

Not Funny

Politics can become heartless in its interplay between opponents. What could be a serious and courteous debate soon degenerates into maneuvers that blindside contenders. A recent example is the transporting of migrants to distant locations apparently without proper consultation with all the parties affected! Such tactics delight one side and set the stage for a counterpunch by the other. And what becomes of the pawns involved?

In 1938 Nathanael West published a novel about a New York newspaperman who writes a daily feature under the pen name "Miss Lonelyhearts" - (*Are-you-in-trouble? Do-you-need-advice? Write-to-Miss-Lonelyhearts-and-she-will-help-you*). It was an idea cooked up by the paper's editor, Shrike. It's apparent purpose was to offer advice to the readers of the metropolis, but its real purpose was to increase circulation; to capitalize on human suffering. Everyone at the paper saw the column as a joke - even the fellow assigned to play "Miss Lonelyhearts". Then the letters started coming in.

Dear Miss Lonelyhearts - I am in such pain I don't know what to do sometimes I think I will kill myself my kidneys hurt so much. . . I have 7 children in 12 years and ever since the last 2 I have been so sick. I was operated (sic) on twice . . . cry all the time it hurts so much and I don't know what to do . . . Sick-of-it-all.

Dear Miss Lonelyhearts - I am sixteen years old now and I don't know what to do and would appreciate it if you could tell me what to do. When I was a little girl it was not so bad because I got used to the kids on the block making fun of me, but now I would like to have boy friends . . . and go out on Saturday nites, but no boy will take me because I was born [deformed] - although I'm a good dancer . . .and my father buys me pretty clothes. I sit and look at myself all day and cry. . . . What did I do to deserve such a terrible bad fate? . . Sincerely yours, Desperate.

The godless editor Shrike thought the letters hilarious. After so many years in journalism the futility of human existence *amused* him. Life was obviously a cruel joke; so *why not laugh* instead of cry? So he would lean over "Miss Lonelyheart's" shoulder while he typed and nag: *The same old stuff, . . . Why don't you give them something new. . . ? Tell them about art.* Then he would sneeringly dictate platitudes like: *Do not let life overwhelm you. When the old paths are choked with the debris of failure, look for newer and fresher paths.*

But over time "Miss Lonelyhearts" himself began to react differently. The more he read the letters, the more his replies seemed sacrilegious. Individuals living out there in the tenements or commuting on subways; or children anxious over domestic violence - how could he ever adequately respond to the unique pain of their misspelled petitions? Then he began to realize his letter writers were not looking for solutions to their problems. In the privacy of their anguish what they wanted was *someone to care*. What they were pleading for was love - a love that reaches right down to the soles of your feet and guarantees you are not expendable; that your life has been no joke. He trembled to think what they were asking of him - a care that was divine. Yet the summons was so attractive: this call to transcend himself and the Shrikes and the politics of this "whirl-d".

Geoff Wood