

**“Good Reasons for Not Laughing”:  
Humor as Violence in Nathanael West’s  
*Miss Lonelyhearts***

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**Abstract**

As a representative text in the emergence of a “modern grotesque,” *Miss Lonelyhearts* raises several interlocking problems. First, it forces us to examine laughter’s curious alliance with horror, disgust, and alarm. Though these responses would seem to oppose laughter, *Miss Lonelyhearts* continually enlists them to provoke and intensify it. A second and related problem concerns the rules of gender in this violent or alarming humor. The victims of grotesque violence are usually female, the violence itself is typically sexual in nature, and the laughing onlookers as well as the perpetrators of this violence are usually male. *Miss Lonelyhearts* is a particularly interesting text in this regard, for while it exploits the linkages between male humor and sexual violence, it also encourages our progressive dissociation from that circuit. What emerges is not only a brutal comic arrangement but a guiltier mode of violent male laughter. This built-in resistance to the very laughter it provokes will be examined in the third section of this paper, mainly in relation to the temporality of reading.

**Key Words:** West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, grotesque, comic, humor