“Hope” is among the most nebulous of words. Everyone has his or her own idea of what it means. If academic definitions hold any currency these days, we can go to the Random House dictionary, which recognizes hope as “the feeling that what is desired is also possible, or that events may turn out for the best” (Stein 637). Both halves of that statement may inform a discussion of how novelists Nathanael West and Kurt Vonnegut use hope as an abstract but still potent idea.

In comparing Vonnegut’s work and implicit philosophies to Nathanael West’s novel Miss Lonelyhearts, we can observe two quite divergent views of the value hope and its corollaries possess in the modern age. Through the use of similar images, themes, and moral considerations, West and Vonnegut illustrate opposed commentaries. West’s vision of American life is of a wasteland devoid of any chance at redemption, in which hope exists only as the cruel catalyst for his hero’s incipient downfall. Vonnegut has what seems to be a similarly bitter view of the plight of our culture and society, but he sees hope as the best method of retaining sanity: fighting despair with optimism. In short, these two novelists use many common means to arrive at different perceptions.

West’s novel concerns the moral and spiritual crisis of a young man who writes advice to the lovelorn for a small New York newspaper. Journalists call it the agony column, and that’s what this book is—one long agony column. Deluged with letters from readers who sign themselves with names like Desperate, Disillusioned, and Sick-of-it-All, he finds himself becoming intensely involved in their collective misery. Sex and art are not the answers, he has decided; religion seems the only alternative, and Miss Lonelyhearts—he is identified only by his role—sinks deeper into what he candidly calls his “Christ complex.” Despite the taunts of his editor, Shrike, he convinces himself that he can make a difference, that he can teach his readers to love. But he tries too hard, believes himself too thoroughly, and finally is shot and killed by one of the pathetic readers he has tried so hard to help.
Miss Lonelyhearts is worthy of comparison to the great works of West’s contemporaries, F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner. Like them, West posits a disillusioned, symbolically impotent protagonist who sorts through the debris of a nihilistic society in search of some sort of truth. He may arrive at a separate peace, but he will also learn that his image of truth is too illusory to have any practical value in today’s world. Like Jay Gatsby or Quentin Compson, Miss Lonelyhearts is searching for the final answer, only to find the answer unattainable and the search an often fatal mistake.

Vonnegut can also be seen to have emanated from this modern American tradition: his heroes—Paul Proteus in Player Piano, Malachi Constant in The Sirens of Titan, Eliot Rosewater in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, Billy Pilgrim in Slaughterhouse-Five—are on similar quests for meaning. But unlike West, Vonnegut allows them means of dealing with the social and psychological limitations under which they are forced to live, means of finding individual truths within themselves. Billy Pilgrim’s time-tripping, for instance, enables him to retain equilibrium under the pressure of his memories from the war and the ways in which his family is splintered. This is the hope that Vonnegut, however subtly, offers: the (occasional) hope for (temporary) reconciliation on a purely personal basis.

The initial similarity one notices between Miss Lonelyhearts and practically all of Vonnegut’s novels is one of tone: the mixture of grotesque, often violent imagery with comedy (although in West the comedy is usually of a parched, mirthless variety, as opposed to Vonnegut’s more spontaneous humor). For Vonnegut, this mixture is evident in such instances as his crosscutting of the bombing of Dresden with Billy’s Tralfamadorian sci-fi fantasy in Slaughterhouse-Five; the narrator’s deadpan confrontation with the guru Bokonon as the apocalypse nears in Cat’s Cradle; and the comically inept Rudy Waltz’s accidental killing in Deadeye Dick.

Vonnegut has turned this voice of haplessness into his trademark—one critic complained that, in his books, “eternal truth turns out to be a shrug of the shoulders” (Marcus 122)—but West was doing approximately the same thing decades earlier. In Miss Lonelyhearts, the comic and dreadful are combined in the garrulous speeches of the editor Shrike, who makes jokes about the letter-writers:

This one is a jim-dandy. A young boy wants a violin . . . he is paralyzed and can’t even feed himself. He has a toy violin and hugs it to his chest,
Devin McKinney

imitating the sound of playing with his mouth. How pathetic! However, one can learn much from this parable. Label the boy Labor, the violin Capital, and so on. . . . (West 240)

In both Vonnegut’s and West’s views, the horrific and the laughable are comingled in just this way, and for both of them that comingling exists as a tool which they can use to construct their worlds. Beyond this, both are simply following the long literary tradition of countering unbearable content with humorous form: ever since Mark Twain’s tales of murder and miscegenation and Edgar Allan Poe’s stories told by irredeemably insane narrators, the dark facets of life have often been leavened with comedy. Even Goethe’s Faust, which can be seen to have had a major influence on Vonnegut, subverts our formal expectations by making Mephistopheles—superficially the most hateful character—into an often clownish and hapless figure: the horrible is made humane and identifiable through the use of subtle comic intonations. Why? Because the incongruity of hysterical sadness and hysterical laughter is too much for most writers to resist; the comedy sharpens the tragedy, and the tragedy makes clear the need for the comedy. In an effective way, Vonnegut and West use the masks of tragedy and comedy to cancel one another out: the reader isn’t impelled to cry at the sadness or laugh at the jokes (although this may certainly happen) but to recognize the void which has replaced them.

Symbolically, the most notable point of intersection between Vonnegut and West is their frequent use of birds as allegorical or figurative images. In Vonnegut’s universe the birds are symbols of grace and freedom amidst chaos and destruction. In Mother Night, the spy whose name is Sparrow represents, for better or worse, the narrator’s only chance of escaping execution for war crimes. A developing motif in Vonnegut’s novels of the 1960s was the vignette of a bird singing sweetly and unabashedly in moments of the most intense crisis: it is used tentatively in Cat’s Cradle, in a more directly symbolic fashion in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, and finally becomes a unifying force in Slaughterhouse-Five. The black men in Breakfast of Champions use bird imitations as their method of enduring the pain and humiliation of having baseballs thrown at them. Lynn Olson, in her essay “Poo-tee-weet” on Vonnegut’s extensive use of bird symbolism, has shown how the image of the phoenix arising from the ashes is crucial to Vonnegut’s archetypal vision; his heroes often play the phoenix, finding mental tricks to play on fate, ways of recovering (at least equivocally) from the psychological bombs life drops on them.
On the other hand, one would have to look to Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* to find a portrait of these creatures as unsparing and bleak as that limned in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. For West, all birds are birds of prey, bringers of disruption and ugliness. Miss Lonelyhearts tries to see tranquility in the New York skyline; “if a bird flew across this arrangement, he closed his eyes angrily until it was gone” (182). He thinks of an acquaintance as “a screaming, clumsy gull” (238). We might also recognize Shrike’s name as a double entendre: the shrike (a.k.a. the butcherbird) is a bird of prey that kills its victim by impaling it on thorns. In the initial draft of his novel, West named his character’s newspaper the New York Evening *Hawk* (Long 45), which is consonant with his use of birds as negative symbols since newspapers themselves are depicted negatively: the man who kills Miss Lonelyhearts hides his gun in a newspaper.

Both Vonnegut and West deal with their heroes’ need for order, and for both this need is a psychic roadblock. “Miss Lonelyhearts found himself developing an almost insane sensitiveness to order. Everything had to form a pattern,” West writes (192). Betty, Miss Lonelyhearts’ fiancée, is the symbol of that order: “She had often made him feel that when she straightened his tie, she straightened much more” (183). It is his compulsion for ordering things—for universal love would indeed be an ultimate order, an ultimate conformity—that finally unhinges him; he refuses to see that such an order is not possible within his disordered society.

Likewise, Vonnegut subtly mocks Billy Pilgrim’s ordering reflexes by placing these words in the mouth of a Tralfamadorian: “Earthlings are the great explainers, explaining why this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided” (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 85). It is indicative of the difference between these authors that whereas West’s hero desperately—fatally—pursues the impossible dream of complete order, Vonnegut’s hero finally accepts its nonexistence and learns to live his life without conventional order of any kind, attaining what might be seen as a state of grace by travelling back and forth in time. Sometimes, however, Vonnegut’s characters do not recognize the danger of complete order, and he is forced to teach them in the harshest terms. In *Cat’s Cradle* the result of scientific labor is Ice-Nine, a lethal substance which turns everything it touches into ice and robs the atmosphere of its oxygen, thus bringing about the world’s effective end. Order has been achieved, Vonnegut concedes; chaos has been mastered. But where are we now?

A worthy comparison between West and Vonnegut along these lines might be drawn by examining their books’ respective structures. *Miss*
Lonelyhearts is, in form, a forerunner of Vonnegut: the chapters are short and pungent, almost like self-contained scenes whose effectiveness relies on the accumulation of episodic detail—a string of pearls as opposed to a single organic jewel. The segments bear laconic, deadpan titles ("Miss Lonelyhearts, Help Me") similar to those employed by Vonnegut in Mother Night and Cat's Cradle. And this point, too, furthers the discussion of order in their books. Contrary to Vonnegut, West’s novel assumes a rigid chronological structure and sense, with no shifts in time other than scattered and insubstantial references to Miss Lonelyhearts’ childhood. Miss Lonelyhearts doesn’t know how to master time, how to make it work for him—as Vonnegut’s heroes, with a progressive degree of success, do. The lack of interplay between the unbearable present and an alternative past or future may explain why Miss Lonelyhearts has less chance for survival than do Vonnegut’s central characters. West’s hero, although he is affected by the Oedipal shadings of his childhood, makes no significant reference to what happened yesterday or, more importantly, to what may happen tomorrow. As a result, he is firmly entrenched in the dire consequences of here and now; there is no escape because he can’t conceive of any. Billy Pilgrim and Kilgore Trout, however, can, and this is in part what enables them to survive where Miss Lonelyhearts cannot: consequently, Vonnegut adopts in his books a structural strategy which will illustrate physically and narratively the shifting of time-perceptions.

It was noted earlier that Vonnegut’s hope for humankind is in the achievement of personal reconciliation—an acceptance of the self (and the limitations of the self) above all else. This is the point at which he and West part company, and the crisis by which their characters live or die. Miss Lonelyhearts seeks large-scale reconciliation—the salvation of all the pitiful, illiterate souls who write to him. His Christ complex leads him to believe that such a reconciliation can be realized only through his assumption of their troubles, only by his taking the entire weight of human suffering on his shoulders. As West has constructed things, this mania, so sincerely and passionately felt, is as good as a death warrant.

Vonnegut’s heroes often seem weighted down with something very similar to Miss Lonelyhearts’ “Christ complex,” but unlike him, neither Vonnegut nor his heroes can take it at face value. Certainly, none of them is willing to die for it. In Mr. Rosewater, Kilgore Trout (who is likely the closest Vonnegut will ever come to defining a Messiah for our times) appears as a stamp redeemer—just subtle enough to remind us of Christ,
the soul redeemer. Billy Pilgrim is constantly dogged by Christly parallels, whether marching to prison with his arms spread above him, lying prostrate as electro-shocks course through his brain, or emerging from the slaughterhouse as if it were Jesus’ cave. In each case, Vonnegut is using the messianic connotations for their satirical value, not because he means to say, literally, that Kilgore Trout or Billy Pilgrim is Jesus arisen. By the same token, these characters are sufficiently self-aware to realize that their agonies and tribulations do not constitute crucifixion and martyrdom on a holy scale.

Miss Lonelyhearts, conversely, takes his self-designated Christhood with the utmost solemnity—and Vonnegut has shown us how dangerous “solemnity” can be. Because he is only one man who wishes to use his life and work to help others, he is most directly linked to Vonnegut’s millionaire eccentric Eliot Rosewater. And like Eliot, Miss Lonelyhearts can initially conceive of his supplicants only as abstractions, as “Desperate” and “Disillusioned” and “Sick-of-it-All.” If he comes too close to the truth of what they are, if he is forced to perceive them as anything other than words on paper, he loses the objectivity which makes his quest possible. Eliot tries to help the people of Rosewater through money, not caring what each of them is like, nor concerned that each has a special identity; he thinks of them as groups of numbers and letters, units whose entire identity can be expressed by the special code he uses to identify them in his ledgers. Miss Lonelyhearts makes an attempt to sexually mollify one of his readers, Faye Doyle, but feels only a strong repulsion; that reader has passed beyond the realm of the abstract and has become a living being, and as such can no longer be dealt with as easily.

Eliot reaches this same realization when one of his dependents, Diana Moon Glompers—a fat, unpleasant, blindly adoring woman who reminds one of Faye Doyle—smashes her telephone and tells him, “You were the only reason I needed one”:

“‘Oh, now—’ he said, doubtingly, ‘you surely have many other acquaintances.’”
“‘Oh, Mr. Rosewater—’ she sobbed, and she sagged against the bus, ‘you’re my only friend.’”
“‘You can make more, surely,’ Eliot suggested hopefully.
“‘Oh God!’ she cried.
“‘You could join some church group, perhaps.’”
“‘You’re my church group! You’re my everything! You’re my government. You’re my husband. You’re my friends.’”
These claims made Eliot uncomfortable. (172)
Eliot boards the bus which will take him from Rosewater, has a vivid hallucination involving the World War II firebombing of Dresden, Germany, and loses his mind, to awaken one year later inside an asylum. After talking with his rich, pragmatic father, he realizes he was saner when he was giving his money away to the lost souls who asked for it; he elects to go on dispensing his fellowships, elects to go on trying. This is his hope, and the hope Vonnegut holds out for us. "Life is worth while, for it is full of dreams and peace, gentleness and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar." These words are from Miss Lonelyhearts (178), not from Mr. Rosewater, but these are the words Eliot, at least for the moment, decided to believe. (He saw a similar purifying flame, after all, while imagining the burning of Dresden.)

They are also the words that Miss Lonelyhearts, by the end of the story, has accepted. What then is the difference between them? Just this: Eliot also knows that, while he can go on helping in his own small way, he cannot save everyone with love or money—just as he could not save his wife Sylvia from going crazy. Miss Lonelyhearts, on the other hand, has deluded himself to the point where salvation for all people (and his own role as the savior) is not only possible but essential: he convinces himself that he can save the world. To put it bluntly, he has taken chaos and suffering—not to mention himself—too seriously: he has allowed the external demands of the world around him to dictate the course of his life rather than formulating a new, personal world which suits his needs. Might not Vonnegut be saying that if we take ourselves and the world's inef-fable troubles too seriously, we'll go mad, just like Miss Lonelyhearts? And Sylvia? And Eliot?

All of which brings us back to that nagging but necessary word—hope. The difference between West and Vonnegut lies not merely in the fact that their protagonists hope for different things but in how these writers portray hope as a factor in the protagonists' fates. Miss Lonelyhearts hopes to be Jesus Christ, and he ultimately has "the feeling that what is desired is also possible," the first half of the dictionary definition of the word. Basically, his hope (carried to its insane extreme) is what gets him killed. Vonnegut's brand of hope as expressed through his heroes is summed up by the second half of the Random House definition—the aspiration "that events may turn out for the best." In our time, Vonnegut asks, can we do any more than this—hope for the best? Probably not; nor can we afford to do any less, because hope is the only thing that may pull us through.
Vonnegut's world is never spotless: he sees the madness, but also manages to find ways of dealing with it. West's vision, conversely, is utterly negative because he sees no recourse for Miss Lonelyhearts once he has ordained himself the new messiah; once the illusion is accepted as fact, there are no ways out. Vonnegut does allow Eliot a way out: the ability to accept the absurdity of what he's been through and make a decision about it. Both worlds are intensely realized and, on their own terms, convincing, because West and Vonnegut are uniquely gifted artists. They can make us believe that hope is imperative (in Vonnegut's case) and that hope in lethal (in West's). By examining both extremes and weighing their validity within the circumstances of our own lives, we might be better disposed to reach a definition of "hope" which best fits us—which informs the demands of our lives. And which turns each of us into a character out of Kurt Vonnegut.

Works Cited


