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THE AMERICAN DREAM, THE AMERICAN LIE: AN EXAMINATION OF QUEERNESS, DISABILITY AND AMERICAN IDENTITY IN *MISS LONELYHEARTS*

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

English and Writing Studies:

Literature and Composition and Rhetoric

---

by

Vivian Arias

May 2023

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Dr. Omar Moran, Committee Chair, English

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ABSTRACT

This project, informed primarily by queer theory and disability studies, examines the ways in which queerness, disability, and marginality are central to Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and his critique of the American Dream. Nathanael West, Jewish American novelist and screenwriter, is remembered for his work critiquing the American Dream; however, one aspect that has remained understudied is how his novels feature non-normative outsiders, past and present. The primary analysis of this project is focused on the 1933 novella *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Other works by West are also referenced. From West's perspective, the American Dream was the American nightmare for most people, especially those with socially non-normative or otherwise marginal identities or inclinations. While this project extends the conversation around West's exposure of the corruption of the American Dream for the average person, it is more so invested in uncovering the queerness present in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, pointing towards national anxieties around identities that are maligned with the heteronormative, ableist, and patriarchal standards of the 1930s.

Keywords: queer theory, disability studies, Nathanael West, Miss Lonelyhearts

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DEDICATION

To those who find themselves on the margins in any way, to those who require no saviors in order to live their lives, and to those who push back against the norm: keep going.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Literature Review

Section One: Who was "Nathanael West"?

Nathanael West, born Nathan Weinstein in New York, was of Ashkenazi Jewish descent, and wrote his most remembered works primarily during the 1930s. He was the son of Jewish immigrants who worked hard to establish themselves among the working wealthy, and enjoyed a middle-class upbringing. His choice of name is pivotal to understanding who he was and his writing, especially in terms of what motivated him. According to Joe Woodward's 2011 biography *Alive Inside the Wreck: A Biography of Nathanael West*, the author changed his name because it was "too Jewish for a writer seeking broad success" (35). As such, West was a man who defined himself, acutely aware of the racism facing Jewish Americans and the limitations placed on them as a result of that discrimination.

For many children of immigrants like West, American assimilation was something that wasn't just to be desired— it was an ideal to work toward, an ideal that, in no uncertain terms, later influenced the way he chose to be named. Despite being enrolled in great schools, West was no great scholar. At least, not academically speaking, as he was a voracious reader throughout his life. He barely made it through his grade school years, dropped out of high school, and only got into college because he forged his transcripts (Woodward 48-49).

Somehow, after a failed stint at Tufts University, West was admitted to Brown University. At the time of West's attendance, Brown was a university with a strong fraternity presence, yet had no Jewish fraternities— an indicator of the college's anti-Semitism. Marion Meade's biography of West, *Lonelyhearts: The Screwball World of Nathanael West and Eileen McKenney*, expands on this anti-Semitism present at Brown. According to Meade, this was not only the first time that West had lived among Christians, but it was also the first time he experienced "classic" anti-Semitism (53). West, at this point in his life, being of Russian Jewish background, had only experienced tension from German Jews who saw those of Russian descent as "lower-class money grabbers" (53). At Brown, knowing himself as a Jew, being seen by others as Jewish, and having no place on campus as other groups did, led to a feeling of exclusion within West.

It is debated as to whether or not he seriously wished to join a fraternity, but that is of little importance— of more emphasis is how West understood himself in relation to his race. Woodward describes West as "grounded in his position as a Jew" (63), and his choice to change his name had more to do with being remembered and recognizable to the public, not a choice fueled by shame over his Jewishness. It is pertinent to note that while West was ethnically Jewish, he was a secular Jew who was fascinated by other religions, particularly Catholicism and mysticism, which will be covered in greater detail in the chapter on *Miss Lonelyhearts*. While his time at Brown highlighted a certain level of

exclusion, West crafted himself out of his deep desire to be a known and respected writer. I use the word "crafted" purposefully here: again, West was someone who created himself, over and over throughout his life in his pursuit of success. He stood in a space between a privileged "insider," and a marginal "outsider."

This strange positioning gave him a peculiar set of eyes to see American society through, informing and shaping his deeply cutting writing. Central to West's work are themes of violence, pain, struggle, and inequity, all pointing to the same biting question: Why, if the American Dream is true, is it so unattainable for so many? Across his writings, West attempts to answer that question, spanning both American coasts, through characters and settings that critique the neatly-packaged dreams sold to Americans of who they could, and should, be via normative ideology. West's work brings into focus a clear empathy for those on the outside, those who don't exactly fit into one normative category, which are often thought of in such binaristic terms as gender, sexuality, and ability. I strongly believe this is because West himself did not fit into the gendered norms for the time. West was not remembered to be an ideal American man; he had little athletic talent, and was described by friends as clumsy, a bad driver, and, importantly, someone who longed for sophistication he could not achieve (55).

Ideal American men are those who adhere to masculine norms, such as being athletic, strong and financially secure. These principles are shaped by

capitalistic, patriarchal and ableist societal norms, all of which West would go on to critique in his writings. West was very critical of capitalism and its exploitative nature, evidenced by his political leanings and social circle. Socialism was a "popular movement among West's circle of friends," Woodward writes, stating that West leaned strongly to the left politically, especially when he moved to Hollywood (146). His later marriage to Eileen McKenney, a proud socialist, was also telling of his more progressive viewpoints. West himself was not a socialist, yet he wrote the proletariat novel *A Cool Million*, a work steeped in issues of the working class, shown through the struggles of its titular character, Lemuel Pitkin. It is with this background on West that I now turn to defining terms.

Defining Terms

Overview of Terms: Queerness, Disability, Satire, and the American Dream

The terms defined in this section are "queerness," "disability," "satire," and "the American Dream." Relatedly, also outlined are the theoretical frameworks which undergird this project: queer theory and disability studies. Because I am now analyzing West's work nearly a hundred years later, these terms would not have been used at the time in the same ways. Analysis of non-normative versus normate identity and expressions includes topics such as homosexual tension between central characters, sexual power dynamics, disability, and gender roles. These non-normative identities and expressions were considered in the 1930s to be taboo. Such people were regarded as abnormal, showcasing aspects that society actively ignored. Their presence in West's work is especially interesting

and was considered obscene for the time. Instead of turning away, West's work asks us to run toward these topics at full speed, to become enveloped in this "other" world.

On "Queerness"

I will use the term "queer" expansively to highlight the ways in which West's work explores aspects of sexuality and gender norms, as well as issues of class and interpersonal power dynamics.

Queer theory can more broadly be applied to matters beyond sexual preference due to its disruptive and ever evolving nature. In fact, many queer theorists outright refuse to "reduce" the term "queer" down to a singular meaning, as Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan describe in their 2019 book *Queer Theory Now: From Foundations to Futures*: "queer is a 'deliberately ambiguous term' that is simultaneously a way of naming, describing, doing, and being" (1). Their work outlines the non-linear roadmap of how queer theory came to be, arguing that the following movements and ideas came together to create what we now know as queer theory: "lesbian/ gay/ bisexual activism, gay & lesbian studies, trans activism & theory, postmodernism, poststructuralism, lesbian feminism, and lesbian of color theory & activism" (7). Queer theory originates from the thinking of postmodern and poststructural theorists such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan (8). This has largely to do with the usage of "queer" as a verb: "queering" something makes the focus of the

term on what it does instead of what it is, making the term, and by extension, the theory, applicable to things outside of sexuality and gender.

Judith Butler's work is referenced as challenging the heterosexism of feminist theory while criticizing the lesbian feminist movement as holding rigid standards for identity categorization, asking us to rethink normalized binary ideologies (8). Challenging normativity, as I will later highlight with disability studies, is a central tenet of queer theory, particularly with Michael Warner's coining of the term "heteronormativity" in the early 1990s (11). Warner uses "heteronormativity" to describe "the pervasive and largely heterosexual norms that underpin society" (11). McCann and Monaghan cite the "ordinary" family dynamic of father and mother as an example of heteronormativity in action (11). All other family dynamics deviate from this norm imposed by Western society (11).

For clarity of use, let me pause to delineate "norms" from "normative": which, although related, are applied and defined differently. As McCann and Monaghan describe, "norm simply describes a dominant rule, standard, or expectation, but normative refers to the context surrounding how these things are established, perpetuated, and often morally endorsed" (13). It is that last bit I would like to draw attention to with my analysis of West's work: the moral endorsement of certain ways of being. Throughout his novels, West focuses on the destructive aftermath of morally endorsing the status quo. He exposes the dangers created when society exclusively promotes heterosexuality, able-

bodiedness, the gender binary, and financial success, specifically through the violence that non-normative people face in his works.

On “Disability”

“Disability,” generally speaking, will refer to some form of experienced limitation, usually antithetical to what is considered to be “normal” human functioning. This can take many forms, be physical or mental, and may or may not be visible or immediately obvious to able-bodied people.

“Able-bodied” refers to what many people consider “normal” bodies, or people without experienced limitations. To define a related term, “ableism,” I turn to Floris Tomasini’s work in disability studies, describing ableism as arising “out of the able-bodied assumptions of another’s needs. It is not intentionally discriminatory or hurtful, but nevertheless can be perceived and received so” (27). She goes on to cite two illuminating examples of ableism: the idea that disabled people need fixing or rehabilitation in order to fit into everyday life, and the constant attitude of pity which assumes disabled people are perpetually in need of able-bodied help (27).

Much like the prior definition of queerness and its related terms, normativity plays a major role in understanding disability studies, as well as binaristic thinking. In this paradigm, disabled bodies are on the side of “abnormal,” while able-bodied individuals are regarded as “normal.” This has made several disability studies theorists state that normativism and disability are inherently linked, as Tomasini outlines: “a person without an impairment can

define [themself] as ‘normal’ only in opposition to what [they] are not – a person with an impairment” (32). This argument could, and has been, extended to queerness and queer theory as well, positioning queerness as interwoven with straight normativity, one defining itself by what it is not. Robert McRuer creates the term “compulsory able-bodiedness,” a term which took inspiration from queer theorist Adrienne Rich’s “compulsory heterosexuality,” in his essay “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence.” McRuer draws parallels between the two concepts, queerness and disability, by highlighting the ways in which they lie outside of normative ideology: “The most successful heterosexual subject is the one whose sexuality is not compromised by disability (metaphorized as queerness); the most successful able-bodied subject is the one whose ability is not compromised by queerness (metaphorized as disability)” (373). The hegemony that able-bodiedness and heterosexuality have, then, are always in a state of tension with disability and queerness that can “never quite be contained” (375). The “norming” of certain ways of being leads to the exclusion of these “others,” making their presence disruptive to the systems that demand they be silenced or erased altogether.

On “Satire”

Because West is known to be a satirical writer, “satire” will be defined here as ironic or exaggerated humor meant to expose important issues. Instead of attempting to define what type of satire West partook in, or restraining him to one satiric camp, I am much more interested in what West’s satire does, as opposed

to what it is. In Matthew Mutter's article "Nathanael West, Secularism, and the Uses of Comedy," West is described as an "ironist," someone whose works are "preoccupied with the comic inadequacy of distinctly modern discursive attempts to diagnose, explain, inhabit, or transform suffering" (34).

For West, satire is a humorous means of critiquing social issues such as working-class exploitation, homophobia, sexism, and ableism by presenting the reader with characters that display these qualities. If read literally, his work can easily offend readers due to the fact that West is described as "a satirist of satire, an ironist of the ironic disposition" (34), something most seen in Miss Lonelyhearts, and is present across his work. In other words, West takes a viewpoint that does not take itself too seriously, while presenting deeply serious issues for the reader to then grapple with, acting as a facilitator of the issue at hand.

On the "American Dream"

The American Dream is typically thought of as a set of ideals that define freedom within a capitalistic framework made possible via hard work with the promise of upward mobility, emphasizing individualism. The "American Dream" has been as nebulous as it has been mythic. The term lacks roots in reality, making it extremely subjective and flexible in meaning over time. To better define this term, I turn to Lawrence R. Samuel's book, *The American Dream: A Cultural History*, in which he traces the history of this uniquely American narrative that persists today as a central, driving cultural force.

Originally, this term was specifically about “the ‘inherent right to be restricted by no barriers’ outside those of one’s own construction,” as detailed in a 1931 book by James Truslow Adams titled *The Epic of America* (14). This definition would later morph into several slightly different definitions used by Adams as the years progressed and the book’s term, “the American Dream,” entered the public’s vernacular (15). This points to the slipperiness of the term, as it was “soon appropriated by politicians, scholars, writers, artists, religious leaders, and many others [...] to describe the nation’s state of affairs” (15). Samuel goes on to detail the direct tying of financial success to American individualism and the idea of upward mobility in the wildly popular 1933 board game, Monopoly, which gained success during the Great Depression (18). The game appealed to Americans’ goals of idealized success, especially because “all people started off equal” in the game, with players particularly relishing “the to-the-winner-go-the-spoils ethos” present (18).

The rise of the Dream’s presence in popular culture, especially the movies, is an aspect of this concept that must be discussed for the scope of this project, due to the fact that Nathanael West was also a screenwriter heavily involved in the movie industry. West’s involvement with Hollywood, the factory of dreams, is most apparent in his 1939 novel *The Day of the Locust*. Movies of the 1930s were when the American Dream “was at its dreamiest” (Samuel 25), hearkening back to American myths in *Gone with the Wind*, *Born to be Wild*, and the *President’s Mystery*. The Old West was similarly a popular backdrop, “a

tableau offering the possibility of copious amounts of adventure, heroism" (25). With tensions rising abroad and economic instability at home, the American Dream appeared in movies as a type of escape toward a romanticized past. Hollywood's myth-making contributed to the widespread desire for a curated version of an ideal life. For many Americans, their dreams became whatever version of success they were sold.

CHAPTER TWO

MISS LONELYHEARTS

Introduction

Miss Lonelyhearts has cultural taboos such as disability and queerness—more specifically, male homosexuality, as central themes. Set in New York during the Great Depression, the novella follows Miss Lonelyhearts, an able-bodied advice columnist whose self-professed Christ complex drives his stringent prescription of normate ideologies to his paper column audience, many of whom are people with disabilities in worse social, educational, and financial standing than he. The letter-writers wrote to, or, as in the case with Mr. Doyle, got personally involved with, Miss Lonelyhearts out of desperation. Miss Lonelyhearts' personal crusade to "save" queer people and people with disabilities is incredibly ironic, because of his own immoral, violent actions and repressed queerness, as shown through his curious, fatal connection to Mr. Doyle.

For a man of supposed faith, Miss Lonelyhearts' immorality is seen primarily in the hypocritical way he carries himself. Within a traditional Christian ideology, sexual purity is of utmost importance, with heterosexual relations in the context of a marriage between a man and a woman being framed as the only acceptable way to be sexually active. The terms "man" and "woman" here refer to biological sex, or, people who identify as the sex they were assigned at birth, a normative concept accepted and perpetuated by the church at the time and by

many today. Any deviation from this standard, whether that be in the form of queerness or pre-marital or extra-marital sexual relations, are considered sinful and require repentance. Miss Lonelyhearts preaches one thing and practices another, as he participates in pre-marital sexual relations with both his longtime girlfriend Betty and a married reader of his column, Mrs. Doyle. Sexual deviancy from religious norms is also present in Miss Lonelyhearts' repressed queerness. In one particularly violent scene of the novella, we see Miss Lonelyhearts corner and beat an old man for his perceived queerness, which is contrasted by his later affectionate relationship with Mr. Doyle.

West's novella points to the idea that normative ideologies around disability and queerness will always be resisted by those who are part of those groups, and that those who cling to ideologies that persecute others often mirror what they claim to cast out. The primary way this is done is by the use of satire, which presents the ironic Miss Lonelyhearts and all of his hypocrisy and violence as a means to critique the larger hegemonic systems of oppression that are heteronormative and ableist. Miss Lonelyhearts' continuous fixation on saving poor "others" highlights his own issues and inability to meet normative standards. Miss Lonelyhearts' immorality, taken in hand with his occupation as a newspaper advice columnist, makes him the very definition of a false prophet.

The Christ Complex and Normative Hegemony

Normative ideology describes the means by which what is considered "normal" is produced, which is shaped by interlocking hegemonic systems of

oppression that favor majority groups, with heteropatriarchy and ableism being central examples relevant to this project. These systems privilege the heterosexual able-bodied white male above any “others” who find themselves outside of those identity categories, defining people and their agency based on how closely they can adhere to the conventions and mores of “normal” practice and thought. “Agency” refers to the level of control a particular person has with regard to the world around them, which is determined by their proximity to normative power in how they identify themselves and how the world perceives them. Judith Butler’s work is especially salient when challenging binaristic heterosexism and the amount of agency a particular person may have. Butler’s writings gave shape to the theory of gender performativity, the idea that gender is something that is acted out within a certain set of standards or norms assigned to identity categories. Butler describes identity categories as tending “to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression” (308). As such, aligning oneself with an identity category can uphold or resist a specific hegemonic structure, as in the case of Miss Lonelyhearts. Because of his outward appearance as a white man with an able body, Miss Lonelyhearts is able to be understood by the outside world as normate. Being categorized outwardly as normate allows him to go through life in a way that has little obstacles. His white male able-bodiedness grants him a particular kind of privilege. Miss Lonelyhearts has a “bony” chin with a forehead

that is “high and narrow” (61). He is described as looking like a “New England Puritan,” his nose “long and fleshless” (61). This description of Miss Lonelyhearts gives the image of a white, thin man who would blend in with a crowd of people on any New York street, a man who passer-by would not look twice at because he does not carry any outward characteristics that are out of the ordinary, the “normal.” Despite his ego, his life is not anything to be desired. However “normal” he may seem on the outside, he is in no way financially well-off, and his position as an advice columnist does burden him emotionally. While his job does limit his economic mobility, much of Miss Lonelyhearts’ suffering is of his own making.

Miss Lonelyhearts’ anger and loneliness are because of how he chooses to interact with the world around him, not because of who he is as an able-bodied religious white man. Because he cannot use his column as a preacher’s pulpit, the frustration he feels stems from the limitations his editor Mr. Shrike places on what can be published, not solely from the content of the letters he receives. When he receives a letter from a girl who signs herself as “Desperate,” Miss Lonelyhearts lights a cigarette that refuses to draw, seemingly increasing the frustration he feels, staring at it “furiously” (61). His fury comes from the fact that “Christ was the answer, but [...] Christ was Shrike’s particular joke” (61). In this instance, his anger comes from his beliefs being mocked and censored by his editor, overshadowing his initial frustration from reading the letter. His focus is not with “Desperate,” it is solely turned to the ridicule he receives from Shrike for his beliefs. He does not think about her situation, as they would if one were

considering responding with advice, but instead he is concerned with his having to “stay away from the Christ business” (61). His loneliness is his creation as well, as he does have a long-term girlfriend, Betty, who he treats as a sexual object and breaks his promise to marry (71). Betty is, somehow, actually in love with Miss Lonelyhearts, yet he only seems capable of pushing her away with the callous way he treats her (73). Miss Lonelyhearts may be bitter and enraged, as well as alone, but these issues are not a result of being marginalized— they are a result of his actions.

Those who write in to Miss Lonelyhearts’ column, however, are well aware that they are on the outside of the normative privileges granted to someone like Miss Lonelyhearts; they candidly expressing their dissatisfaction with their situations. Here, Miss Lonelyhearts acts as a priest would, hearing their woes and providing advice in his column responses. Their letters act as a kind of confessional writing, with intimate details of their lives which highlight the ways in which they do not fit with the normate world around them, and the poor treatment they receive as a result. Examples of marginalized experiences detailed by the letter writers include issues of abortion and autonomy in family planning, child sexual assault, and isolation due to physical difference (59-61). The power dynamic at play in the relationship between Miss Lonelyhearts and his readers is important to note, as Miss Lonelyhearts is presented as someone with valuable feedback to give by having the position of an advice columnist, much as priests give religious guidance to those who enter the confession booth. This

priest/confessor dynamic is certainly evident in the way Miss Lonelyhearts sees himself, but is especially apparent in the way Shrike frames his role. Shrike jokingly refers to Miss Lonelyhearts as one of the “priests of twentieth-century America” (61), even going so far as to rewrite the “Anima Christi” prayer credited to St. Ignatius Loyola, commonly recited after taking communion, with lines like “Soul of Miss L, glorify me./ Body of Miss L, nourish me, […] In secula seculorum. Amen” (59). The bastardization of this prayer is apt for Miss Lonelyhearts because he is actively discouraged by Shrike to give religious feedback to his readers, something that creates tension in Miss Lonelyhearts, as he supposedly believes that “Christ was the answer” to their issues (61).

Because Miss Lonelyhearts has a Christ complex, he sees himself as a savior to those he interacts with. The people with disabilities who write to him are seeking a way out from the mistreatment they face from able-bodied people who see them as “inferior.” Thus, the issue is with how they are perceived, not with the disability they have itself. An example of this is detailed in the letter from a girl born without a nose who describes her struggles with relentless bullying, as well as with ableist, religiously-charged arguments for her physical appearance that have her considering suicide. She writes to Miss Lonelyhearts: “I was born this way. I asked Papa and he says he doesnt know, but that maybe I did something in the other world before I was born or that maybe I was being punished for his sins. I dont believe that because he is a very nice man. Ought I commit suicide?” (60). She signs her name as “Desperate.” Instead of responding, Miss

Lonelyhearts ignores her letter and lights a cigarette, the cigarette acting as a distraction from this girl's plight. Miss Lonelyhearts' silence and lack of response is an alliance with the same oppressive machinations that define Desperate's suffering— he is able to look away while she cannot. The dehumanization this letter writer faces is not unique to her, as she is like countless other disabled people seeking human care and compassion when writing to Miss Lonelyhearts. In ignoring her letter, Miss Lonelyhearts upholds the status quo of apathy towards people with disabilities. Her letter becomes an issue that, for Miss Lonelyhearts and society at large, is out of sight and out of mind. This apathetic approach also ignores the way her disability is framed as a kind of punishment for her parents' supposed sins or even the sins of a past life she cannot recall, a religious type of ableism that places a moral emphasis on physical ability. In this framework, possessing an able body is an indicator of a higher power's favor over a person, thus, possessing a disabled body is seen as a kind of curse for some moral shortcoming. Aligning able-bodiedness with favor from God, and a disabled body with punishment, creates a binary that directly ties judgement to one's appearance and abilities. This is deeply problematic for a disabled person's sense of self-worth and dignity, placing their physicality as an aspect of themselves that is not only negative, but a sin they must repent for. Their disability, their very way of being, is then something that they feel they need to escape instead of embrace, as evidenced by Desperate's consideration of suicide. The fact that this goes uncontested by Miss Lonelyhearts is an indicator

of the dismissive way he views disability— a moral failure corrected by piety. Miss Lonelyhearts moves through life with unearned religious authority, his action or inaction telling of his own larger biases at play. Whether or not Miss Lonelyhearts responds to a column-writer depends entirely on how sincere he can be about his Christ messaging, which gets at the heart of what drives him: his ability to police others while he ignores his own non-normative traits, as we will later discuss, with his repressed homosexuality.

Miss Lonelyhearts and the "Successful" Heterosexual Male, an Agent of the American Dream

The American Dream and capitalism are intertwined, creating a financial fantasy of success through hard work. Social, sexual and gender norms combine with the American Dream in such a way that McRuer's concept of the "successful" heterosexual male can extend to a larger social critique of capitalism by linking compulsory heterosexual able-bodiedness to production and value (371). McRuer writes, "being able bodied means being capable of the normal physical exertions required in a particular system of labor" (371). Within this paradigm, the presence of queerness and disability are threatening to one's success as a heterosexual able-bodied male. Depending on who someone is in relation to this set of gender and social norms, and how well their life matches to the perceived standard, they will face varying levels of "success." When thinking of the American Dream, it is important to examine the way non-normative identities are left out of the discussion, as the American Dream is typically

remembered in a heteronormative, able-bodied fashion. Examples abound through variations of the Dream in nostalgic visions of achieving a nuclear family consisting of an able-bodied husband, wife, two children, plus a dog in a little house with a white-picket fence and a car parked in front. The American Dream enforces the gender binary, where American patriarchy slates men toward greater financial success than women. Sanda L. Hanson and John Kenneth White expand on this point in their book, *The American Dream in the 21st Century*, stating "systems and structures work to the distinct advantage of some and the disadvantage of others […] empirical evidence clearly shows that women have had less success than men in achieving the Dream" (98-99). Interestingly, women are more likely than men to define the American Dream in spiritual terms through religious fulfillment, a point that applies to Miss Lonelyhearts through his emasculative naming. The structures and systems that Hanson and White reference are hegemonic ones which perpetuate inequities and division among the population, something that is a running theme across West's work. These hegemonic systems combine with the American Dream of success to destroy the bodies and minds of West's central characters in *A Cool Million* and his later novel, *The Day of the Locust*. Through their physical and mental breakdowns, West highlights the all-encompassing, destructive nature of the American Dream and normative belief. The "successful" heterosexual male can be an agent of the American Dream, enforcing normative standards upon others. A primary example of this heteronormative model is represented in the character of Mr. Shrike.

In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the titular character finds himself stagnant in his pursuit of the American Dream, desperately holding on to what power he does have within these systems. His frustration stems from his inability to fully achieve heteronormative standards of financial and social success. On the surface, as an advice columnist, Miss Lonelyhearts is in a position of power, one which his audience takes seriously. They expect him to be worthy of holding such a position. This is why they write in, because they entrust him with their woes. In reality, Miss Lonelyhearts is regarded as a joke. His low salary combined with his lackluster love life and feminine pen name leave him utterly emasculated (72).

West's choice to not reveal Miss Lonelyhearts' identity is an interesting one, as the character is assumed to have a male name outside of the text, with the reader being unaware of it. When originally drafting the novella, Miss Lonelyhearts did indeed have the "masculine" name: Thomas Matlock (Woodward 118). "Thomas Matlock" was later dropped and Miss Lonelyhearts stood in his place as the protagonist. West's avoidance of a masculine name for this character adds to the queerness present in the novel, because it creates a level of constant tension in the security of his gender identity, placing normative definitions of success ever so slightly out of reach. Miss Lonelyhearts can afford only "cheap clothes" (61), demonstrating his inability to achieve the masculine ideal of financial success. His gender, sexuality, and religious beliefs are ridiculed by Shrike on a regular basis. One example of this occurs when Miss Lonelyhearts is in a bar with Shrike, becoming annoyed with his editor's

misogynistic ranting, which causes Shrike to exclaim “Oh, so you don’t care for women, eh? J.C. is your only sweetheart, eh? Jesus Christ, King of Kings” (65). Shrike is simultaneously calling Miss Lonelyhearts gay and interested in sexual relations with a male deity he worships, making his statement both homophobic and blasphemous, delivering two blows to Miss Lonelyhearts’ perception as a straight religious man. By showing annoyance with Shrike’s tirades, Miss Lonelyhearts’ masculinity is called into question. He does not act in the same way Shrike does, with Shrike being far more successful and respected as a man than Miss Lonelyhearts is. Miss Lonelyhearts’ annoyance at Shrike is not necessarily with what he is saying, but how he is saying it, and with what frequency. Miss Lonelyhearts finds Shrike’s delivery annoying, not the sexist ideals themselves. In complicitly agreeing with Shrike’s views, Miss Lonelyhearts is no less of a sexist than Shrike is, because he does not outright oppose what he says, and allows Shrike’s rant to continue on. In other words, by staying silent, Miss Lonelyhearts performs a passive form of sexism, something that allows him male legitimacy in the hyper-masculine space they are in, a bar. The power dynamic between Miss Lonelyhearts and his editor cannot be overlooked in this interaction, as it does affect the way the two men treat one another. Shrike, as Miss Lonelyhearts’ editor, has direct financial control over him by supplying him with the job of column writer, and so, Miss Lonelyhearts is his subordinate. This can deepen the reason why Miss Lonelyhearts stays silent in the face of such crass talk: it could financially hurt him to speak up. When confronted with

Shrike's casual sexualization of a woman that is not his wife, Miss Lonelyhearts should have challenged Shrike's infidelity if Miss Lonelyhearts was truly moral. Instead, Miss Lonelyhearts ignores the clear dehumanization of women in order to hold onto his own limited power.

His own internalized shortcomings as a male attempting to fit an impossible standard of performance manifests in violence and pity when he interacts with people he perceives as inferior, due to not processing his own issues. In this way, his role as hegemon extends past his column, past his workplace role and into his everyday life. Miss Lonelyhearts, then, upholds what McRuer calls "the system of compulsory able-bodiedness," a system in which, as we will recall from the literature review, places success within one's ability to have an able body and be heterosexual, a body uncompromised by either disability or queerness (McRuer 373). Miss Lonelyhearts' move from giving column advice to in-person proselytizing is catalyzed by Mrs. Doyle, who, in her letter, identifies herself as "unhappily married to a cripple" (86), in reference to Mr. Doyle, her husband. When asked for help from the people he wishes to "save," Miss Lonelyhearts is presented with an opportunity to redeem souls, or so he believes. Miss Lonelyhearts' arrogance, due to his Christ complex, allows his tendency toward immorality and violence to smash any real chance he has of helping anyone. Before dissecting how Miss Lonelyhearts "helps" the Doyles, we must explore the lengths to which he will go to be understood by the public as one of McRuer's "successful" men.

Homosexual Repression, Rage, and the Pathologizing of Queerness

The most prominent example of Miss Lonelyhearts' targeted violence towards people he believes to be homosexual and who are visibly disabled is depicted early on in the novella, when, during a night of drinking and debauchery, Miss Lonelyhearts and his friends come upon an old man who uses a cane in a public bathroom. Posing as sexologists, they begin to interrogate the old man about his sexuality, describing it as a "difference from other men," taunting him as a "pervert," and, putting his arm around him, Miss Lonelyhearts demands to hear the "story of his life" (77). In these three utterances, Miss Lonelyhearts places himself in direct opposition to the old, "unsuccessful" man, to use McRuer's framework: Miss Lonelyhearts is, presenting himself just the same as those "other men" he is out with, not a "pervert," and in a priest-like position, ready to hear the old man confess the "story of his life." Importantly, posing as psychologists enables Miss Lonelyhearts and his companions to initiate and carry out a brutal line of questioning to forcefully determine this old man's sexuality.

Miss Lonelyhearts' friend, Ned Gates, says the following to feign legitimacy: "We're scientists. He's Havelock Ellis and I'm Krafft-Ebing. When did you first discover homosexualistic tendencies in yourself?" (77). Gates is here referring directly to two major contributors in the pathology of homosexuality, Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, psychologists and sexologists active during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Again, I return to McCann and

Monaghan's work to explain the significance of their reference by Gates, first examining the idea of "pathology." The term pathology typically refers to the science of diagnosing a disease, however, to pathologize something is to define it as "abnormal," as McCann and Monaghan outline (31). They remind us, lest we forget, that "until 1973 homosexuality was understood as a mental disorder in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders" (31), with early sexologists contributing to this designation, including Krafft-Ebing and Ellis. In 1886, Krafft-Ebing aligned same-sex desire with the following: "necrophilia, sadism, masochism, paedophilia (and others) as pathologies, or aberrations" (30). As for Ellis, a notable eugenicist, he introduced the term "sexual inversion" in 1927 to refer to homosexual attraction present in people, "in both congenital (permanent) and situational (temporary) forms" (32), which implies that homosexuality could be treated if conditions were right. To invoke the names of these psychologists while harassing an old man for his assumed sexual preferences is to carry out a long-standing tradition of designating homosexuality as deviant, and, more importantly, erasable via "medical" intervention. It is no mistake that West would have Miss Lonelyhearts be the stand-in for Ellis, due to Ellis' eugenicist ideals— eugenics being defined as the practice of selective human breeding for the "improvement" of humanity, a concept which was used to include or exclude specific populations based on traits perceived to be favorable. By directly referencing eugenicists, West offers a deeper critique of hegemonic institutions. When thinking in eugenicist terms,

homosexuality and disability were considered undesirable because they stood outside of the perceived norm, which was of course, heterosexuality and able-bodiedness. With Miss Lonelyhearts acting as the hegemon of normative thinking in this novel, his association with Ellis is fitting, and to be in the company of a Krafft-Ebing type is all the more telling.

In hiding behind the perceived legitimacy of a psychological background, Miss Lonelyhearts is allowed to carry out his crusade of “saving” this man. Miss Lonelyhearts refers to this directly when he says “Science gives me the right” (78). When the old man insists he has no story to tell, Miss Lonelyhearts’ rage is ignited and the following violence ensues: “he took his arm and twisted it. [...] He was twisting the arm of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent. He was twisting the arm of Desperate, Brokenhearted, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband” (77-78). Physical touch is very important in this scene, because of the way Miss Lonelyhearts chooses to use it only for what he desires: to produce a confession of non-adherence to his normate ideals. If he cannot get a confession via verbal intimidation, he will get it through physical force. This old man had done nothing but happen to be in the same public place that Miss Lonelyhearts was also in, and, because he is visibly more vulnerable than Miss Lonelyhearts and his friends, as well as physically weaker, he becomes their target. But, because there is no story for him to hear, Miss Lonelyhearts’ violence results in his getting hit from behind with a chair (78), stopping him from further injuring the old man.

It is because Miss Lonelyhearts is denied the confession he feels entitled to that his attempt at being that "successful" heterosexual able-bodied man is incomplete, making him fall short of that compulsive desire for heteronormativity. Butler's concept of heterosexuality as "always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself-and failing" (313), implicates that Miss Lonelyhearts is chasing an unachievable ideal. The fact that he does not get the confession he seeks also, importantly, illustrates that the people on the outside of the systems he upholds— queer or disabled people— do not owe their stories to him or people like him simply because it is demanded— even when their arms are twisted. The fact that when twisting the old man's arm, Miss Lonelyhearts envisions twisting the arms of all who wrote to his column shows that he is indeed on a mission to force the masses to conform to what he believes to be correct. His religious superiority allows Miss Lonelyhearts to justify his violence in any form, as his violence is his very attempt at bringing people closer to Christ. When he meets the Doyles, his attempts at saving them lead to his own sin. He completely fails to help the couple and only further emasculates himself.

Miss Lonelyhearts Meets Mr. Doyle: A Queer Encounter, A Joining of Hands

After sleeping with Mrs. Doyle, Miss Lonelyhearts and Mr. Peter Doyle meet. Their first meeting is peppered with what Butler describes as "compulsory performance" of gender and heteronormativity (314), wherein "the 'I' is the effect of a certain repetition" (311). Both men are hyper-aware of the socially

acceptable ways they can interact with one another, and feel compelled to perform accordingly. Mr. Doyle, who uses a cane and wears an elevated shoe, does his utmost to be pleasant and gentlemanly, shaking hands multiple times with Miss Lonelyhearts— an action that is seen by Miss Lonelyhearts as excessive, but welcomed (109). Mr. Doyle's overperformance of this typical male interaction is indicative of his hyper-awareness of his disability, trying to "fit in" as much as he possibly can among the other, able-bodied men. While Mr. Doyle's hand-shaking is later described as "his only social gesture" (110), Miss Lonelyhearts' actions also showcase a performative type of non-sexual gentlemanliness, through careful smiles. Away from the group, they sat across from one another; the tension between them rises as they struggle to begin a conversation, with Mr. Doyle nervously adjusting his clothes, and Miss Lonelyhearts finding "it very difficult to keep his smile steady" (110). Mr. Doyle's handshakes and Miss Lonelyhearts' polite smiles are what are considered appropriate repetitive actions for heterosexual men to do in public, actions which are regarded as not too affectionate or touchy.

By repeating these actions, both Mr. Doyle and Miss Lonelyhearts are striving to adhere to normative standards of masculinity and heterosexuality simultaneously. This is especially true because they are in the back room of a speakeasy, a semi-public place where they can still be seen by others, mainly, other men presumed to be heterosexual. After Mr. Doyle has Miss Lonelyhearts read a letter that he had brought, which expressed his existential frustrations at

having to work as a meter reader with no accommodations for his disability (111), Mr. Doyle's hand slips and accidentally touches Miss Lonelyhearts'— at first retracting, then clasping it. Here, the performative repetition is broken and a genuine connection occurs with a new action, via the two men holding hands: "he did not let go, but pressed it firmly with all the love he could manage. At first [Doyle] covered his embarrassment by disguising the meaning of the clasp with a handshake, but he soon gave in to it and they sat silently, hand in hand" (112). This new action, lovingly holding hands, is outside of the conventions of what is considered "normal" for heterosexual men to do in each other's company. Holding hands is an action with a higher level of intimacy than most accepted male gestures. Both men seem to be aware of that heightened intimacy because Mr. Doyle even tries to play it off like he was shaking his hand. In continuing to hold hands, Mr. Doyle and Miss Lonelyhearts break away from the repetitive masculine performances they had previously engaged in. Instead, a desire to engage in more genuine forms of connection, those that are not forced, is evident. These more genuine forms of connection are socially shunned, however, because they are outside of the normative standards.

The second time Mr. Doyle and Miss Lonelyhearts hold hands, the conditions are different. Miss Lonelyhearts is visiting the Doyles, and, when Mrs. Doyle is out of the room after arguing with Mr. Doyle, we see the following occur: "[Mr. Doyle] stuck out his hand. Miss Lonelyhearts clasped it, and they stood this way, smiling and holding hands, until Mrs. Doyle reentered the room. 'What a

sweet pair of fairies you guys are,' she said" (115). This interaction between Mr. Doyle and Miss Lonelyhearts happens after Mrs. Doyle makes overt sexual gestures to Miss Lonelyhearts, which are ignored by Miss Lonelyhearts. Keeping in mind the fact that Miss Lonelyhearts has already slept with Mrs. Doyle at this point, it is interesting that instead of continuing his interactions with Mrs. Doyle, Miss Lonelyhearts is focused on Mr. Doyle— especially in expressing this kind of non-normative gesture. As Butler reminds us, "acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions" (314-315). The punishment for Mr. Doyle and Miss Lonelyhearts holding hands arrives in the form of Mrs. Doyle's comment, where she insults them for doing so, insinuating their homosexuality by using the slur "fairies." I would define, then, their hand-holding as a transgressive pleasure, because it is outside of normate expectations for heterosexual men, and because it is repeated, an indicator of what they would prefer to do if they were not bound by these standards.

The repetition of holding hands, a non-normative action, is curious because it signals that Miss Lonelyhearts has a level of comfortability with Mr. Doyle that he cannot have with any women he has interacted with previously. His interactions with women are seemingly only motivated by sex, whereas when holding hands with Mr. Doyle, Miss Lonelyhearts seems capable of some form of love. His relationship with his girlfriend Betty, who he had once agreed to marry, yet ignored for two months thereafter, is evidence of his inability to love women,

and commit to one (71-72). Notably, when Miss Lonelyhearts held hands with Betty in her apartment, he soon "grew tired" of it, moving instead to "put his hand inside her clothes" (72). The difference between then and now, between holding hands with Betty versus holding hands with Mr. Doyle, is like night and day in the level of intimacy present. Quickly after being reprimanded for his transgression of holding hands with Mr. Doyle, Miss Lonelyhearts attempts to preach to the Doyles on how to save their relationship, a sermon that is unsuccessful (115). It is Miss Lonelyhearts' pivoting back towards normate religious ideology in his frantic sermon that highlights his inability to address any queerness present in himself. His desperation to distance himself from that queerness is evident in his "screaming" of the sermon to the Doyles (115). Simultaneously, he reinstates his Christ complex and tells others how to live their lives instead of evaluating his own actions. Because his sermon is not taken seriously, the novella itself, and by extension, West, seems to critique Miss Lonelyhearts' hypocritical approach.

<u>The Death of Miss Lonelyhearts and the Rise of Queer/ Disabled Resistance</u>

Miss Lonelyhearts' death at the hands of Mr. Doyle complicates ableist and heteronormative power dynamics. Miss Lonelyhearts never considers that his actions could have serious consequences, a line of thinking that is rooted in his privileges as an able-bodied, heterosexually passing man. After leaving the Doyles' home and literally beating away Mrs. Doyle's advances, Mrs. Doyle claims to her husband that Miss Lonelyhearts attempted to rape her, which enrages Mr. Doyle. Even though Miss Lonelyhearts, to his credit, did no such

thing, Mr. Doyle believes his wife and seeks reprisal: “Doyle was carrying something wrapped in a newspaper. When he saw Miss Lonelyhearts, he put his hand inside the package and stopped. [...] He pulled his hand out. The gun inside the package exploded and Miss Lonelyhearts fell, dragging [Doyle] with him” (126). Hilariously, this event is preceded by Miss Lonelyhearts having a “religious experience” in which he falls ill and hallucinates that he is speaking with God (125). Mr. Doyle’s arrival to his door is then understood by Miss Lonelyhearts as an act of God, his being sent to him so Miss Lonelyhearts could “perform a miracle” in which the two would “embrace” and become “whole” (126). Mr. Doyle, however, outside Miss Lonelyhearts’ door, had instead come to kill him. The symbolism behind Mr. Doyle’s gun being hidden inside the newspaper is significant: delivering Miss Lonelyhearts’ death in this way is Mr. Doyle taking control of the narrative while stripping Miss Lonelyhearts of his platform. One certainly cannot write for a newspaper advice column if they are dead, and the message Mr. Doyle sends to Miss Lonelyhearts is a clear one: that his advice has caught up to him and his days of hypocrisy have come to end. Mr. Doyle does not need to know the true extent of Miss Lonelyhearts’ transgressions to know that such a person should not have a position as an advice columnist. Interestingly and ironically, Mr. Doyle believes he is acting to protect his wife and her honor, an acceptable performance of masculinity, even though he is unaware of her previous consensual encounter with Miss Lonelyhearts. Of course, Mr. Doyle’s killing of Miss Lonelyhearts is morally wrong, but, in eliminating Miss

Lonelyhearts, as a man with a disability, Mr. Doyle pushes back against what Miss Lonelyhearts represents: the system of compulsory able-bodiedness and heteronormativity. Miss Lonelyhearts never expected to be stopped, and as such, bought into the fallacy that aligning oneself with hegemonic power structures protects a person, specifically, those systems of heteronormativity and able-bodiedness. In doing so, he ignored the agency of the queer and disabled people he sought to "correct" with his Christian fanaticism, and further, ignored his own queerness. Mr. Doyle's actions disrupt the idea that marginalized "others," whether they be queer or disabled, are powerless to the systems that demand they fall in line.

Conclusion

Miss Lonelyhearts forces us to consider the ways in which hegemonic systems of oppression are not only constructed, but compulsory, and that crusading for those systems is a fool's errand. Miss Lonelyhearts is an incredible hypocrite, able to go through life saying what he believes to be all the right things through his public platform, his newspaper column, while acting very differently in his private life. He, as the representative of these compulsory systems of normate able-bodiedness and heterosexuality, does not account for those he targets to push back in any way, leading him to believe himself invincible. In meeting Mr. Doyle, Miss Lonelyhearts' own repressed queerness is brought to the surface and indulged in, if only momentarily, before Miss Lonelyhearts is compelled to revert back to the systems he upholds that forbid such behavior. In

upholding these systems, and by ignoring the actual concerns of people with disabilities and violently retaliating against those who refuse to bend to his normative wills, Miss Lonelyhearts ignores their agency. Because this results in Miss Lonelyhearts' death, West's novella seems to urge us to reconsider stringent adherence to these normative ideologies, and points towards minoritized groups' ability to disrupt these systems. Resistance is unexpected by the systems that implore compliance, and in resisting, minoritized peoples that are outside of the systems of compulsory able-bodiedness and heterosexuality have power to re-write the narrative and choose for themselves how to live their lives. For those marginalized as "other," solace is not found in saviors or individualism, but instead in daring to consider each other as sources of empowerment. In the killing of Miss Lonelyhearts, these groups deny the idea that they need saving, when they can liberate themselves.

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