearts a kiss that becomes a bird's "peck of reward" (ML, 22). Fay's "cooing" over the telephone is another bird reference (ML, 27). At one point in the book, Shrike stalks away from Miss Lonelyhearts (ML, 45). Perhaps the most poignant image of animal behavior occurs at the Doyle household. Peter falls to the floor and imitates a growling dog while Fay kicks him and eventually leaves with a "snort of contempt" (ML, 48). Later, she grunts like a pig (ML, 49). The novel becomes, then, a means of debasing and dehumanizing man's position to that of the irrational animal.

The sacrificial scene contains another instance which coincides with the action of the novel: the wasteland motif. During the scene, the boys convert a pleasant hill in a meadow with a fertile atmosphere into a frightening grotto of matted wool and lamb's blood. Indeed, the blood bath engulfs everything: rocks, flowers, underbrush, earth. The crushed head surrounded by swarming flies captures the stench and decay now present in the area. This sterility also pervades the entire work. Early in the book, Miss Lonelyhearts notices that the air smells waxy and artificial as though it is heated electrically. Even though it is springtime, there are no visible signals of rebirth in the city, only those of sterility:

> The decay that covered the surface of the mottled ground was not the kind in which life generates. Last year . . . May had failed to quicken these soiled fields. It had taken all the brutality of July to torture a few green spikes through the exhausted dirt.

> What the little park needed . . . was a drink.
> (ML, 4-5)

The urban land is undergoing a drought with no relief in sight.

In the country, death and decay are similarly ubiquitous in the form of "rotten leaves, gray and white fungi, and over everything a funereal hush" (ML, 38). Even the heavens are sterile: the sky, at one point, appears gray "as if it had been rubbed with a soiled eraser" (ML, 5); later, the sky looks "canvas-covered and ill-stretched" (ML, 27). Even the sun is "dying" (ML, 19).

The wasteland imagery appears elsewhere in the novel. Miss Lonelyhearts' room is undoubtedly a portrait of barrenness containing only a bed, a dining table, and two chairs. The walls, for the most part, are bare. The atmosphere of the room also takes on a semblance of deadness since the room is "as full of shadows as an old steel engraving" (ML, 8). This semblance later becomes a reality when, just prior to Miss Lonelyhearts' "religious experience," everything in the room is "dead," and existence has become a "black world of things" (ML, 57).

The decay is so extreme in Miss Lonelyhearts' world that it invades his imagination. In one instance, he daydreams not about a lush tropical island but about a desert filled with rust and grime, surrounded by a fence covered with posters and graffiti, and populated by his letter-writers who are "gravely forming the letters MISS LONELYHEARTS out of

white-washed clam shells" (ML, 25). Eventually, they run out of shells and begin to use junk in the form of "faded photographs, soiled fans, time-tables, playing cards, broken toys, imitation jewelry" to finish the lettering (ML, 26). A second instance of sterility invading Miss Lonelyhearts' daydreams occurs when he imagines himself in the window of a pawnshop which is itself a material wasteland cluttered with "the paraphernalia of suffering" (ML, 30). Miss Lonelyhearts begins to fashion a human being from the piles of junk, gives up, begins forming various geometric figures, but is still unsatisfied. He, therefore, erects an immense cross which soon becomes too large for the pawnshop and is moved to the shore of the ocean. Here, marine refuse is everywhere available, and he labors to finish the construction of the "junk" cross with "bottles, shells, chunks of cork, fish heads, pieces of net" (ML, 31). Miss Lonelyhearts' world is truly a black and "dead . . . world of doorknobs" (ML, 9).

The wasteland motif is not only evident in the setting but also in the sexual deadness and sterility of the characters, one instance of which occurs in the focal episode. Miss Lonelyhearts' savage knife attack of the lamb serves to demonstrate his "castration anxiety."[113] According to Hickey, this desire for sexual impotence during the slaughtering of the lamb is a close parallel to the "ancient totem ritual" performed

[113] Hickey, p. 133. Comerchero also notes the "castration anxiety" in this scene (The Ironic Prophet, p. 99).

by children.[114] This ritual has been interpreted by Sigmund Freud, who states that a child's "totemic interests" arise primarily from the "fear of castration" since it is a "narcistic" precondition of the Oedipus complex.[115] The noted psychoanalyst argues that the child's attitude in respect to his "totem animal" is extremely "ambivalent," showing symptoms of both affection and abhorrence in large degrees.[116] Miss Lonelyhearts himself is immoderately ambivalent during the lamb sacrifice and, thus, apparently affirms his castration anxiety. Malin supports this position when he suggests that Miss Lonelyhearts is unable to use the knife because he himself desires to be "cut."[117]

Like the impotent Miss Lonelyhearts in the microcosmic scene, the characters that inhabit the novel are also sexually dead.[118] As Volpe suggests, the characters are "breathing dead men /wearing/ death masks /as an/ alternative to facing the horrors of life."[119] Obviously, the letter-writers themselves are a meaningful picture of the sexual deadness that

[114] Hickey, p. 133.

[115] Freud, "Totem and Taboo," in The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, p. 907.

[116] Freud, "Totem and Taboo," p. 907.

[117] Malin, p. 40.

[118] Since Miss Lonelyhearts' sterility has previously been traced and discussed, it does not bear repeating in the present discussion.

[119] Volpe, p. 94.

permeates the work, but they are not the only victims. The men are unable to love, and the women, even if they could, are unable to accept love; both men and women are "cut off" from each other.[120] Shrike is the dead pan whose "features /are/ huddled together in a dead gray triangle" (ML, 6). Since his wife cannot sexually satisfy him nor he her, Shrike seeks those who offer a type of "sterile sex,"[121] women like Miss Farkis, who has "long legs, thick ankles, big hands, a powerful body, a slender neck and a childish face made tiny by a man's haircut" (ML, 6). Mary Shrike is a sexual pawn exploited by others. She is the eternal virgin incapable of sexually giving herself away: "Sleeping with her is like sleeping with a knife in one's groin" (ML, 21). She knows the word love but cannot associate it with sex. Miss Farkis has both a masculine appearance and behavior. The clean old man is sickenenly effeminate. Fay Doyle is a bitch: she has legs that resemble "Indian clubs" (ML, 27), breasts that look like "balloons" (ML, 27), arms that feel like "thighs" (ML, 27), and buttocks that resemble the action of "two enormous grindstones" (ML, 28). Fay uses sex as a commanding, demanding outlet which allows her to dominate others. She knows about sex but not about love. And finally, Fay's husband, Peter, is a diminutive cripple who is "all dried up" (ML, 28).

[120] Thomas H. Jackson, "Introduction," to Twentieth Century Interpretations of Miss Lonelyhearts, p. 3.

[121] Volpe, p. 94.

This sexual impotency accentuates the sterility present in the wasteland motif.

Another technique that underscores the wasteland imagery is the use of sterile phallic symbols. In the sacrificial scene, two such symbols are present. The first is the ineffective knife which breaks on the altar. The second is the deadly stone used to crush the lamb's head.[122] Likewise, the many stones in the novel become sterile phallic symbols. When thought of in connection with Miss Lonelyhearts' sexual impotence, his rock (stone) identity is not only appropriate but also inevitable. Other sterile phallic images appear. During the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts smokes many cigarettes. This tubular image of the burning cigarette with ashes is a symbol of decay rather than one of regeneration. Similarly, the phallic shadow of the lamp-post that appears spearlike and pierces Miss Lonelyhearts as he walks by also promises death and suffering. The phallic snake whose scales reflect the dead and sterile world represents Miss Lonelyhearts' hysteria. From the junk and waste accumulated in a pawnshop, Miss Lonelyhearts builds a phallus. Later, at the Doyle household, Miss Lonelyhearts becomes a phallic "empty bottle, shiny and sterile . . . that is being slowly filled with warm, dirty water" (ML, 50). The novel itself ends with a

[122] According to Robert Graves, the stone has been a phallic symbol since early Greek times when it was used as the center of orgiastic rituals honoring the gods and goddesses (The Greek Myths, I, p. 56 and p. 102, notes 1 and 2, respectively).

phallic explosion of a gun which presumably brings death to the protagonist. The most poignant sterile phallic symbol, however, is the shadow of the Mexican War obelisk:

> The stone shaft cast a long, rigid shadow on the walk in front of him . . . . It was lengthening in rapid jerks, not as shadows usually lengthen . . . . The monument . . . seemed red and swollen in the dying sun, as though it were about to spout a load of granite seed. (ML, 19)

Once again, there is no rebirth promised, only a sterile threat of death. Throughout the novel, the phallic symbols foreshadow decay and desolation.

Perverse sex is another theme that appears in the sacrificial scene. As previously mentioned, this episode suggests the rape of a virgin. Furthermore, Hyman states that "this nightmarish scene, with its unholy suggestions of the sacrifices of Isaac and Christ, embodies the book's bitter paradox: that sadism is the perversion of love."[123] This perversity of sex is similarly present throughout the novel. Miss Lonelyhearts himself is a man hiding behind a woman's name and possessing latent homosexual tendencies. These tendencies surface twice in the novel. The first implication of homosexuality is when Miss Lonelyhearts and his drunken friend, Ned Gates,[124] find a "clean old man" in a public washroom and take him to Delehanty's speakeasy. Here,

[123] Hyman, pp. 25-26.

[124] This surname also characterizes and suggests femininity since a gate, in Freudian criticism, usually symbolizes the female sexual organs.

they torture him with questions concerning his "homosexualistic tendencies" (ML, 17). When the old gentleman refuses to answer, Miss Lonelyhearts sadistically twists the man's arm because he is reminded of an earlier incident in his childhood when he had stepped on a small frog: "Its spilled guts had filled him with pity, but when its suffering became real to his senses, his pity had turned to rage and he had beaten it frantically until it was dead" (ML, 17). Miss Lonelyhearts now "frantically" tortures the old man and cannot be stopped until someone breaks a chair over his head. The second implication of Miss Lonelyhearts' homosexuality occurs with Peter Doyle. At the speakeasy, the columnist and he sit holding hands beneath the table while "disguising the meaning of the clasp with a handshake" (ML, 47). At the Doyle home, Peter tears open Miss Lonelyhearts' fly. Later, they stand holding hands in the parlor like a "sweet pair of fairies" (ML, 49).

Sexual perversion is evident elsewhere in the novel. Miss Lonelyhearts cruelly tugs at Betty's nipple and brutally strips Mary in the hallway while her husband, wearing only his pajama top, hides behind the door. Fay Doyle aggressively attacks Miss Lonelyhearts and drags him into bed. Later, she gooses him and even tries to arouse him beneath the table while supping with her husband. Shrike lets his wife go out with other men so that she will be "hot and bothered" when she gets home (ML, 22). Mary Shrike perversely teases

Miss Lonelyhearts with the play of her breasts by coquettishly exposing a track medal that she won in school. At the speakeasy, the columnist's colleagues jest about female writers who have been gang raped. Harold S.'s thirteen-year-old-deaf-and-dumb sister has been raped by a child abuser. Broad Shoulders' husband keeps "a hammer, scissors, knife, stone lifter etc" under his pillow and lies in his own waste under the bed to scare his wife (ML, 41). In fact, the correspondents express themselves so completely with very little reservation that they become exhibitionists.[125]

Sexual perversion is further supported by the use of perverse sexual images, two of which appear in the focal episode. According to Otto Fenichel, M. D., a standard equation applied to dreams is that of "knife = penis and cutting = coitus."[126] Thus, the cutting of the lamb's throat with a knife becomes the first image of perverse copulation in the dream scene. The second image is the crushing of the lamb's head with the phallic stone. The novel similarly contains perverse images of copulation: the many cigarettes being put into the mouth, Miss Lonelyhearts being pierced by the shadow of a spear, a tie being jammed into the mouth, a groin being tormented by a metaphorical knife, a tent being

[125] Philippe Soupault, "Introduction to Mademoiselle Coeur-Brise (Miss Lonelyhearts)," in Nathanael West: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 111.

[126] Otto Fenichel, M. D., The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis, p. 223.

entered by a skeleton that flowers at every joint, a rolled-up newspaper being slapped into the mouth, a "tortured high light" being suspended "on the blade of a gilt knife (ML, 30), and a "reclining statue" being penetrated anally by a train rolling into the station.

Two communication gaps in the form of arguments occur during the dream sequence, one over the existence of God, the other over the bargaining price of the lamb. This problem of communication is another theme that dominates the book. Arthur Cohen remarks that the novel underlies "West's bitter conviction that there is no communication in our world. Man shares nothing with man."[127] The most obvious lack of communication surrounds the protagonist. Miss Lonelyhearts' actual speeches comprise only a very small percentage of the novel. He finds it impossible to reply to Shrike's bitter rhetoric. He is unable to communicate to his letter-writers; in fact, he never actually finishes a single column in the reader's presence. Shrike tells Miss Lonelyhearts to handle the Christ myth with a "thick glove of words" (ML, 33); however, language is crippled, and words become the spoiling force of the Christ dream.[128] The "saint" cannot communicate when nobody listens. Miss Lonelyhearts eventually locks all communication out by jamming his telephone and confining himself to his room; he

[127] Arthur Cohen, "The Possibility of Belief: Nathanael West's Holy Fool," Commonweal, LXIV (June 15, 1956), 278.

[128] Jackson, p. 3.

becomes an impersonal and incommunicable "rock" which cannot be penetrated.

Other characters exhibit communication problems. Both married couples in the novel constantly argue and feud. Their marriages are desperately torn apart by a lack of expressive reason. The letter-writers are an extremely potent vignette of the book's mass incommunication. Unable to receive aid and meaning from those who are "close" to them, the letter-writers turn to Miss Lonelyhearts for help. The recurrent misspellings, unapostrophized contractions, incorrect subject-verb agreement, and other grammatical errors in the letters themselves further substantiate the difficulty of communication. Shrike communicates through elaborate gestures and a "blank" face (ML, 6). His barbed and bitter rhetoric is "besliming" in its misuse.[129] Mary Shrike always talks in headlines; she says more with her breasts and track medal than with her voice. Fay Doyle is "not very good at writing" letters and wants to talk personally to Miss Lonelyhearts (ML, 25). When she does speak, though, her voice speaks words with a monotonous tom-tom beat. The language she uses is "even heavier than her body" (ML, 29). Peter Doyle has a momentary wordless conversation with Miss Lonelyhearts. When the cripple does finally speak, it is "labored" (ML, 45) and resembles "a jumble of . . . retorts" (ML, 46). He communicates

[129] Jackson, p. 3.

with the picturesque motion of his hands. Knowing that he would have trouble communicating verbally with the columnist, Doyle has brought along a prepared letter to do his talking. Even the letter itself is a poor excuse for a means of communication.

Lack of communication is also present in several episodes of the novel. At Betty's apartment, Miss Lonelyhearts' tongue becomes a fat thumb, and he cannot say what he wants to say. At Delehanty's, he backs away from the bar while daydreaming and bumps into another patron, spilling the latter's glass of beer. Before Miss Lonelyhearts can excuse himself, the patron punches him in the mouth. The "clean old man" cannot understand the homosexual-scientific jargon which Miss Lonelyhearts and Ned Gates use to question him. Betty misunderstands Miss Lonelyhearts' sexual advances. When Doyle speaks to him in the speakeasy, the columnist watches more than he listens. Even the final scene contains a dramatically ironic lack of communication. Throughout the novel, words and language have been cumbersome, more an agonizing or revengeful cry than a reasoning means of communication.[130]

Another device that occurs in the dream sequence is the relationship between performer and audience. Jud exhibits "his farm training" while bargaining for the lamb (ML, 9).

[130] Jackson, p. 3. Jackson also remarks that "at no point in the novel does speech or writing function in the service of anything closer to reason than an imitation or burlesque of it" (pp. 3-4).

The boys parade the lamb through the streets. The hill where they "perform the sacrifice" becomes a stage (ML, 10). They set the stage by converting a rock into an altar, covering it with flowers, and laying the lamb among the flowers. Miss Lonelyhearts, the elected priest, performs a chant while his two assistants watch. This performer-audience relationship also manifests itself throughout the novel. At Betty's, Miss Lonelyhearts throws a tantrum with gestures similar to "those of an old-fashioned actor" (ML, 12). When he finishes, he menacingly asks, "Didn't you like the performance?" (ML, 13). At the El Gaucho restaurant, Mary acts Spanish with movements that are "languorous and full of abandon" (ML, 22). Later in the evening, she leans over the table mimicking the way her mother died. Peter's pictorial hands occupy the center ring for the one man audience of Miss Lonelyhearts. At the Doyle apartment, the husband and wife stage a "dog and cat scrape" while Miss Lonelyhearts watches. Soon, Miss Lonelyhearts occupies the spotlight as he gives the Doyles his fruitless message with the help of a "stage scream" (ML, 49). At the party, Shrike's voice and gestures imitate those of a "circus barker" (ML, 52). Throughout the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts attempts to play the Christ-role. The letter-writers demonstrate their expressiveness by contending for Miss Lonelyhearts' attention, and he, in turn, performs for his reading-public audience. Even Shrike's verbal lectures are staged performances. Performers and spectators alike inhabit the confines of West's novel.

A final device that appears in the focal sequence is surrealism. The grotesque and bizarre distortion to create a dream-like state plus the all-inclusive blood bath are predominantly surrealistic images. Other wild surrealistic images saturate the novel. Within his being, Miss Lonelyhearts contains "the opposition of the perfect sinner and the perfect saint."[131] He is both saint and devil, an unmistakable paradox. Elsewhere, a tongue is described as a "fat thumb" (ML, 11), breasts as "tiny red hats" (ML, 19) and "pink-tipped thumbs" (ML, 38), a heart as a "lump of icy fat" (ML, 18), a skull as a blossoming rose, a war monument as a phallus, a woman as a giant breast,[132] a man whose fat smiling cheeks look "like twin rolls of smooth pink toilet paper" (ML, 25), another woman as a "tent, hair-covered and veined" (ML, 26), another man as a "skeleton in a water closet" (ML, 26), still another woman as a party dress, and still another man as an impervious rock. There is also a young girl with a cancerous hole where her nose should be, a room where all the furnishings are dead, and an ivory Christ decoratively nailed to the wall instead of a cross. But the most startling surrealistic image is the facial description of the crippled Doyle:

> His eyes failed to balance; his mouth was not under his nose; his forehead was square and bony; and his round chin was like a forehead in miniature. He

[131] Cohen, p. 276.

[132] Philip Roth brings West's metaphor to reality but perverts the image by having a man transform into a mammary object in The Breast.

> looked like one of those composite photographs used by screen magazines in guessing contests. (ML, 45)

Throughout the novel, the surrealistic images help highlight the impossibilities of this impossible world.

The religious inversion and perversion, the inversion of couples, the catalytic conversion of character, the dream, the journey, the escape, the antithetical images (spirit-flesh, light-dark, human-animal, appearance-reality, stone-flower, sex-violence, and performer-audience), the disillusion and despair, the wasteland setting and characterization, the pain, the cruelty, the violence, the bizarre and grotesque, the sterile phallic symbols, the perversity of sex, the perverse sexual images, the lack of communication, the surreal, and the microcosm are all fictive devices that help structure and unify Miss Lonelyhearts. This novel is West's best structured and unified work. The many and varied themes and techniques are distinctive and extremely well-polished. The obscurity of Balso Snell has disappeared. In his last two novels, as the next chapter discusses, West will continue to exploit these fictive devices in other realms of artistic experience.

CHAPTER IV

A COOL MILLION AND THE DAY OF THE LOCUST

I. A Cool Million: The Dismantling of the American Dream

> "America is the land of opportunity. She takes care of the honest and industrious and never fails them as long as they are both. This is not a matter of opinion, it is one of faith. On the day that Americans stop believing it, on that day will America be lost." (CM, 74)

Although A Cool Million is Nathanael West's weakest novel, there are some structural devices that highlight the work. A few of these devices are totally new for West, but most of them are old treasured relics from his first two novels that he again polishes and renovates for public display. The novel itself is a savage attack on get-rich-quick schemes that have obsessed Americans from the beginning. The structural techniques West uses underscore this attack.

One unifying device is the narrator's mock-heroic dialogue and tone. As "our hero" Lem progressively becomes more dismantled after each episode, the mock-heroic tone undercuts the American dream and suggests that it, too, is being dismantled. The sublime becomes absurd, emotions are turned to sentimentality, serious subjects are treated in a

frivolous manner.[133] The burlesque is complete; the mock-heroic style ridicules and literally destroys what most Americans believe is the sublime enhancement of the new land: an opportunity to get rich quick. As Martin observes, the "novel not only reveals deceptions of the American dream; it is in every way a precise reversal of the very literary form in which that dream had been best expressed."[134] The artificiality of the novel's language suggests the artificiality of the American dream.

The use of the mock-heroic tone also accentuates the ironic structure of the novel. Lemuel Pitkin,[135] a poor young man from Vermont, decides to take the advice of Nathan Whipple and goes to the city to seek his fortune. Following this decision, however, Lem's fortune seems to be foretold in a short scene with Tom Baxter, the town bully, who shakes hands with Lem after being outsmarted in a fist fight:[136]

> Lem gave his hand in return without fear that there might be craft in the bully's offer of friendship. The former was a fair-dealing lad himself and

[133] Throughout the novel, West uses many incongruities of style and manner that underscore these methods.

[134] Martin, p. 241.

[135] The first name brings to mind Jonathan Swift's Lemuel Gulliver (in this case, Gullible), who also takes a journey. The surname suggests that Lem is always "kin" to "pit" falls.

[136] David D. Galloway, "A Picaresque Apprenticeship: Nathanael West's The Dream Life of Balso Snell and A Cool Million," in Nathanael West: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 42.

> he thought that everyone was the same. However, no sooner did Baxter have a hold of his hand than he jerked the poor boy into his embrace and squeezed him insensible. (CM, 78)

The dismantling has begun. Throughout the novel, Lem, the naïve sucker, undergoes numerous instances of luck which continually evaporate into misfortune and result in a further dismantling.[137] Lem is duped first by Lawyer Slemp, who forecloses on Lem's mother's house; second by "Shagpoke" Whipple, who practically steals Lem's mother's cow for collateral on a thirty dollar loan; and third by numerous confidence men who deceive him repeatedly. Lem loses his teeth, an eye, a thumb, his scalp, a leg, and he is finally felled by an assassin's bullet in his heart. Ironically, during the course of the novel, the hero's situation is continually worsened rather than bettered, and his wealth never comes. Like Miss Lonelyhearts, who places too much trust in the Christ myth, Lemuel Pitkin oversteps the boundaries in his trust for the success myth and is consequently defeated by his "unquestioning faith."[138]

The novel's ironic structure does not end here, though. The fortunes of two of the main characters are paradoxical statements, further proof that serves to debase the American dream to the level of cliché. While Lem is striving hard to be honest, he becomes more dismantled at every turn. On the

[137] Martin, p. 239.

[138] Galloway, p. 42.

other hand, Betty Prail is living a life of sin and shame as a prostitute, and she is in good condition, both physically and financially. Paradoxically, Betty Prail is successful even though degraded, while Lem, in his honest search for a cool million, is unsuccessful and physically maimed.

The structure of the novel also revolves around the recurrent action of the separation and meeting of "Shagpoke" Whipple and Lem. Each time Whipple and Lem meet again in the novel, the former has risen more in power and prestige while the latter has become more dismantled and further away, if possible, from his fortune than when he first started. After each meeting, the two undergo a significant change of fortune, one for the better, one for the worse. West ironically juxtaposes the rise of Nathan Whipple, who gains personal identity and success through underhanded Facist political actions, and the fall of Lemuel Pitkin, who loses his personal identity through honest dealings and physical disfigurement. Only after death does Lem gain success and, then, as a martyr for Whipple's cause.

Another structural device used in the novel is the appearance versus reality motif. Real intentions are consistently hidden behind false masks. Con men perpetrate underhanded dealings. A Chinese laundry establishment is a front for Wu Fong's whorehouse, where the room styles and décor are as fake as their inhabitants. Sylvanus Snodgrasse disseminates trite American propaganda to occupy a crowd's

attention while his henchmen circulate through the listeners and pick their pockets. A public museum is a front for an organization "disseminating propaganda of the most subversive nature" (CM, 162). This motif is used most frequently in the non-comic situations where Lem seems to have become lucky but in reality is only about to become more misfortunate.[139] The appearance versus reality motif helps illuminate the overall theme that the American dream, even though it glitters immensely, is a fraud, a sham, a delusion, an illusion.

Finally, like the first two novels, this novel contains a microcosmic scene that helps structure and unify it. This focal episode binds and reflects the fictive devices used throughout the novel. This novel's microcosmic unit is the museum display entitled the "Chamber of American Horrors, Animate and Inanimate Hideosities" (CM, 162-166). Indeed, this miniature "Chamber" is only a mirror reflecting the hideosities contained within the larger "Chamber" of the novel itself. The style of this miniature section is strictly surrealistic and, thus, parallels the mock-heroic style of the novel since both forms of writing rely on exaggeration.

The museum display is divided into two presentations: "inanimate and animate"; hence, the spirit versus flesh motif that is present throughout the novel is visible in the focal scene. The "animate" portion of the show is entitled "The

[139] Martin, p. 239.

Pageant of America or A Curse on Columbus" (CM, 163), thus echoing the futility and disappointment of the American dream presented in the novel. The pageant ends with a brief playlet filled with the same clichés that saturate the novel. In the playlet, there are several actions that are consistent with the overall action of the novel: the slick con artist taking advantage of the unsuspecting and naïve; the quick change of scene, mood, and tone; the optimistic search (journey motif) for the get-rich-quick scheme; the savage attack and dismantling of the American dream (dream motif); the antithetical device of performer-audience; and the figuration of the fierce struggle to survive and endure (battle motif). The playlet even has an ironic structure closely paralleling the ironic structure of the novel.

Other themes and techniques occurring both in this microcosmic scene and throughout the novel are the wasteland motif (both in setting and characterization), the sterile phallic symbols, the disillusion and despair, the appearance versus reality motif, the coupling of sex and violence, the perverse sex and perverse sexual images, the lack of communication, the nakedness-clothing motif, the descriptions of humans in animal terms, the violence, the pain, and the cruelty. The recurrent appearance of these fictive devices throughout the novel aid the reader in interpreting and deciphering the structural and thematic unity of the novel just as the focal episode does.

These, then, are the structural building blocks West utilizes in A Cool Million. The American dream is shackled and degraded by virtually the entire repertoire of West's fiction. It becomes as fake as Wu Fong's laundry establishment or the traveling museum of hideosities. Political satire and subversive propaganda are not West's mainstay. Critic Daniel Aaron observes that West's "slapstick ends in a scream; the self-hatred of his characters, their efforts--sometimes grotesque and always painful--to find answers or relief, only curdles his pity. In A Cool Million . . . the real culprit is not capitalism but humanity."[140] West was definitely not at home in this novel. The precision and forcefulness return in his last novel, The Day of the Locust.

II. The Day of the Locust: A Star Is Dead

> He left the road and climbed across the spine of the hill to look down on the other side. From there he could see a ten-acre field of cockleburs spotted with clumps of sunflowers and wild gum. In the center of the field was a gigantic pile of sets, flats and props. While he watched, a ten-ton truck added another load to it. This was the final dumping ground. He thought of Janier's "Sargasso Sea." Just as that imaginary body of water was a history of civilization in the form of marine junkyard, the studio lot was one in the form of a dream dump. A Sargasso of the imagination! And the dump grew continually, for there wasn't a dream afloat somewhere which wouldn't sooner or later turn up on it, having first been made photographic by plaster, canvas, lath and paint. Many boats sink and never reach the Sargasso, but no dream ever entirely disappears.

[140] Daniel Aaron, "Late Thoughts on Nathanael West," The Massachusetts Review, VI (Winter-Spring 1965), 316.

> Somewhere it troubles some unfortunate person and some day, when that person has been sufficiently troubled, it will be reproduced on the lot. (DOL, 132)

In his last novel, West again uses fictive structural devices that he had previously utilized in his first three novels. Just as A Cool Million is a bitter attack on the almost mythical American dream, The Day of the Locust is a savage attack on the superficial glitter and glamour surrounding America's dream factory: Hollywood. Hollywood is not only a microcosm of America but also of the world, of life. To structure and unify his novel, West, therefore, uses his yet unexhausted supply of themes and techniques which best enable him to illuminate and accentuate the deception, the hypocrisy, and the illusion of "Tinsel Town, U. S. A."

At times, the structure and presentation of the novel even closely parallel that of a motion picture.[141] The loose and indistinct quality of the early scenes dissipates, and the focusing becomes more clear and directed as character delineation progressively becomes "tighter, faster, and more merciless."[142] The movie tendencies of the novel are apparent enough, but other literary merits that aid in making the book structurally sound are also evident.

The Day of the Locust is structured so that it, like Balso Snell, comes full circle. By simply looking at the

[141] Richard B. Gehman, "Introduction," to The Day of the Locust, p. xix.

[142] Gehman, p. xix.

beginning and ending of the novel, one can see that there is a definite pattern which could not have been left to chance; there is an intelligent guiding force behind this pattern in the genius of Nathanael West. In the opening scene, West lays the foundation of the work which will be completed later in the ending.

The novel opens with the "great din" of horses' hooves coupled with the chaotic action of a crowd "moving like a mob . . . all jumbled together in bobbing disorder . . . a wild sea . . ." (DOL, 59). Almost immediately, the reader is disoriented, and the scene impatiently waits for someone to take control. Eventually, a man appears who gives the chaotic army some direction by screaming at the top of his lungs, "Stage Nine--you bastards--Stage Nine!" (DOL, 59). The disorientation and illusion are broken by the director's scream; the scene becomes a Hollywood lot, and the army becomes a façade, simply a crowd of performers lacking direction. This opening scene is strategically comparable to the closing scene of the novel.

The final scene opens with the great din of another chaotic mob whose riotous motion is also described with bobbing disorder and sea imagery. Once again, the reader is disoriented, and the scene impatiently awaits someone who will take control of the situation. This time, the direction comes from a painter (appropriately similar to the earlier movie director, who paints portraits on film instead of

canvas), named Tod Hackett, who blends the riot into a mentally painted holocaust entitled "The Burning of Los Angeles." Even the director's scream is mirrored in the painter's final insane scream, imitating the ambulance siren. Just as before, the disorientation and illusion are shattered with a scream; both the scene and the mob become façades, simply a crowd of betrayed spectators turned momentary performers who are rioting more out of boredom and disappointment than from any apparent cause. This final scene, then, parallels the imagery, structure, progression, sequence, and realization of the opening scene with almost diagrammatical neatness.[143]

Another technique West uses again in this novel is that of a recurrent action around which the book is structured. This action involves Tod Hackett's painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles." The first reference to the portrait is simply an allusion to its existence, implying that Tod has begun the formulation of it in his mind. With each recurrent reference to the portrait, it becomes more vivid, more detailed, and more developed. Eventually, the brief sketches presented progressively throughout the novel culminate in the final mob scene. These brief sketches become the basis for the inevitable final product which Tod frantically captures on his mental canvas. The crowd dramatically fades onto that canvas,

[143] A further instance of the novel's coming full circle exists in each scene's depiction of Hollywood. Hollywood holds promise at the beginning but those promised dreams are shattered and left unfulfilled at the end.

becoming the realization of "The Burning of Los Angeles." Ironically, Tod gets to live the picture rather than paint it.

Each recurrent mention of the portrait, then, helps structure the novel as well as foreshadow the final madness and fate of the major characters and cheated crowd. Furthermore, Tod's mentionings of the portrait occur each time after Faye Greener has rejected him. He, therefore, captures his frustration and disillusionment in the final masterpiece, immortalizing his own suffering in the embodiment of the cheated crowd.[144] As Tod's portrait comes more and more into focus, becomes more and more tight in character development, and finally culminates in the realization of destruction and holocaust, so does the novel. At the last, "The Burning of Los Angeles" is mentally finished, and the creative process, like the novel, has come full circle.

Another technique that dominates the novel, thus aiding in structuring and unifying it, is the recurring use of ritual. Ritual and ceremony surround the lifestyle of Hollywood: role-playing, make-up, rehearsals, costuming, choreography, stage settings, out-takes, re-takes, takes, cuts, stuntmen, and stand-ins as well as the signing of autographs, the traveling in expensive limousines, and the living in large mansions. The use of ritual, then, highlights the falsity and mockery

[144] West himself captured his own frustration and disillusionment in a poem entitled "Burn the Cities" which, like Tod's portrait is concerned with "the apocalyptic reversal of history" (Martin, p. 329). See Appendix for a copy of West's poem.

of Hollywood. The characters "perform" rituals so often that their lives become a memorized and rehearsed script, an imitation of countless scene "takes" redone again and again.

The entire novel is saturated with ritualistic tendencies. In the cockfight, there is the ritual of arming the cocks with gaffs, the ritual of thinning feathers, the ritual of billing the birds to anger them, and the ritual of battle. Perhaps the two major rituals are dance-oriented. The first occurs at Miguel's camp and becomes a ritual of mating. Faye and Miguel dance in a manner suggestive of animal mating rites or even reminiscient of primitive mating rites:

> They approached each other with short mincing steps. She held her skirt up and out with her thumbs and forefingers and he did the same with his trousers. They . . . danced back to back with their buttocks touching . . . . While Faye shook her breasts and her head, holding the rest of her body rigid, he struck the soft ground heavily with his feet and circled her. (DOL, 117).

The second major dance ritual occurs during the party at Homer's house. Again, Faye is the object as Miguel, Earle, and Abe vie for her attention. Beginning with Faye's sexually suggestive body movements, the ritual continues through a series of dances that progressively become heightened in movement and meaning. The ritual finally ends in violence with Earle kicking Abe across the room, Abe squeezing Earle's testicles in revenge, and Miguel smashing Abe's head into the wall.

Other rituals exist elsewhere: Harry's performance of involuntary spasms and contortions, the lizard's attempts to

catch the flies, Harry and Faye's quarrels consisting of a laughter-song and dance routine, Earle's stance at his store and his method of rolling and lighting cigarettes, the funeral home's recording of a Bach chorale at Harry's funeral, Maybelle Loomis' frantic search to find an appreciative audience for Adore's talents, little Adore's singing of "Mama Doan Wan' No Peas" with overt sexual gestures and an expert "blues" imitation (DOL, 140-141), Faye's facial and body gestures and expressions, Homer's hands and their elaborately patterned gestures, and Faye's "Viper" song that she wails like a dirge. These endless rituals, like any other, soon become meaningless, empty, and sterile, thus suggesting that the moral, spiritual, and emotional lives of the characters are just as hollow and meaningless.

The recurrent theme of appearance versus reality is another method used in structuring and unifying the novel. The artificiality, falsity, and hypocrisy of Hollywood become very evident. Throughout the novel, the glamour, folklore, and legend of Hollywood symbolically represent "the surface show and activity overlay/ing/ an absence of meaning and purpose."[145] The appearance versus reality motif underscores the illusion and deception of Hollywood. In this "tinsel" town of legend and dream, everyone is trying to be what he is not, and nothing seems to be as it appears:

[145] Martin S. Day, "Nathanael West," in History of American Literature: From 1910 to the Present, II, 312.

> A great many of the people wore sports clothes which were not really sports clothes. Their sweaters, knickers, slacks, blue flannel jackets with brass buttons were fancy dress. The fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office; and the girl in slacks and sneakers with a bandana around her head had just left a switchboard, not a tennis court. (DOL, 60)

And later, Tod makes his way through set after set of different cities and countries which appear to be actual but, in reality, are artificial. The deserts of sand dumped by a truck upon one set, the load of snow carried by another truck to another scene, and the picnic where actors are "eating cardboard food in front of a cellophane waterfall" (DOL, 131) are all demonstrations of the deception surrounding Hollywood. This image of Hollywood's deceitfulness is strengthened during a movie production of Waterloo. Because of a producer's oversight, he does not recognize that Mont St. Jean is still under construction and orders the French army to charge the hill. The battle ends when the "whole hill folded like an enormous umbrella and covered Napoleon's army with painted cloth" (DOL, 134). Still later, as Tod overlooks the canyon, "he couldn't see the city in the valley below . . . but he could see the reflection of its lights, which hung in the sky above like a batik parasol" (DOL, 159). The implication is clear: the glamour, excitement, and legend that surrounds Hollywood makes it impossible to see the deceit, corruption, and falsity that lies beneath its surface.

Even though Hollywood is the main vehicle for the disclosure of pretentiousness, other images are also prevalent. Homer's house becomes a conglomeration of artificiality:

> . . . the front door . . . was of gumwood painted like fumed oak and it hung on enormous hinges. Although made by machine, the hinges had been carefully stamped to appear hand-forged. The same kind of care and skill had been used to make the roof thatching, which was not really straw but heavy fireproof paper colored and ribbed to look like straw. (DOL, 80-81)

At Harry's funeral, the chapel "lights went on behind imitation stained-glass windows which hung on the fake oak-paneled walls" (DOL, 128). Claude Estee, imitating the spirit and atmosphere of his Southern-styled colonial mansion, calls for his Black slave to bring him a mint julep. Incongruously, a Chinese servant enters with a Scotch and soda garnished to appear like a mint julep incognito. At the Cinderella Bar, patrons witness the performance of a female impersonator. Appearing in a "tight gown of red silk" (DOL, 145), the young man sings a lullaby:

> He had a soft, throbbing voice and his gestures were matronly, tender and aborted, a series of unconscious caresses. What he was doing was in no sense parody; it was too simple and too restrained. It wasn't even theatrical. This dark young man with his thin, hairless arms and soft, rounded shoulders, who rocked an imaginary cradle as he crooned, was really a woman.
>
> When he had finished, there was a great deal of applause. The young man shook himself and became an actor again. He tripped on his train, as though he weren't used to it, lifted his skirts to show he was wearing Paris garters, then strode off swinging his shoulders. His imitation of a man was awkward and obscene. (DOL, 146)

Even though the man is an actor, his performance as a woman is more real and convincing than his true masculinity, let alone more real and convincing than any of West's female characters.[146] And finally, during the final mob scene, a reporter, talking into a microphone, describes the scene as follows:

> "What a crowd, folks! What a crowd! There must be ten thousand excited, screaming fans outside Kahn's Persian tonight. The police can't hold them. Here, listen to them roar."
>
> He held the microphone out and those near it obligingly roared for him. (DOL, 176)

Everything within this California pleasure dome glitters with artificiality.

The characters in the novel similarly put on affectations and poses which are soon stripped off by their revealing actions and speech. By removing the mask of pretense, the characters are exposed as being ugly, immoral, corrupt, vain, hypocritical, and smug. This delineation of character presented in the constant and recurring "putting on" and "stripping off" of affectations and poses helps to structure and unify the novel by illuminating the artificiality and emptiness of the Hollywood dream.

Harry Greener impresses not only Homer but the reader as well with his skillful burlesque act. Yet his actions and speech soon reveal the shallowness of his character. A failure in the show business world, he is now no longer able to

[146] Martin, p. 133.

separate his real world from his fantasy world. He is so involved in the stage world that in his real illness, he makes a phony "second act curtain groan" (DOL, 119).

Earle Shoop is introduced to the reader as a typical cowboy attempting to play the role of a gentleman. However, he is soon disclosed to be "an image of virile idiocy."[147] He pretends to be the legendary cowboy, making his tall stature even more heroic by adding three inches of bootheel and five more inches of Stetson hat. His entire repertoire of language consists of three phrases: "Lo, thar," "Nope," and "I was only funning."[148] He is out of place in the novel. His "Crude hoe-down" fails to become an integral part of Faye and Miguel's ritual dance (DOL, 117). Everything that he does is awkward and unseemly. He does not belong in Hollywood but in the distant cattle ranges of Texas.

The only successful person in the novel is Claude Estee, but even he lives in a make-believe world. His Beverly Hills mansion resembles the colonial architecture of the Southern Civil War period. Claude himself pretends to be a Confederate colonel with a large belly when he is actually "a dried-up little man with the rubbed features and stooped shoulders of a postal clerk" (DOL, 68-69).

Abe Kusich appears to be an important and influential person of normal stature, a person who possesses name cards

[147] Hyman, p. 35.

[148] Hyman, p. 36.

with complimentary credits from authoritative sources. Yet he soon becomes a grotesque dwarf and an overemphasized buffoon. He is a bookie selling illusions and false hopes to all the suckers who will buy them.[149] He is a three-foot dwarf acting like a six-foot bully.

Homer Simpson is first described as an innocent hick, incognizant of the ways of the world. He comes from a small Iowa town and an existence of almost "deep sleep and plant-like calm."[150] His hands even echo this existence; they seem to exist separately from his body and take on animal characteristics that are instinctive and innocent in their nature. Shortly after he meets Faye, however, his "big hands dance at the end of his arms," and "several times his hands moved forward to comfort her but he succeeded in curbing them" (DOL, 97). Later, his hands become unbearable in their itching:

> He rubbed them against the edge of the table to relieve their itch, but it only stimulated them. When he clasped them behind his back, the strain became intolerable. They were hot and swollen. Using the dishes as an excuse, he held them under the cold water tap of the sink. (DOL, 99)

As Faye begins to leave, Homer wishes to say something polite, something to express his fondness for her. He fails to do so because he is too shy, but "his hands were braver. When Faye shook good-by, they clutched and refused to let go" (DOL, 100). After Faye leaves, Homer finds himself alone, but "his hands

[149] Light, Interpretative Study, p. 174.

[150] Light, Interpretative Study, p. 176.

kept his thoughts busy. They trembled and jerked, as though troubled by dreams . . . . Their fingers twined like a tangle of thighs in miniature" (DOL, 101). Homer's hands betray his apparent hick-like naïvety. They dramatize his suppressed emotional needs and "embody all of Homer's repressed violence."[151] His hands are the hands of a strangler, a rapist.[152]

Maybelle Loomis is no less a hypocrite than anyone else. As Donald Torchiana suggests, concealed beneath her pleasant appearance "is the everpresent savagery, the hushed imperative in her voice, with its threat of the strap should Adore refuse any audience his talents."[153] Probably because of her misdirected influence, Adore is very similar to his mother. He first appears to be an adorable small child with stately, almost military, dignity and an acute sense of manners. Yet, when his mother turns her back to him, Adore reveals the true impudent and impish child that he is by making faces at Homer: "He rolled his eyes back in his head so that only the whites showed and twisted his lips in a snarl" (DOL, 140). One minute he is an accomplished blues singer effectively using highly suggestive sexual gestures, and the next he is playing with a toy boat while imitating the sound of a tugboat's

[151] Hyman, p. 37.

[152] Hyman, p. 37.

[153] Donald T. Torchiana, "The Day of the Locust and the Painter's Eye," in Nathanael West: The Cheaters and the Cheated, p. 267.

whistle.[154] Later, at the final mob scene, Adore attempts to play a practical joke on Homer, again makes faces at him, and finally strikes him in the face with a stone. Adore's mother aptly terms him "the Frankenstein monster" (DOL, 140).

Throughout the work, Tod Hackett represents the sensitive awareness of the painter's eye. But despite his awareness of the entrapment of the cheated, Tod is still one of Faye's admirers. Consequently, he himself becomes entrapped, even though he realizes the falseness of Faye as a love object. Tod is also portrayed as "both a humane and essentially nonviolent man,"[155] which is perfectly illustrated when he attempts to stop Faye's whoring profession with a lecture on venereal disease and sex hygiene. Yet, at the same time, he "constantly dreams of raping Faye, of smashing her self-sufficiency with a blow, and of clubbing her with a bottle."[156]

Faye Greener becomes pretentious in two ways: (1) in her attempt to play the role of a lady, and (2) in her attempt to appear innocent. When Homer first meets Faye, she possesses all the characteristics of a gentlewoman: the overworked politeness, "the artificial voice, the elaborate gestures, the lustful suggestiveness."[157] But when Homer invites

[154] Torchiana, p. 267.

[155] Reid, p. 148.

[156] Reid, p. 148.

[157] Light, Interpretative Study, p. 175.

her to eat with him, she discloses her true nature. She straddles a chair, rests her head on her folded arms, and becomes worse than a pig in her eating habits and manners. Faye is also foiled in her attempt to play innocent. When the reader first meets her, she is "dressed like a child of twelve in white cotton dress with a blue sailor collar. Her long legs were bare and she had blue sandals on her feet" (DOL, 94). Later, she reprimands a pass from Tod by scolding, "Momma spank" (DOL, 107). As Stanley Hyman mentions, Faye is metaphorically stripped at the final party to reveal what she really is:

> She receives her five male guests wearing a pair of green silk lounging pajamas with the top three buttons open. By the time she dances with Miguel all the buttons are open. In the succeeding fight her pajamas are badly torn, and she takes off the trousers, revealing tight black lace drawers. When Homer finds her in bed with Miguel, she is naked.[158]

Without ever ceasing to be her "true" self, fatal Faye unknowingly becomes her film fantasy double. She uses her sexuality as a weapon to achieve fame and stardom, loving only attractive men or those men who can influence and further her film career.[159]

Finally, to structure and unify his work, West again uses the microcosmic technique. The cockfight in Homer's

[158] Hyman, p. 42.

[159] Edenbaum, "From American Dream to Pavlovian Nightmare," in Nathanael West: The Cheaters and the Cheated, p. 207.

garage becomes more than a mere episode of the pain, violence, and cruelty that pervade the entire novel; it becomes an analogue, the focal episode of The Day of the Locust. The fictive devices that reflect, bind, and culminate the issues of the cockfight are the same fictive devices that reflect, bind, and culminate the motifs of the novel.

The pain, cruelty, and violence so evident in the cockfight are also prevalent throughout the novel. Similarly, the cockfight illustrates "the cruelty of natural competition, a competition in which the weak are always doomed."[160] Even though the big red cock fights bravely (dream motif), his gallantry remains futile (the search: journey motif); he is no match for the overpowering glossy bird. Just as in the cockfight, the futility of the oppressed invades the whole novel.

A cockfight, of course, involves two birds who ritualistically battle one another for survival. Throughout the novel, there are numerous analogies between the fighting birds and the fighting humans who also spar with one another. Just as the rituals of gaffing, billing, and battling dominate the cockfight, so does ritual and ceremony saturate the novel. Predominant throughout the cockfight is the use of bird imagery, specifically dealing with the birds themselves, bird feathers, and bird blood. Similarly, the novel itself contains clusters of bird imagery.

[160] Reid, p. 156.

During the fight, the big red cock becomes so battered, bruised, and wounded that it is almost incapable of further movement. After all of Abe's efforts to revive the bird fail, he attempts to stimulate the bird to violence by sadistically squeezing the bird's penis. When this perversity fails, he tries by scratching its testicles. This particular event demonstrates several fictive devices that similarly recur in the story: sex coupled with violence, sterile phallic symbols, perverse sex, and perverse sexual images.

The "pit" for the cockfight is a scene of countless odds and ends, a junkyard of materials. This wasteland setting of the cockfight also pervades the entire novel. Hollywood and its setting is also a junkyard of odds and ends, a collection of waste. The land is sterile, the houses are artificial, the sets are fake. The wasteland motif also touches the moral, spiritual, psychological, and emotional lives of the characters. Surrealistically, everything and everybody possess a surface life, a kind of death-in-life existence.

Other themes and techniques used to structure and unify the novel are also present in this focal episode. Throughout both the cockfight and the novel, disillusion and despair reign; artificiality and deception flood in; surrealistic style and content dominate. In the cockfight, the relationship between the crowd of men and the fighting cocks becomes clear: the men are spectators demanding satisfaction from the

birds; the birds are performers attempting to satisfy the men. In this light, the entire book can be divided into spectators "whose emotional needs demand satisfaction" and performers "who are attempting to satisfy the emotional needs of others."[161] Finally, throughout the scene, humans are described as animals and given animal characteristics, an action that consistently recurs throughout the work.[162] The cockfight, then, helps put the book into focus, illuminates and dramatizes themes, delineates character, and probably even parallels West's own artistic method in the book--that of unveiling grotesqueries.

[161] Light, Interpretative Study, p. 173. Light also states that these roles "occasionally shift, for in the world of grotesquerie all men are both performers and spectators; for instance, Faye Greener serves as a performer in her screen roles, but off the screen she attempts to satisfy her emotional needs by thumbing through a pack of mental dream-cards until she finds one on which to dream" (p. 173). Similarly, the cheated and tricked population are essentially spectators, but they become performers during the final mass riot.

[162] Particularly interesting in the context of the fighting cocks is West's use of bird imagery to describe and characterize humans: Abe has "a high-pitched cackle" (DOL, 63), and he struts. Miguel states that Abe "ought to wear gaffs" (DOL, 156). Faye is egg-like in her self-sufficiency. Her laugh is "shrilly" (DOL, 122); she trills and peacocks; she sobs "in a lower key, almost a coo" (DOL, 122). In Tod's apocalyptic portrait, Faye is "straining to hurl herself along at top speed . . . enjoying the release that wild flight gives in much the same way that a game bird must when, after hiding for several tense minutes, it bursts from cover in complete, unthinking panic" (DOL, 108). The Gingo family exchange "a series of thick, explosive gutterals" (DOL, 129), reminiscent of the conversation between three quails at an earlier point in the novel. Faye and Miguel perform a dance very similar to a mating ritual for birds. Furthermore, all the characters spar with, peck at, and pit with each other, suggesting obvious analogies between themselves and the fighting game-cocks of the focal episode.

The Day of the Locust is an apocalyptic view of Hollywood--its tinsel dreams, its undercurrent of lethal violence. In his last novel, West's crowd of cheated and betrayed individuals (a crowd that was barely noticeable in the background of the Trojan horse in Balso Snell, came to the forefront as the suffering multitude in Miss Lonelyhearts, banded together to form the National Revolutionary Party of Leather Shirts in A Cool Million) realize their apocalyptic fury and chaos that has been silently accumulating and subtly threatening since their first appearance in Balso Snell. Meaninglessness and nothingness have lost their importance and function.[163] Nothing remains but aridity and insanity; the long-awaited, overdue, inevitable Apocalypse (the Day of the Locust) arrives:

> Out of the smoke, onto the land, came locusts as powerful as scorpions in their sting. The locusts were commanded to do no harm to the grass in the land or to any plant or tree but only to those men who had not the seal of God on their foreheads. The locusts were not allowed to kill them but only to torture them for five months; the pain they inflicted was like that of a scorpion's sting.[164]

Metaphorically, West's cheated and betrayed crowd becomes a swarm of ravaging locusts, starved and deprived on a strict diet of Hollywood culture, society, and individuality.[165]

[163] James Bowden, "No Redactor, No Reward," in Nathanael West: The Cheaters and the Cheated, p. 294.

[164] Revelation, 9:3-5.

[165] Widmer, "The Last Masquerade: The Day of the Locust," in Nathanael West: The Cheaters and the Cheated, p. 192.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

> As a witness and a seer, Nathanael West is missed and will be missed even more in the new epoch that is about to begin . . . . Never more than during this last year have I regretted the loss of the creator of Miss Lonelyhearts. The automobile accident in which he died is one of those news items that make one distrustful of fate. Nathanael West did not complete his work. What he did leave us remains among the most significant testimonials one can ask for in literature.[166]

> Today West is at last getting just recognition for his special, remarkable talent; more and more rooters--after his death--are helping his reputation to come into its own. After his death; that is the final ironic, tragic, Westian joke.[167]

S. J. Perelman jokingly characterizes Nathanael West as two creatures: one as a normal-sized man with normal desires, and one as a dwarfish imp who stands "only eighteen inches high," emerges only during the night, strikes cats "with a tiny umbrella," and sleeps in the bottom drawer of a bureau.[168] Perelman, no doubt, and anyone who reads West is probably more inclined to believe the latter characterization. Like Perelman's bizarre description of West the author, all of

[166] Soupault, p. 113.

[167] Gehman, p. xx.

[168] S. J. Perelman, "Nathanael West: A Portrait," Contempo, III (July 25, 1933), 1, 4.

West's characters are grotesque "cripples,"[169] emotionally, spiritually, mentally, or physically. They are cheated and betrayed humanity whose lives, fortunes, and dreams are insecure.

All of West's novels are tales of insecurity.[170] Perhaps one of West's scenes best illustrates this point. Little Adore Loomis plays a game of cat-and-mouse by placing a purse tied to a string in front of Homer Simpson. If Homer (thinking there was money in the purse) reached for the object, Adore would yank the purse out of his reach. Metaphorically, this scene represents the cheat of life. Homer, as his name suggests, is timeless man; the purse is life with all its promises; Adore is fate, the evil prankster who maliciously jerks life away from man at the most inopportune times. David Galloway suggests that throughout West's fiction "runs the warning that life is a hoax, an April-fool purse embroidered with dreams."[171] For West, there was no hope for humanity; even dreams and illusions were not the answer. In West's fictive world, "the dream inevitably metamorphised into nightmare."[172] Ironically and paradoxically, man's only hope for

[169] W. H. Auden, "West's Disease," in The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays, p. 243.

[170] Light, "Nathanael West and the Ravaging Locust," American Quarterly, XII (Spring 1960), 46.

[171] Galloway, "Nathanael West's Dream Dump," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, VI (Winter 1963-1964), 63.

[172] Galloway, "Dream Dump," p. 46.

life is in death, as the endings of Miss Lonelyhearts and A Cool Million testify.

Nathanael West's literary career began in the bowels of the ancient, mythical Trojan horse and ended in the bowels of the modern, mythical Trojan horse, the dream factory of Hollywood.[173] His novels are "dark parables" envisioning and questioning the meaning of human existence.[174] This quality of "dark parables" as well as the elements of violence, pain, and torture which are evident throughout West's novels are vaguely reminiscent of the "blackness" that dominated the literature of late Nineteenth Century America, particularly in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe.[175] Indeed, West's "black" elements, methods, and tendencies closely resemble those of Poe.[176] When describing Poe's literary methods, Harry Levin could have just as easily been referring to West: ". . . the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque, the fearful colored into the horrible, the witty exaggerated into the burlesque, the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical."[177] Even West's definition of the

[173] Galloway states, "It was logical that the white heat of /West's/ creative energies should at last be turned on the dream capital of Hollywood where dreams were sealed in cans and marketed to the world" ("Dream Dump," p. 46).

[174] Josephine Herbst, "Nathanael West," Kenyon Review, XXIII (Autumn 1961), 611.

[175] Galloway, "A Picaresque Apprenticeship," p. 43.

[176] Galloway, "A Picaresque Apprenticeship," p. 43.

[177] Harry Levin, The Power of Blackness, p. 134.

short "lyric novel" resembles Poe's definition of the lyric poem.[178] Both authors realized the effectiveness of short, powerful vignettes to produce nightmarish results.

Throughout West's fiction, form and content, method and meaning are inseparable. Within the thematic texture of betrayed dreams, eruptive violence, agonizing pain, and torturous cruelty, West has threaded images of antithesis, waste, sterile phalli, and perverse sex; motifs of battle, disillusion, despair, dream, and journey; and techniques of surrealism, grotesqueness, bizarreness, and microcosm.

Even though West's novels were published within the time span of a single decade and total slightly less than four hundred pages, they encompass an era and lifestyle that have comprised and will continue to comprise the whole continuum of man's existence. West's novels are a study of human nature and the myths which make its existence bearable. The novels are panoramic in scope and kaleidoscopic in view.

[178] West, "Notes on Miss Lonelyhearts," p. 2.

TABLES

TABLE I

Willie Shrike	Peter Doyle
1. a joke-machine[179]	1. a joke for machines
2. worshiper of the flesh; materialist[180]	2. worshiper of the spirit; spiritualist
3. emotionally crippled; claims to be a great saint who can walk on water	3. physically crippled; claims to be a damned villain who can hardly walk on land
4. a dead pan	4. highly emotional
5. gives Miss Lonelyhearts a parodied prayer	5. gives Miss Lonelyhearts an honest, sincere letter
6. has a definite identity at first but soon loses it; as the novel progresses, his power over Miss Lonelyhearts continually decreases[181]	6. has no definite identity at first but soon gains one; as the novel progresses, his power over Miss Lonelyhearts continually increases
7. described and characterized in terms of a cruel and sadistic butcher bird	7. described and characterized in terms of a playful and obedient puppy dog
8. writes imaginary letters for Miss Lonelyhearts	8. writes an actual letter to Miss Lonelyhearts

[179] Light, Interpretative Study, p. 91.

[180] Marc L. Ratner, "'Anywhere Out of This World': Baudelaire and Nathanael West," American Literature, XXXI (January 1960), 461.

[181] Malin, p. 62.

	Willie Shrike	Peter Doyle
9.	a deadpan insulter of penned Miss Lonelyhearts letters	a valid, alive "Miss Lonelyhearts letter in the flesh"[182]
10.	communicates with sharp, barbed rhetoric; not muted by his infirmities	communicates with awkward body movements; "muted by his infirmities"[183]
11.	facial features are "huddled together in a dead, gray triangle" (ML, 6); his "jaunty little face looks like a paralyzed scream of fright"[184]	facial features are "very strange . . . . His eyes failed to balance; his mouth was not under his nose; his forehead was square and long; and his round chin was like a forehead in miniature. He looked like one of those composite photographs used by screen magazines in guessing contests" (ML, 45)
12.	Miss Lonelyhearts cannot cuckold him and never attempts to "save" him	Miss Lonelyhearts cuckolds him and then attempts to "save" him[185]
13.	becomes verbal when violent or angry	becomes physical when violent or angry
14.	depicted as a sadist	depicted as a masochist
15.	a man who has few or no illusions[186]	a man who lives to see his dreams materialize

[182] Jackson, p. 5.

[183] Abrahams, p. 65.

[184] V. S. Pritchett, "Miss Lonelyhearts," in The Living Novel & Later Appreciations, p. 278.

[185] Norman Podhoretz, "Nathanael West: A Particular Kind of Joking," in Doings and Undoings: The Fifties and After in American Writing, p. 69.

[186] Hickey, p. 119.

Willie Shrike	Peter Doyle
16. depicted as one who is not bothered by his wife's apparent infidelity	16. depicted as one who seeks revenge because his wife's infidelity
17. characterized as being "vicious"[187]	17. characterized as being "helpless"[188]
18. pretends to be the "superior male" in his marriage, the "one with control and authority"[189]	18. is the subordinate partner in his marriage
19. offers Miss Lonelyhearts momentary escape through the guise of newspaper jargon	19. gives Miss Lonelyhearts permanent and final escape beneath the medium of newspaper print
20. rejects love and will go out of his way to hurt other people	20. needs love so desperately "that he is willing to go to ridiculous extremes to get it"[190]
21. married to a delectable, desirable lady	21. married to a massive, overbearing woman
22. makes Miss Lonelyhearts immobile by his vicious cleverness	22. makes Miss Lonelyhearts mobile by his naïve helplessness

[187] Reid, p. 99.

[188] Reid, p. 99.

[189] Abrahams, p. 61.

[190] Abrahams, p. 65.

TABLE II

Mary Shrike	Fay Doyle
1. depicted as the "dispassionate, frigid . . . tease who talks freely but is incapable of action"[191]	1. depicted as the lonely, passion-starved, sex-driven woman who is insatiable
2. sadistically and painfully seductive: "She was wearing a tight, shiny dress that was like glass-covered steel and there was something clearly mechanical in her pantomime" (ML, 22)	2. hopelessly unattractive: ". . . legs like Indian clubs, breasts like balloons and a brow like a pigeon. Despite her short plaid skirt, red sweater, rabbit-skin jacket and knitted tam-o'-shanter, she looked like a police captain" (ML, 27)
3. pretends to be the dominant force in her marriage	3. is the dominant partner in her marriage
4. becomes the picture of delectable and appealing sexuality	4. becomes the "embodiment of de-feminized and de-romanticized sexuality"[192]
5. "On the one hand, she is pulled by the head's knowledge and fears; on the other, she instinctively reacts according to the body's desires"[193]	5. "She has neither head nor heart, only a body and a physical drive which she inflicts on the docile Miss Lonelyhearts"[194]

[191] Abrahams, p. 64.

[192] DiStasi, p. 92.

[193] Light, Interpretative Study, p. 86.

[194] Abrahams, p. 65.

Mary Shrike	Fay Doyle
6. described in terms of breast imagery, a mammary delight;[195] images of human appeal	6. described in terms of sea imagery, an oceanic Frankenstein;[196] images of cosmic terror
7. teases Miss Lonelyhearts	7. makes love to Miss Lonelyhearts
8. depicted as a frigid lover	8. depicted as an aggressive lover
9. leaves Miss Lonelyhearts unsatisfied after his attempted seduction of her	9. leaves Miss Lonelyhearts "physically sick" after her forceful seduction of him (ML, 30)
10. does not cuckold her husband	10. does cuckold her husband
11. appears to be a revitalizing force for Miss Lonelyhearts and offers him a means of escape	11. is a "voracious vacuum which drains Miss Lonelyhearts"[197] and becomes a "gigantic, living Miss Lonelyhearts letter" (ML, 29)
12. one who lives in a dream world	12. one who has seen her dreams shattered and only relies on realities
13. is the symbol of the eternal virgin	13. was pregnant before she was married
14. she "always talked in headlines and her excitement forced /Miss Lonelyhearts/ to be casual" (ML, 20)	14. "Her voice was as hypnotic as a tom-tom and as monotonous" (ML, 29), causing Miss Lonelyhearts to become bored

[195] Hyman, p. 18.

[196] Hyman, p. 19.

[197] DiStasi, p. 92.

Mary Shrike	Fay Doyle
15. reminds Miss Lonelyhearts of breasts and nipples which he thinks about to excite himself before going to meet her	15. reminds Miss Lonelyhearts of tents and canvas which he thinks about to excite himself before going to meet her
16. married to an emotionally crippled husband	16. married to a physically crippled husband
17. causes Miss Lonelyhearts to feel a spark flare up in his groin	17. causes Miss Lonelyhearts to feel like a dirty bottle being slowly filled with polluted water
18. is seduced by Miss Lonelyhearts in the hallway outside her apartment and has to fight him off	18. seduces Miss Lonelyhearts in her own living room and he literally has to fight her off
19. knows about love but not about sex	19. knows about sex but not about love

TABLE III

The Shrikes	The Doyles
1. introduced to the man first, the woman second; episode with Betty separating the two meetings	1. introduced to the woman first, the man second; episode with Betty separating the two meetings
2. Mary has the religious name of this couple; Shrike represents fleshly love	2. Peter has the religious name of this couple; Fay represents fleshly love
3. Miss Lonelyhearts has known them for years	3. Miss Lonelyhearts has just met them
4. Shrike is the partner in this marriage who frightens Miss Lonelyhearts; his name symbolizes the butcher bird "which impales its living prey on thorns, and the sense of murderous penetration is in his every act . . . the phallus is just an instrument of sadistic impailment /sic./."[198]	4. Fay is the partner in this marriage who frightens Miss Lonelyhearts, she is "omnivorously engulfing . . . the female genitalia are a smothering, swallowing, devouring sea"[199]
5. presented in human imagery: Shrike as phallus (sadistic impalement) and Mary as breast	5. presented in "inhuman or subhuman imagery";[200] Peter as puppy and Fay as sea

[198] Reid, p. 82.

[199] Reid, p. 82.

[200] Hyman, p. 18.

The Shrikes	The Doyles
6. are aware of one another as persons with identities and problems; refer to each other, for the most part, by name	6. are not "much aware of the other as a person"; hardly refer to each other by names, using "wife," "cripple," and "husband" instead[201]
7. "Shrike and Mary reflect the perversion of nature under the dominance of a crippled male principle--a parasitic and manipulative intellect"[202]	7. Peter and Fay "reflect the cruelty of nature under the dominance of a brutalized female principle--a desire as formless and devouring as the sea"[203]
8. their involvement with Miss Lonelyhearts causes him to seek materialistic means of escapes from his letter-writers	8. their involvement with Miss Lonelyhearts instills in him the need for spiritual assistance and the necessity to help his readers
9. Mary invites Miss Lonelyhearts to her home with a telephone call	9. Peter invites Miss Lonelyhearts to his home with a personal interview
10. Mary purposely initiates the pimping situation in her marriage and Miss Lonelyhearts is the intended recipient	10. Peter innocently initiates the pimping situation in his marriage and Miss Lonelyhearts is the unexpected recipient
11. Shrike stays home while Miss Lonelyhearts and Mary go out	11. Doyle goes out while Miss Lonelyhearts and Fay stay home
12. Miss Lonelyhearts has no "message" to offer them	12. Miss Lonelyhearts attempts to give them a pertinent "message"

[201] Jackson, p. 6.

[202] Reid, p. 100.

[203] Reid, p. 100.

The Shrikes'	The Doyles
13. at their home, Miss Lonelyhearts has a verbal battle with Shrike	13. at their home, Miss Lonelyhearts has a physical battle with Peter
14. Mary is the partner who is described as being sexually dead: "Sleeping with her is like sleeping with a knife in one's groin" (ML, 21)	14. Peter is the partner who is described as being sexually dead: "He's all dried up. He hasn't been a husband to me for years" (ML, 28)

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

BURN THE CITIES[1]

I

The Eastern star calls its hundred knives
Burn the cities
Burn the cities

Burn Jerusalem
It is easy
City of birth a star
A rose in color a daisy in shape
Calls with its hundred knives
Calls three kings
Club diamond heart
Burn Jerusalem and bring
The spade king to the Babe
Nailed to his six-branched tree
Upon the sideboard of a Jew
Marx
Performs the miracle of loaves and fishes

II

Burn the cities
Burn Paris
City of light
Twice-burned city
Warehouse of the arts
The spread hand is a star with points
The fist a torch
Burn the cities
Burn Paris
City of light
Twice-burned city
Warehouse of the arts

The spread hand is a star
The fist a torch

[1] Martin, p. 329.

Workers of the World
Unite
Burn Paris

Paris will burn easily
Paris is fat
Only an Eskimo could love her
The Seine is her bidet
She will not hold urine
She squats upon the waters and they are oil
A placid slop
Only the sick can walk on it
Fire alone can make it roar
Not like a burning barn but muted
Muted by a derby hat
So also my sorrow
City of my youth
Is muted by a derby hat

The flames of Paris are sure to be well-shaped
Some will be like springs
Some like practiced tongues
Some like gay flags
Others like dressed hair
Many will dance
Only the smells will be without order

The spread hand is a star with points
The fist a torch
Workers of the World
Unite
Burn Paris

III

Burn the cities
Burn London
Slow cold city
Do not despair
London will burn
It will burn
In the heat of tired eyes
In the grease of fish and chips
The English
workers will burn it
With coal from Wales
With oil from Persia
The Indian will give him fire
There is sun in Egypt
The Negro will give him fire
Africa is the land of fire

London is cold
It will nurse the flame
London is tired
It will welcome the flame
London is lecherous
It will embrace the flame
London will burn