

**THE PROTO - POSTMODERNIST  
NATHANAEL WEST:  
A STUDY OF HIS NOVELS**

By

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I, T. Imsunaro Ao, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form the basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.


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TO  
MY LATE FATHER

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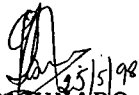
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## CONTENTS

	Pages
Acknowledgements	i-ii
CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION	1-25
CHAPTER II PARODY AS PLOT	26-46
CHAPTER III GROTESQUE AS CHARACTERS	47-69
CHAPTER IV CERTAIN HERMENEUTIC QUESTIONS - PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION	70-96
CHAPTER V NARRATOR AS READER AND WRITER	97-115
CHAPTER VI CONCLUSION	116-122
BIBLIOGRAPHY	123-131

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers an introduction to postmodernism by examining critically some of the definitions given by critics. Before applying to the text under study it is necessary to point out the salient characteristics of postmodernism in general and literature in particular. It is fair to state in the beginning itself that postmodernism is conspicuous not for its elusive nature only but also for its eclectic and contradictory implications. This is partly because of the complex nature of the postmodernist discourses and partly because of its ideological specificity which can be traceable to various branches of knowledge such as Anthropology, Architecture, History, Philosophy and so and so forth.

The first and foremost problem that we encounter in defining 'postmodernism' is the problem inherent in its periodization. The genealogy of postmodernism continues to be a subject of debate. Different dates regarding its beginning have been proposed by different critics that make the confusion worse and confounded. According to Waugh, "'postmodernism' was first used as a period term in the early 50's by Arnold Toynbee who announced that we are

entering the fourth and final phases of Western history: one of irrationalism anxiety and helplessness" (Waugh 1992:34).

In 1924, Virginia Woolf suggested that modernism, or at least the modern world, had begun "on or about December 1910, when human character changed" (Brooker 1992:5). In 1977, with a mark seriousness, typical of postmodernism, Charles Jencks, offered that modernism had 'ended' on 15th July 1972 at 3.32 p.m. (Ibid.).

The term postmodernism is itself problematic and is still a long way from being solved. The term 'postmodernism' sounds like the vocabulary which is grounded in fantasy:

The word's apocalyptic tone, its connotation of nihilistic rejection, issue from the oxymoronic aspects which seems to provide a way of speaking about the impossible. To say 'I am postmodern' would be, for most people, something like saying 'I am asleep' - it can be done, but what does it mean? Of course, the confusion vanishes when we replace 'modern' with 'modernism' and explain that the latter refers less to historical time than to a specific movement in the arts. (Ray 1984:131)

What Ray seems to suggest is that the entire controversy regarding the term 'postmodernism' comes to an end if it is treated, like 'modernism', to 'refer less to historical time than to a specific movement in arts'. However, in that case too Ray does not deny "their fundamental strangeness". But he believes that this very

'strangeness' corresponds to the epistemological rupture with traditional assumptions about the meaning which the postmodern situation has effected.

Taking cue from Ray's statement, any researcher will be tempted to know how postmodernism becomes a serious departure from 'traditional assumptions' about the meaning. What Ray means by 'traditional assumptions' is still not clear. Whether he refers to the traditional assumptions coming down from Victorian period or he confines himself to the modernist mode beginning with Yeats, Eliot, Pound etc., is a question of debate. But in view of the ideological shift from modernism to postmodernism, it is fair to begin our survey from 'modernism' and to see whether 'postmodernism' is a break or continuation of it. This aspect of postmodernism will be taken care of in the subsequent pages. But at this stage we shall simply concern ourselves with the definition given by critics.

Jean-Francois Lyotard, Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard are three writers whose writings can be considered as the harbinger of postmodernism. In his The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1984), Lyotard has seen postmodernism as the general condition of knowledge in times of information technology. He sees modern scientific developments playing the role of avant-garde

liberator, "designed to shift and transform the structures of reason itself" (Lyotard 1984:60). He says:

Postmodern Science - by concerning itself with such things as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, 'fracta', catastrophes and pragmatic paradoxes - is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, non-rectifiable, and paradoxical. It is changing the meaning of the word knowledge, while expressing how such a change can take place. It is producing not the known, but the unknown. (Ibid.: 60).

Lyotard in the said remarks sees postmodernism as consisting of discontinuous and paradoxical elements which are characteristic of the time we are living.

Baudrillard sees postmodernism as the substitution of the simulacrum for the real. He is of the view that we live in an age in which 'signs' or representation are no longer required to have any verifiable contact with the world they allegedly represent. He mentions the four stages through which representation has historically passed on its way to the condition of pure simulation. Initially, the 'sign' or 'representation' "is the reflection of a basic reality" (Baudrillard 1983:12). In the second stage, the sign "masks and perverts a basic reality" (Ibid.). In the third stage, the sign "masks the absence of a basic reality" (Ibid.). In the fourth, terminal stage, the sign "bears no relation to

any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (Ibid.). In the regime of simulation which is contemporary culture, Baudrillard diagnoses the incessant production of images with no attempt to ground them in reality.

Jameson's views on postmodernism can be culled from his essays such as "Postmodernism: or the cultural logic of Late Capitalism" (1984), "Reading without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video-Text" (1987), "Periodizing the 60's, the Sixties without Apology" (1984) etc. In the first two essays Jameson has tried to link postmodernism to the cultural logic of late capitalism. Underpinning his argument with a 'totalizing' economic theory derived from Mandel's book Late Capitalism (1978), Jameson offers his characterization of postmodernity in socio-economic terms. In its simplest terms, market capitalism begets realism: monopoly capitalism begets modernism, and therefore multinational capitalism begets postmodernism (Jameson 1984:78). Jameson describes the contemporary global movement not as a surpassing of capitalism, but rather as an intensification of its forms and energies. The postmodern phase of multinational capitalism is according to Jameson, marked by the exponential growth of international corporations and the consequent transcending of national boundaries.

For some critics, Modernism and Postmodernism

describe artistic and cultural artifacts and attitudes of the present century. They feel that both these terms have reached beyond national, cultural and generic boundaries. They can be used to refer not just to art and cultures but also more comprehensive to aspects of modern society. Apart from this, the boundaries between the two terms vary according to different usages. As Andreas Huyssen points out:

The amorphous and politically volatile nature of postmodernism makes the phenomenon itself remarkably elusive, and the definition of its boundaries exceedingly difficult, if not per se impossible. Furthermore, one critic's postmodernism is another critic's modernism (or variant thereof), while certain vigorously new forms of contemporary culture (such as the emergence into a broader public's view of distinct minority cultures and of a wide variety of feminist work in literature and the arts) have so far rarely been discussed as postmodern. (Huyssen 1988:58-59)

Huyssen has referred to 'the amorphous and politically volatile nature of postmodernism', in other words, its 'indeterminacy'. Ihab Hassan is of the view that the 'indeterminacy' can draw in other terms such as 'avant-garde'. He says:

Like other categorical terms - poststructuralism, or modernism, or romanticism for that matter - postmodernism suffers from a certain semantic instability, that is, no clear consensus about its meaning exists among scholars.... Thus some critics mean by postmodernism what others call avant-gardism or even neo-avant-gardism, while still others

would call the same phenomenon simply modernism. (Hassan 1985:121)

Taking cue from Hassan we may try to identify postmodernism either with 'avant-gardism' or 'neo-avant-gardism'. The term avant-gardism is derived from military terminology. It refers to the advance guard which prepares the way for a larger following army. In the context of cultural politics the term has been used to refer to movements which aims to assaulting conventional standards and attitudes. Thus Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Constructivism are all conventionally described as avant-gardist in essence because they seek to destroy bourgeois standard. And it is the overtly political activist element in many avant-garde movements which is frequently used as one of the criteria for distinguishing between avant-gardism and modernism.

Thus critics are so sharply divided among themselves that any researcher is bound to be lost in the labyrinth of the definitions provided by them. Thus a fresh attempt to define postmodernism is often a fresh confession of failure. The term as such has been so 'used' and 'abused' that the more firmly one tries to comprehend it, the more conscious one becomes of the multiplicity of contradictions. As Linda Hutcheon points out:

Few words are more used and abused in discussions of contemporary culture than the word 'postmodernism'. As a result, any attempt to define the word will necessarily and simultaneously have both positive and negative dimensions. It will aim to say what postmodernism is but at the same time it will have to say what is not. Perhaps this is an appropriate condition, for postmodernism is a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory as well as unavoidably political. (Hutcheon 1989:1)

A survey of critical opinions shows that whereas some view postmodernism as a total break from modernism, others think of it as an intensification and extension of modernism. Whether we see postmodernism vis-a-vis modernism or vice versa, we cannot visualise an abrupt end of modernism making way for postmodernism to begin. Many critics, like Ihab Hassan and Gerald Graff see postmodernism as a continuation, sometimes carried to an extreme, of the counter traditional experiments of modernism. Hassan points out that "postmodern spirit lies coiled within the great corpus of modernism" (Hassan 1985:111). Hassan further asserts that there is no absolute break between modernism and postmodernism, since "history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future" (Ibid.). It is no doubt Ihab Hassan who has more than any other critic contributed to the gradual acceptance of the term, though he himself is confronted with the vexed problem of what postmodernism really means. "The question of

postmodernism remains complex and moot". (Hassan 1983:25). Another crucial view on postmodernism given by Hassan is worth noting - "Postmodernism may be a response, direct or oblique, to the unimaginable which modernism glimpsed only in its most prophetic moments" (Hassan 1975:53). The concept of postmodernism is so unstable that no fixed definition can be given and critics still continue to be confronted and challenged with this perplexing and much debated issue.

"The postmodern tendency in literature and literary criticism have been characterized as a 'breakthrough', a significant reversal of the dominant literary and socio-cultural directions of the last two centuries" (Graff 1979:31). Graff has made a significant point here. In stating this, he does not demarcate the boundary between modernism and postmodernism. "Breakthrough" perhaps could mean a leap forward from the traditional views and beliefs. Co-existing with the loss of confidence in traditional claims of the moral and interpretative art, is the new sensibility which has brought about a novel outlook to interpretation and moralistic beliefs. To quote Graff:

This new sensibility manifests itself in a variety of ways: in the refusal to take art 'seriously' in the old sense; in the use of art itself as a vehicle for exploding its traditional pretensions and for having the vulnerability and tenuousness of art and language, in the rejection of the dominant

academic traditions of analytic, interpretative criticism, which by reducing art to abstraction tends to neutralize or domesticate its potentially liberating energies. (Ibid.:31)

David Harvey has suggested that there is more continuity than difference in the movement from modernism to postmodernism and that the "latter represents a crisis within the former in which fragmentation and ephemerality are confirmed while the possibility of the eternal and the immutable is treated with far greater skepticism" (Harvey 1989:116). Similarly, Alex Callinicos (1989) has argued that there is no sharp distinction between modernism and postmodernism, and that the belief that there is can be explained by reference to the particular political and cultural disappointments of the generation of 1960's in Western Europe and the USA (Callinicos 1989:45).

In the light of the above discussion one thing is clear that postmodernism shares some of the characteristics of modernism. Hence it becomes imperative on our part to see postmodernism not as a sudden break from modernism but as an intensification and extension of modernism.

Modernism may not be as unstable a concept as postmodernism. Any characterization of modernism is widely accepted but many fail to understand and accept

postmodernism. The modernist world to a certain extent can be studied and interpreted. The How? Why? and What? part can be answered, if not fully, at least partially. Central to McHale's definition of the postmodern is the shift from fictions that posed epistemological questions - "How can I know the world?" - to fictions that posed ontological questions - "What world is this?" (McHale 1992:XII). The shift from the epistemological world to the ontological world foreshadows a kind of shift from modernism to postmodernism. The postmodern text becomes uncertain and enigmatic opening up into a new world, one that shifts like shifting sand and a world which is abruptly pushed towards alienation and isolation. Umberto Eco's novel, The Name of the Rose is poised on the Modernist/Postmodernist cusp posing epistemological questions through its detective story that is transformed into an anti-detective story hinging upon ontological destabilizations. Again in Umberto Eco's Foucault's Pendulum, "the epistemological quest is almost immediately transposed into an ontological key: not 'mystery', but 'conspiracy' and in particular the 'world making' dimension of conspiracy." Regardless of how we construct postmodernism, its story is far from linear and is certainly multi-dimensional (Ibid.: XIII).

The world is not created for our interpretation and,

therefore meaning does not remain our concern. It is a non-interpretative and a non-conventional world that the postmodern world foreshadows. Modernist art looks for some kind of meaning hidden behind the surface whereas postmodern art is complacently contented with the elusive nature of meanings and interpretations. Susan Sontag denounces the interpretation of works of art on the grounds that "to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world in order to set up a shadowy world of meanings" (Sontag 1967:7). Perhaps, Fiedler and Sontag's attempt to define postmodernism will throw more light on postmodernism vis-a-vis interpretation. According to them, as quoted by Bertens and Fokkema, "Postmodernism is anti-interpretative, even anti-intellectual and vitalist, it emphasizes performance and form over meaning and content; it seeks to deflate modernist pretensions at meaningfulness and seriousness" (Bertens & Fokkema 1986:18).

Assuming that postmodernism is an extension and intensification of modernism, it is necessary to discuss and analyse briefly the concept of modernism, in particular American modernism in order to get a clear picture of the trends of modernism in the preceding age of the twenties and the thirties and even earlier than that. Although the term 'modernism' has been prevalent for most of this century, it

still evokes disparate images for those who use it. When something is being referred to as modernist, it brings to mind the experimental art forms, the fragmented image of Picasso's cubist paintings, the puzzling juxtapositions of T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land come readily to mind. The turn of the century ushered in radical developments in art, thought, literature, science. The relationship of one to the other continues to be a debatable issue, nonetheless the one common ground they share could be their awareness of the future. The novelty of modernist art is the excitement to discern the world well in advance which they were struggling to create.

Amidst all these changes and upheavals, we find American modernism implicated to create something new. Hoffman's The Twenties presents a rich survey and furnishes a vivid and genuine picture of the decade. The events of the decade shifted from one period to another and from one writer to another because of the fact that no world system is ever entirely fixed or immune from moral revision, innovation and alteration. Fitzgerald's work emitted a whiff of money and wealth. A haunting query of a fundamental lack of substance and depth in the American experience permeates Fitzgerald's stories. Having and nurturing wrong dreams in Fitzgerald led to tragedy and remorse. In Hoffman's view,

"the mechanism of the dream became the most important source of all Surrealist art, in its disguises one found remarkable associations of images and discordances of thought" (Hoffman 1962:243). Freud's Interpretation of Dreams led to the understanding of man and his psyche. On the whole, the turn of the century ushered in radical developments in art, thought, literature and science.

Romanticism and modernism depended on the concept of imagination which imposed a kind of "order, value and meaning on the chaos and fragmentation of industrial society" (Graff 1979:33). This kind of strict adherence to 'order' could go on only till the first world war. The war brought about upheaval, disharmony and fragmentation. There was a total breakdown and the once accepted values and beliefs came to be questioned. The modernist revolt ushered after the First World War mainly because the period after the war is marked by an unexampled range and rapidity of change. The catastrophe of Western civilization has raised doubts about the adequacy of traditional literary modes to represent the harsh and dissonant realities of the postwar world. T.S. Eliot, the high priest of modernist tradition felt that the inherited mode of ordering a literary work, which assumed a relatively coherent and stable social order, could not accord with 'the immense panorama of futility and

anarchy which is contemporary history'. In his The Waste Land, Eliot experimented with new forms and a new style by replacing the standard flow of poetic language with fragmented utterances. His magnum opus substituted for the traditional coherence of poetic structure a deliberate dislocation of parts, in which very diverse components are related by connections that are left to the reader to discover, or invent. Similar kinds of experiments were made by James Joyce and Ezra Pound. These kind of work subverts the basic convention of earlier prose fiction by breaking up the narrator continuity. Further, they are serious departure from the standard modes of narration.

Postmodern art is not only anti-interpretative; it is multi-dimensional too. Culture in the Postmodern sense underwent a sea of change and came to be known as mass culture or popular culture. Mass culture meant anything from pop music, pop art, science fiction, pornography to painting. Fiedler explored his own brand of Postmodernism which tended heavily toward pop art. Pop art which Leslie Fiedler identifies with Postmodernism draws a parallel to Joyce's Finnegans Wake. The point Ihab Hassan makes is simply this: "Finnegans Wake carries the tendencies of high art and of popular culture to their outer limits there where all tendencies of mind may meet, there where the epiphany

and the dirty joke become one" (Hassan 1975:81). It is true that Finnegans Wake takes us to a sublime phase where pure poesy merges with the crude, the crafty, the bizarre, the lowly and the obscene. Here, comedy asserts its authority not only for amusement but more to multiply and compound complexities.

Complexity is an innate feature of the Postmodern art and this could be due to several factors. One of these could be the narrative pattern adopted by the writer. Self-consciousness of one's art is the trademark of Postmodernism. The novel that parodies and reflects upon its own structure is not new. Sterne's Tristram Shandy (1760-1767) antecedes even Joyce's Finnegans Wake in this. In fact, Don Quixote is really the first important novel using the self-conscious narrator. "The self-conscious narrator intrudes into his own created work to comment on himself as a writer, and on his book, not simply as a series of events with moral implications but as a created literary product" (Booth 1952:165).

Nathanael West is placed very crucially amidst all these changing trends and values that the Western world was undergoing. In his biographer Jay Martin's words, "West was unbearably sensitive to the paradoxes of his time. He was part of the Lost Generation, the youngest of the last of

that generation" (Martin 1970:40). His personal bent of activities strongly responded to the bizarre, the grotesque and to the potentially savage. His childhood adventures recorded a freakish kind of celebration of what is bizarre and grotesque. He had not at this time read Breton nor the fin de siecle writers but he was surprisingly fascinated by witchcraft, occultism and mysticism. Martin further records that West showed "as striking preoccupation with the human body, particularly with its odors, its orifices, its corruptibility and diseases, with parasites that feed on human body" (Ibid.:32). Such interests also led him to seek his own identity in an age deeply perplexed about its own character. Thoughts about the future were inconceivable, for it was averse to any kind of logical reasoning. This partly explains why West made his novels resistant to easy solutions. Such grotesqueries and diseased preoccupations provided models for his narratives which no doubt could not conform and succeed along conventional lines. Perhaps all these are repercussions of a man who remained a mystery even to himself. The sensibility of such a writer who remained essentially lonesome in spite of his many acquaintances truly reflected the complexities and all-pervasive pessimism that characterized the modern age.

This reinforces the fact that West was writing not

only during an age entrapped at a point of extreme distortion but during a time when Avant-Garde, Dadaism and Surrealism were in vogue. He started writing during the twenties and the thirties when a great upheaval had already started as a result of the war. West was caught in the wild throes of unrest that the War and the Great Depression brought about. This period, as a historian puts it, "was uniquely an era in which time outran consciousness, in which the sequential stages of depression and reform appeared too rapidly to allow for accurate fathoming. Hence, the misery of the country was equalled only by its bewilderment" (Martin 1970:98). The debate between the characteristic spirits of the twenties and thirties is reflected through the divisions that took place within West himself. The stimulating literature and other cultural achievements of the twenties elapsed and an altogether different form of interpretation took birth during the thirties. By the thirties "the attitude changed, as writers both questioned and struggled to re-interpret the history of their own culture which had changed so radically overnight" (Bradbury/Rulands 1991:319). Therefore, his works conceived and written during the thirties, were marked by a sense of meaninglessness, despair, decadence, political failure and entropy. No doubt, West is crucially placed in the history of Modernism and Postmodernism writing throughout the 1930s

before he died in a car crash in 1940.

The present study is an attempt to relocate West's works in the context of of Modernism vis-a-vis Postmodernism so as to see what aspects of his works carry on with the Modernist mode and in what sense his novels prefigure Postmodernism. His works are not governed by any pre-determined credo. His fictional imagination does not adhere to any set norms which are strictly formulated by the traditional novel writers. His personal streaks of rebellious nature are consistent with the unruly and incoherent nature of his imaginative and creative ability. Perhaps, this is reflected by the fact that West, more than anyone else, measured the malady of the spirit of the age. Hence it is interesting to note that though he wrote during the Modernist period, he was against the formal, coherent orderly forms of writing. It is important to note here that a shift could be seen during the late thirties - a shift from rational to anti-rational behaviour, from a formal celebration of art to a kind of outlandish, freakish celebration of the primal nature where thoughts and feelings were free from the control of logic and reason. West's novels took this radical form of writing and so in this connection Norman Podhoretz in an essay edited by Jay Martin defines West's first novel The Dream Life of Balso Snell as

a brilliantly insane surrealist fantasy that tries very hard to mock Western culture out of existence.

What West observed in Paris, the expatriates, literary experimentalists and surrealists all found their way into the writing of his four novels. Some of his novels like The Dream Life of Balso Snell, Miss Lonelyhearts have a form which has continued to intrigue his readers. In all his works West has adopted a form of humour which critics describe as vicious, mean, ugly, obscene and insane. The modern disorder of surreal dreams, conceits, irony, grotesque elements worked itself into West's writings. This in a way shows that Modernism was spilling over into an artistic strategy of protest against society in the form of radical movements like Dadaism, Surrealism and the Avant-Garde. West started writing under the influence of all these movements. In fact, The Manifeste du Surrealism was issued by Breton in December 1924, just at the time when West himself was similarly moving from his frivolous activities to serious preoccupation with the nature and craft of fiction.

West's strategies evidenced obvious tendencies towards the Avant-Garde, Surrealism and Dadaism. What marks West's continuity with the Avant-Garde rather than with the traditional modernist writing is his central preoccupation

with the extreme primal impulses of the irrational and the non-representable. In seeking to be non-representational and radical, West's world is dominated by randomness and fragmentation. This takes him further into the realms of Surrealism. Breton defines Surrealism, in his Manifesto as the pure "psychic automatism by which it is intended to express verbally in writing or by other means, the real process of thought. Thought's dictation in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations" (Gascoyne 1935:61). West in a nutshell, suggests a special relationship with the present and the new and this explains why he attempted new things attaching new formal problem in each of his novels.

There is resurgence of interest in West now because his techniques of writing call to mind Lawrence Sterne's Tristram Shandy and Cervantes' Dan Quixote. To my knowledge, there are no booklength studies on West as a proto-postmodernist, though there may be stray essays here and there touching on this area tangentially and marginally. Some of such works are Matthew Roberts "Bonfire of the avant-garde: Cultural rage and readerly complexity in The Day of the Locust." Here Roberts argues that Nathanael West's The Day of the Locust marks the point at which the revolutionary avant-garde confronts the spectre of its own

impossibility in the Hollywood dream factory. Another one could be M.A. Klug's "Nathanael West: Prophet of failure" where Klug relocates West in the Postmodern tradition. His essay begins with this sentence "Nathanael West was the prototype of the Postmodernist." In the same vein I would also like to mention "The Sweet Savage Prophecies of Nathanael West" by Kingsley Widmer in The Thirties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama, edited by Warren French. In this essay Widmer presents very clearly how West foresaw the apocalyptic violence of a warped and cheated humanity. Many are of the view that Postmodernism started with Finnegans Wake in Britain but we cannot say the same about America. Faulkner, Fitzgerald are all considered as modernist writers. The underlying hypothesis of the present research is that Nathanael West is a transitional writer who can be rightly placed between Modernism and Postmodernism. Therefore, since such transitional writer as West radicalized Modernism, perhaps Postmodernism followed.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, I want to analyse the following novels of Nathanael West along these lines: (1) The Dream Life of Balso Snell, (2) Miss Lonely Hearts, (3) A Cool Million, (4) The Day of the Locust. I divide my dissertation into the following chapters:

- Chapter I : Introduction.
- Chapter II : Parody as Plot.
- Chapter III : Grotesque as Characters.
- Chapter IV : Certain Hermeneutic Questions  
Problems of Interpretation.
- Chapter V : Narrator as Reader and Writer.
- Chapter VI : Conclusion.

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CHAPTER II

PARODY AS PLOT

Parody has been called "parasitic and derivative" (Hutcheon 1985:3). Perhaps the term 'parasitic' and 'derivative' are used to signify their dependence on the earlier texts. Parody is not defined as a ridiculing imitation to invoke laughter as mentioned in the Dictionary. A parody need not always make fun of an earlier text, it may sometimes offer a much wider perspective. For example in Joyce's Ulysses, while the Odyssey is clearly the parodied text here, it is not one to be mocked at or ridiculed but rather it is to be seen "as an ideal or at least as a norm from which the modern departs" (Hutcheon 1985:5).

Parody is not a new concept altogether. It has been with us since Don Quixote and Tristram Shandy. With these two novels, there came about the dynamic activity of intertextuality and self-representation which influenced modern writing in a big way. The very fact that both the texts allow a wide diversity of critical approaches testifies to their influence upon twentieth century writings. Among modernist writers, Eliot, Woolf, Joyce and others use parody in their work. Virginia Woolf's Orlando for example, is a parody on writing a biography. In this novel, she exposes the pretentious style and solemn pedantry that biographer go for rather than presenting any real

insight of the lives they deal with. Parody in modernist works is sustained by their style and to some extent by decorum too. Such technical styles sustaining parody are no longer seen in postmodern writings for the parodic form has turned intensely radical now. This is what I call subversion of the familiar staples of both modernist and realist fiction.

The Forsterian expectations of how a novel should be organized certainly become unworkable in Nathanael West's fictional works. The proper Aristotelian division of a beginning, middle and an end gets diffused as soon as the novel begins. With this break, the novel enters into a new domain of writing which is rather more complex. In the absence of so called organized 'plots', it is parody which pushes the narrative. Parody brings about a direct confrontation with the form of the novel and the problems related to it. Such an art destabilizes and diffuses conventions in parodic ways, ... "self consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and of course to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past" (Hutcheon 1988:23). So in the light of the above claims, it is necessary to analyse and examine how West uses the superimposing structure of parody to push the plot forward or to organize his plot.

Parody is one of the major stylistic devices in both modernist and postmodernist works. When we consider parody, we need not always relate it to fiction because parodic form of art is now popularly seen in modern forms of art like films, music, painting, television serials and even in comic strips. No fixed definition can be offered to define parody; in fact Hutcheon suggests that the concept of parody must be broadened to fit the requirements of the art of our century (Hutcheon 1985:11).

This broadening aspect of parody is very much applicable to West's works, for he does not use parody to simply mock at past writings. His works, true to their experimental nature, suggest a definition of parody or rather relocate parody in a broader sense. The failure of a systematic working of plot makes way for parody in West. His art failed to sustain itself during the thirties because the nature of his writing jolted the complacent mindset of readers during that period. But I would not term this as West's failure for he was only trying to present the ills of the contemporary American society. His works depicted the malaise that was inherent in the world at large and in America in particular. West, as early as the thirties could envision and foresee the radical changes that America was undergoing. Though the theme of 'failure' predominates his

works, West is not obsessed by such negative values. It becomes imperative for West to employ nightmarish and repugnant images for only such images could vividly expound a demented and sterile world. West therefore uses parody to portray the ills of a decadent and fragmented society.

Modernism is the launching pad for all the four novels - (1) The Dream Life of Balso Snell, (2) Miss Lonelyhearts, (3) A Cool Million, and (4) The Day of the Locust. Though West is not fully skeptical of Modernist aesthetics, he is aware of the uncertainties that beset a modern mind. His fictional works are delicately balanced on a scale that inclines more towards the end of Modernism. The complacently balanced world receives a jerk in West's novels. Miss Lonelyhearts' joke to be a saviour is jerked into rude consciousness intensified even more by the self-realization of his helpless state just as Homer's passivity in The Day Of the Locust is jerked into violence bordering on madness and the irrational. Nathanael West's works in their play of parody and irony radicalize the doubts and uncertainties that Modernism faces. The complexity lies in the fact that while it looks inwards and is introverted, it is capable of criticising that art which it seeks to describe.

The self-reflexive art of fiction is an important form of parody. Fiction turned intensely introverted

directing its focus upon the self. Virginia Woolf and James Joyce wrote fiction that transcended all limitations of simple realism and probed into the consciousness to explore a more intense realism which the earlier texts failed to do. This kind of introverted realism which presented reality through the orders of modern consciousness underwent a radical change. The degree of self-analytical presentation became markedly radicalized; its obsessions with itself could only be presented through the use of parody and irony.

The aspect of experimentation reverberates very strongly in all his four novels. West experiments with new forms of art such as Dadaism, Surrealism and Freudianism in all his four novels. These experimental forms of art evoke disparate images or rather strike a discordant note with the earlier forms of writings. What makes West's continuity with these new forms of art rather than with traditional writing is his central preoccupation with the extreme primal impulses of the irrational and the non-representable. One of the repercussions of intense and radical experimentation in West results in self-reflexivity. As discussed earlier, the novel that parodies and reflects upon its own structure has been with us since Don Quixote and Tristram Shandy though the form was not developed further until the 1920's.

Parodic self-consciousness is presented through the works of Nathanael West. His first novel The Dream Life of Balso Snell is heavy with parodic undertones for it is at heart a parody of the literary pretensions in which man is imprisoned by logic and reason. The Dream Life of Balso Snell then becomes the perfect vehicle of parody and self-reflexivity just as Cervantes' Don Quixote is a great vehicle of self-expression. "The wooden horse was inhabited solely by writers in search of an audience" (CWNW 1957:37). This tone of self-reflexivity reverberates throughout the novel. This aspect of self-scrutiny is rendered more intense for it deals with the illogicality of a man's dream life which becomes more irrational and diffusive as one dream overlaps with the other, exploding finally into a nightmarish failure. The self-conscious artist is also seen through the little dramas of Beagle Darwin's consciousness in which Janey Davenport is the actor. In his musings he replays the entire scene in his unconscious mind and ponders what his reaction ought to be for every action that is replayed. Such a solipsistic form of art is parodied in The Dream Life of Balso Snell. He is the performer throughout who must laugh at himself and if the laugh is bitter, he must laugh at the laugh (CWNW 1957:27).

The Dream Life of Balso Snell continues the self-

parodic mockery throughout. The artist is emotionally incapacitated for he cannot escape his own watchful eye. He is imprisoned by his vigilant gaze to such an extent that all his expressions turn into a parody of himself. The artist here is the extreme kind of Eliot's espousal-poet as critic, artist as critic. As a result the artist becomes a tough critic of himself and cannot escape the clutches of his own self-consciousness. Every movement here is associated with literary burlesque which collapses into parody. M.A. Klug's pertinent statement highlights the parody beneath every action in *Balso* - "Every action, whether it be spent in shaving, making love or killing the next-door neighbour, gets entangled in literary associations and collapses into parody, the ironic admission of the artist's bondage to the dead faces of the past which have usurped the present" (Klug 1987:19). The past no longer remains a complacent picture for it becomes a mocking, jeering audience. Therefore, in every gesture of his life and work, he becomes a self-conscious performer.

The acute self-consciousness on the part of the artist results in superficial poses. This in a way gives perspective for judging the unreality of the presence. "In Borges' stories, for example, technique of reflexiveness and self-parody suggests a universe in which human consciousness

is incapable of transcending its own mythologies" (Graff 1979:55). Again Borges's "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" predicts the unreality of the very world that is presented. Though not with the same intensity, the presentation of West's works strikes at the root of unreality - an unreal world inhabited by characters who are all performers in one way or the other. The likes of John Gilson, Harry Greener, Lemuel Pitkin provides this very aspect in his works. John Gilson in The Dream Life of Balso Snell cannot free himself from his watchful eye and this is evident in the following metaphor, "It is as if I were attempting to trace with the point of a pencil the shadow of the tracing pencil. I am enchanted with the shadow's shape and want very much to outline it; but the shadow is attached to the pencil and moves with it; never allowing me to trace its tempting form" (CWNW 1957:16). This is a pointer to denote acute frustrations involved in the study of the self. Just as the pencil and the shadow cannot be separated, he cannot release himself from his own vigilant gaze. Harry Greener in The Day of the Locust parallels the parody of John Gilson but in a different sense. The domination of the conscious mind is undeniably strong that even at the hour of death he can hardly separate his mechanical gestures from the real one. Faye Greener is an even greater performer, she strikes different superficial poses and emotes meaningless gestures.

In the funeral of her father, Harry Greener, Faye wilfully makes a show of an affectionate daughter. She demonstrates and manipulates the tone of her supposedly pathetic 'moans'. This particular show is actually devoid of any real emotions that could be associated with the death of a loved one. Lemuel Pitkin in A Cool Million is also a pathetic performer. He must perform till the final show is over. In the light of the above discussion we can observe that the self-mocking parody is undeniably linked with the presentation of a world that is superficial and unreal.

This strain of mockery is the underlying feature in each of his novels. In Miss Lonelyhearts, the sense of mockery is heightened right from the beginning through the letters. 'Desperate', 'Sick of it all', etc. create a mockery of the universe that (these fragmented, depressed selves) inhabit. They put forward various questions which dismantle the reader so intensely that the reader himself is abruptly awakened to be pitted against a cruel, distorted and mangled universe. This very strain of mockery, according to Linda Hutcheon, is associated with parody (Hutcheon 1988:34). Balso Snell, mocks at writers and their literary works. Balso enters the Trojan Horse through the posterior end which itself is a direct mockery of the world of art that writers inhabit. This pseudo-journey that Balso

undertakes ends nowhere; it explodes into self-mockery and a parody of a brash experimentation of illogicality and futility of a man's dream life. Such a parodic form is structured within a dream-upon-dream complexity. This same twist of parody is continued in A Cool Million. Lemuel Pitkin who leaves home in search of a fortune is misguided, deceived, deluded, dismembered and finally killed. This signifies a mockery of the American dream of success. A Cool Million is in many ways a parody of the American ideals of community and oneness. But such a lofty dream turns terribly ridiculous and culminates in a nightmarish failure. Such violent self-mockery and burlesque stretching Lem's adventure to an extreme end echoes a profound truth as suggested by Kingsley Widmer - "mocking the gross American costuming in innocence and a lashing out against the contradictory and fraudulent American culture and society" (Widmer 1982:65).

Beneath the motif of self-mockery and burlesque lie acute intricacies that are not meant to be resolved but are to be held in an ironic tension. In this context, I would categorize West as an artist fascinated by what is difficult and paradoxical. The ironic tension becomes taut in Miss Lonelyhearts for there are such an amazing number of unresolvable paradoxes. Its main narrative is structured

upon a pattern of stating questions, a structure that is foregrounded on enigmatic truths and quests almost verging on the grotesque. Miss Lonelyhearts is located amidst these unresolvable and diffusive queries. There are no logical solutions to questions like - 'What did I do to deserve such a fate?', 'What is the stinking business for?', 'How can I have faith in this day and age?', 'When the salt has lost its savour, who shall savour it again?' (CWNW 1957:67, 110, 125). Such questions foreshadow a deep and poignant query about the very construct of universe and man. This self-mockery is complicated by the fact that the characters, especially Miss Lonelyhearts, are incapacitated and shaken by such agencies presented in the form of letters. West's characters are non-evolving and mute according to Robert Emmet Long. He sees a "distinct affinity with the characters in Beckett's plays, who cannot evolve to the point of self-recognition or to a mastery of themselves or the world" (Long 1985:155). This 'mute' state in West aggravates as the questions multiply for they demonstrate the insubstantiality or the slipperiness of the novel's movement - art of unrest offering only questions but no final answers. The entire novel works to problematize such tensions for the real truth and the real answer diffuses into its dark enigmatic nature.

The presence of such glaring and poignant questions

becomes a reality in West. But reality collapses into parody, mocking the very aspect of uncertainty and unrest upon which the novel is structured. In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the casually oriented expectation of a supposed 'saviour' of the depressed and the unfortunate lot becomes subverted. Subversion takes the form of parody here. *Miss Lonelyhearts* becomes a parody of a columnist who is supposed to ease the troubled and perplexed mind with his advice. The reader's expectation of a conventional detective story is subverted but nevertheless it is a quest to solve the unsolvable in a world beset with untold perplexities and uncertainties. All possible landmarks to solve the mystery are destroyed and the novel itself becomes an anti-detective novel. The question gets more embroiled in the mystery that he himself is turned into a victim of his own deception. Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose is also an anti-detective novel shrouded in mystery. Both the novels violently frustrate the reader's expectations of a detective novel - what Bertens and Fokkema state perhaps could be applicable here i.e., "it refuses to solve the crime and refuses to offer a totalized world of order and patterning" (Bertens & Fokkema 1986:21).

Ironic inversion perhaps could be a characteristic of parody seen in West's novels. A closer reading of his text shows a subtle inversion or rather an imitation of the

conventions of the earlier text. The description of Fay Doyle's 'undressing' likened to the 'sea sounds' is in a sense a parody of the seventeenth century metaphysical conceits. The episode in the final chapter of The Day of the Locust, the sign of "Mr. Kanh A Pleasure Dome Decreed" is Coleridge's reversal of the romantic imagination in "Kubla-Khan". In Robert Emmet Long's words "The assumptions of a transcendent world far above reality are mocked by the sterility implied to exist in the film industry" (Long 1985:117). In a similar vein the chapter "Miss Lonelyhearts and the countryside" is another inverted irony of the Romantic notion of escape into the unreality. Wordsworth's obsessions to seek refuge in nature as an escape from harsh reality is echoed in Miss Lonelyhearts' trip to the countryside with Betty. The 'idyllic' picture of nature which Romantic writers glorified through their writings are rather dark and sterile in West. The ironic parody here reaches a crescendo because instead of being rejuvenated and renewed, Miss Lonelyhearts turns back even more morose, confused and ill-humoured. It is a parody which Linda Hutcheon described as "a form of imitation but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text ... Parody is a ... repetition with critical distance, which makes differences rather than similarity" (Hutcheon 1985:5-6).

Subversion and inversion of the familiar staples of earlier writings are a part of parody. Ironic subversion is projected neatly by Thomas Pynchon in The crying of Lot 49. Here the name Oedipa Maas has no direct connotation with the Greek tragedy. We are shown how the subversion works in the sense that Oedipa Maas is supposed to be a woman yet her name echoes the name of a classical hero Oedipus. Similarly all the traditions of an experimental art inverts the intellectuality by parodying the conventional truth and its significance. It signifies a break from an intelligible domain by parodying its respect for reason and logic. In West's The Dream Life of Balso Snell, the domain of logical reasoning shifts violently under the pressure of irrational and rampant exhibition of self parody. This novel mocks at an established world order monitored by reason and logic. Such a world is denied freedom for it is imprisoned by logical thinking and reasoning. Reason and logic in West's fictional world are rendered immobile for they are not considered as potential remedies to heal an emotional and mentally distorted universe. Adorno together with Horkheimer while "reflecting on the difficulties in the concept of reason termed it as "the court of judgement of calculation", "ratio of capital", instrument of domination, and means for the most rational exploitation of nature" (Burger 1984: XVI).

The collapse of all logic and reason results in a direct confrontation with the explosion of the irrational and the process of dehumanization that has permeated into the world at large. The general symptom of malaise in West is characteristic of the larger ills present in the society. All expressions of meaning and logic not only fails but explodes into parodies of themselves. Malcolm Bradbury considers *Balso* as a parodic and nightmarish comedy generating into a world of massive literary pastiche and artistic self-mockery (Bradbury 1991:342) and this is an inevitable symptom of the malaise exploding into literary pastiche. A world constructed on dreams and nightmares is a frenzy and a complex world which could never be presented neatly through structures of a sequential plot pattern. West's fictional imagination cannot adhere to any set norms like the traditional notions of plot, simple and lucid description of characters and straightforward narration. Therefore, in the absence of any of these, it is parody which sustains the structure in West's novels. In *Balso Snell*, we see every gesture collapses into parody. Here, even art is reduced to mere excremental images and also further scatological images are used to mock at art and literary pretensions.

The depiction of the past and the present merges into

an inhuman order of disintegration and violence bordering on the grotesque which explodes into parody in West. For this reason West is considered a pessimistic writer who is so obsessed with the decadent life of both the present and the past. But in so doing West conducts a study of both the elusive past and present just as Joyce probes time in relation to the elusive present. Though the attack on past writings are not so conspicuous in West, I have shown in my discussion how West in subtle ways parodies the past romantic writings of Wordsworth and Coleridge. West's biographer, Jay Martin, reveals to the readers the pent-up raw violence hidden for so long beneath the romantic surface. West's works in a profound manner attempt to release such pent-up forces that could neither be understood or controlled just as the release of the mindless and numberless locusts created havoc and rampant destruction that could not be controlled. In the light of the ongoing discussion we see that Nathanael West gibes at the ridiculous style of degenerate romances and this enables him to create situations that are profoundly parodic. Don Quixote is a precursor of such a legacy. There is a constant play of parody here "owing to the perpetual contrast between Don Quixote's noble nature and absurdities he forms from his surfeit of romances" (Cervantes 1979:26).

Milan Kundera considers Cervantes' Don Quixote a founder of modern era (Kundera 1993:15) and Sterne's Tristram Shandy an important eighteenth-century novel that reaches the heights of playfulness and lightness never scaled before. (Kundera 1993:15). Their contemporaries abandoned the possibilities opened up by these two masterpieces and it is only in the Postmodern period that both Cervantes and Sterne are continually being relocated in the context of the present times. In the twentieth century, we also see a resurgence of interest in West because his techniques are considered similar to those of Tristram Shandy and Don Quixote. West's works break free from the seeming notion of verisimilitude. The self-conscious representation in both Cervantes and Sterne influenced West's fictional works in a big way. The Westian man is pitted against a world he can no longer recognise. The image of God slowly losing control over the universe and its order of values is being presented vividly by Milan Kundera. Hence it is into such a world that the Westian man is let loose or rather imprisoned. Moreover, he is also imprisoned by his own conscious self so that every gesture or movement he makes collapses into parody. For example, Beagle Darwin in The Dream Life of Balso Snell replays the little drama of Janey Davenport's suicide in his unconscious mind and ponders as to what his reaction ought to be. The tough self

critic in West juxtaposes to the presentation of double Don Quixote's and Sancho Panza's in Part II of Cervantes' Don Quixote. The first two remains fictional characters while the other two who live outside the story judge and criticize what has been written about them. In the modern period, Don Quixote is being increasingly viewed as a Postmodern work. So, West by following in the tradition left by Cervantes' and others perhaps could be considered as a writer foreshadowing Postmodernism.

Every novel says to the reader: "Things are not as simple as you think" (Kundera 1993:18). This is the standpoint upon which West's fictional works are based. It does not believe in the organising capacity of the imagination nor does it have any confidence in imposing love and order in an otherwise chaotic world. In the contemporary age, we are grappling with such unresolved, mystified and decentered aspects of novel writing which tend to be unsettling. Since West deals with the experimental self, his characters are unthinkable and unrepresentable as living beings. In this way, West's novel reconnects itself with Don Quixote who is unthinkable as a living being. Ihab Hassan states that Modernism "created its own forms of Authority", whereas Postmodernism "had tended towards Anarchy, in deeper complicity with things falling apart" (Calinescu 1977:142).

Nathanael West, in presenting the unrepresentable and the unthinkable, leans more towards the latter part of Hassan's claim. Therefore, we see that West is being increasingly viewed as a precursor of Postmodernism.

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CHAPTER III

GROTESQUE AS CHARACTERS

I have tried to show in the foregoing chapter that the traditional unbolting of a 'plot' is unworkable in West's fictional works for the simple reason that the author uses parody to push his narrative forward. Within the limits of such a parodic form, the characters in West's works do not subscribe to the Forsterian concept of being well rounded and definable. The nature of character portrayal is somewhat realistic in modernist novels but the rounded fictional character, standing between the narrator and the reader, seems to dissolve into the 'interiorization' technique in the hands of writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. In subsequent decades the shift in character portrayal becomes more noticeable as characters are increasingly created more to depict the absurd, chaotic and meaningless universe than to suit the minds of the reader or the writer.

Fragmentation is seen both in modern as well as in postmodern writings. Ezra Pound compares the notion of fragmentation to a bundle of broken mirrors which cannot be pieced up together. Pound's concept of fragmentation is echoed in West's works for nowhere in West can we get a picture of fullness and perfection. Fragmentation has become an inevitable reality in West. We see no heroic struggle, no

gigantic feats being achieved in West. West's characters appear abnormal and weird more because of their mute acceptance of fragmentation that has begun to corrode life at its very roots. This in a way signifies a symptom of the collapse of chronological patterning that gives life and meaning to the code of characterization.

The delineation of character has undergone certain radical changes. Though this kind of change has been there for a long time but it becomes more evident and intensely radical during the Postmodern times. The Postmodern perspective indicates a fragmentation in culture and society and hence there are perceptions of unalterable and inevitable fragmentation of the contemporary sensibility. The concept of the author being the over-all controlling force and authority behind his creation no longer holds true in the present times. Characters are let loose and they do not speak or behave in a natural manner. To suit such a fragmented and decadent culture and society, the nature of characterization tends to be unrealistic. My purpose in this chapter is to analyse and see whether West's novels subscribe to this radical nature of character presentation or not.

The term 'grotesque' is not altogether new. The 'Grotesque', as viewed by Philip Thomson, is not "a

phenomenon solely of the twentieth century, nor even of modern civilization. It existed as an artistic mode in the West at least as far back as the early Christian period of Roman culture..." (Thomson 1972:11). The grotesque world had been with us since Don Quixote. We cannot talk about the grotesque without referring to Cervantes' Don Quixote because this was the first recorded work which heightened the effect of phantasm in the fictional world. Wilson Knight also observes the grotesque that surrounds the action in Shakespeare's King Lear. He says that "the tragic element present also involves the comic with the slightest shift in perspective" (Nelson 1982:193). Another writer whose work could be interpreted in terms of the grotesque is William Golding. His novels reflect an overall view of an unfathomable universe, both tragic and comic.

Kayser's book The Grotesque in Art and Literature contains a persuasive description of the grotesque in which he holds that the grotesque in art is a result of seeing events in a particular way. Before I start to discuss the grotesque in relation to West's works, I would like to consider the generally acknowledged terms of the grotesque. Kayser cites these terms as "maimed, deformed, monstrous, unnatural, fantastical which may exude both pity and laughter or disgust in context" (Kayser 1963:37). He further

elucidates that the grotesque world is under "the impact of abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence" (Kayser 1963:37).

Kayser and others like Rabelais has stated the features of the grotesque. Taking their theories as a standpoint, I would like to examine West's works. West's novels deviate from the realistic nature of character portrayal and as stated earlier they are never round or definable. West himself suggested in his unpublished story "The Adventurer" that he created his man and woman out of worthless odds and ends. To quote him, the worthless odds and ends consist of "buttons, strings, bits of leather, a great deal of soiled paper, a few shouts, a way of clasping the hands, of going up the steps, of smoothing a lapel, some prejudices, a recurring dream, a distaste for bananas, a few keywords reported endlessly..." (Barnard 1994:330).

From the above elucidation it is clear that West's men and women are not seen as individuals created for their own distinctiveness, nor yet are they exactly "types" or vehicles to convey ideas and meanings but they are more like fragmented bits and pieces fitted together to suit West's vision of a tattered, warped and cheated humanity.

A sense of total self-integration or wholeness is

missing in West's fictional works. This is because of the fragmentary and meaningless existence of the characters. R.E. Long makes an insightful remark while talking about the theatre of unconscious present in The Dream Life of Balso Snell. According to Long, this theatre of the unconscious "comprises fragmentary episodes involving fragmentary people, who appear briefly to proclaim the misery of their isolation, then disappear or are transformed suddenly and often grotesquely into other characters who are in search of themselves" (Long 1985:150). The same vein of fragmentation verging on the grotesque is continued in Miss Lonelyhearts. The letters do not only protest their misfortune but also present the misery of their fragmented selves. Hence we see in West a process of intensification of the notion of fragmentation found in earlier writers like Pound and Eliot. Perhaps the notion of "shattering its coherence" used by Kayser (Kayser 1963:37) could be appropriated by the Westean world.

In the opinion of some Western critics like Long and Hyman, Nathanael West celebrates the grotesque, the abnormal and what is derogatory in his fictional works. To understand this concept I would like to connect West's works to the thirties and see whether they fit into the writings of that period. During the thirties, when the proletarian forms of

writings were predominant, West swung to the other extreme by glorifying grotesque realism in literature. In this connection, I would like to refer to Bakhtin's theory of grotesque and carnivalesque literature. Bakhtin's theory of grotesque stresses the "Gargantuan size, huge protuberances, vast excretions represented in gross and exaggerated forms" (Morris, 1994:21). Though West has not fully endorsed Bakhtin's theory, nevertheless we find that the grotesque elements present in his works border around this theoretical standpoint. Grotesque exaggeration shapes the delineation of most of West's characters like Samuel Perkins, Janey Davenport, Mrs. Doyle, Abe Kusich, Homer and their likes. For example, "Perkins face was dominated by his nose" (CWNW 1957:33). The "nose" in this case protrudes out of the face which appears monstrous and grotesque. Janey Davenport exhibits disproportionate set of teeth - "One hundred and forty four exquisite teeth in rows of four" (CWNW 1957:38). She also has an enormous hump supposed to be carrying a child. By presenting West in this light, I do not intend to indicate that West is a writer who only glorifies what is abnormal and grotesque in his fictional works, my aim is only to show how in effect West, through all these productive and new influences, has offered us completely new ways of relating the novel to the world.

West is continually being relocated in the present times along with writers like Thomas Pynchon and several others. Pynchon's Oedipa Maas is a woman but her name echoes the name of a classical hero and not of a heroine. This aspect of the grotesque is seen in West's Miss Lonelyhearts. Miss Lonelyhearts is a man whereas the address used is that of a woman. The confusion of genders appears as being grotesque and abnormal and this seems to be a regular feature in West's works. Miss McGeeney wears mannish suit in The Dream Life of Balso Snell. In The Day of the Locust, we are introduced to grotesque characters right from the beginning. The male dwarf Abe Kusich rolls himself up in a woman's flannel bathrobe when Tod finds him. What Kingley Widmer had explained in so many lines (Widmer 1982:69-70) finally culminates to a single term 'grotesque'. Therefore I feel that though most of West's critics do not use the term 'grotesque', what they have attempted to say more or less hinges on the term 'grotesque'.

Don Quixote (1615) is the typical example of a work which qualifies the term 'grotesque'. We cannot talk about grotesque characters without referring to Cervantes' Don Quixote because this was the first recorded work which heightened the effect of phantasm in the fictional world. In the person of Don Quixote, both the conscious and the

unconscious states of mind are merged together so much that his illusionary chivalric adventures are continued even during his sleeping state. The reader's dilemma to discern between these states of mind borders on the grotesque. Such complexities and ambiguities are being explored to a certain extent in Nathanael West's fictional works. West's works suggest that reality is too elusive and incoherent to be formally represented. His affiliation to Dada and surrealism makes him sensitive to the promptings of the unconscious and internal impulses while rejecting vehemently all fixed categories and rationalizations that threaten to impoverish man.

To this end, the representation of straightforward, lucid and uncomplicated characters becomes unworkable in West's works. Brian McHale in his Postmodernist Fiction uses the term "Chinese-box worlds" in relation to "The process of world-construction" (McHale 1987:112). Though used in another sense, West in The Day of the Locust uses the same epithet to describe Tod Hackett - "... despite his appearance, he was really a complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside the other like a nest of Chinese boxes" (CWNW 1957:260). Such an embedded and nested concept makes Tod. This deep-structured nature of creation is extended even in his other novels. The

overlapping pattern of intricacy is presented through dream-within-a-dream sequence. This sense of embedding is continuous in West's sense of character portrayal and such a nested representation turns radical bordering on the grotesque. Tod is shown as having a "large sprawling body", "slow blue eyes" and "sloppy grin" which makes him look almost doltish (CWNW 1957:266). All these works together so neatly drive home the concept of Tod's "Chinese-box" personality. On the other level, the very word "doltish" implies a dimwit, idiot, simpleton just as the term "automaton", which describe Harry, Faye, and Homer, reduces them to almost machine-like entities. In a way, the effect of nested or embedded characters also complicates the reading of the novel.

West's ability to reduce the characters to machine-like entities borders on the grotesque. In all his four novels, we see men and women interacting and living as machines. West's biographer Jay Martin states: "With the exception of Tod, West's characters are not really people, perhaps each is only a reflex of the other, who are shattered bundles of mirrors" (Martin 1970:333). This signifies a fragmentation within the created being which in a sense is very much akin to Ezra Pound's concept of 'broken mirrors'. William Carlos Williams, in my opinion, very

closely touches on the grotesque as characters, when he accurately observes the grotesque in West's works. He states that "few characters in the novel are really described in physical terms. Faye hasn't any face that amounts to anything. How would you like to see a woman coming at you with a face such as Picasso gives them? ... Nathanael West somehow builds Faye Greener out of such deformity before us" (Martin 1970:333). The images of Faye suggest a machined doll triggered by mechanical movie fantasies, her vaudevillian father is an "Over wound mechanical toy"; Homer is an automated zombie, one of Faye's lovers is described as a pure "mechanical drawing". Mechanization turns man into an object and a sort of automaton. The ingeniously grotesque gaits that we encounter in Balso Snell, Homer and Harry Greener heightens the effect of dehumanization. The fact that West builds his characters out of the bits and pieces of their machine age is a reflection of the machine-like mentality which opens up into the grotesque.

Combined with West's emphasis on a society of mechanical responses is the absence of towering personalities in his fiction. West's world presents no hero or heroine in the traditional sense. This brings to mind what Bertens and Fokkema say about how "the Postmodern writer must do without heroes and heroic conflicts, he can

only fictionalize the "malaise" of the "increasingly shapeless" world he lives in and in his "increasingly fluid" experience..." (Bertens & Fokkema 1986:13). Perhaps this is the standpoint West adopts because in his fictional works there is no trace of a towering personality. If we are to conduct a character study, the Westean man can never measure up to the essential features of the so-called 'full-bloodied' individual. He can only provide us with debased goals, debauchery, infertility, dismemberment and a death-like passivity. Miss Lonelyhearts, the supposed redeemer of the dejected, the sad and the oppressed is a vexed and depressed character himself. Lemuel Pitkin in A Cool Million is a mechanical robot and has no identity or will of his own. He is mutilated and dismembered bit by bit until he is reduced to the state of a freak. Till the final curtain is drawn, he must act out parts assigned by others. West, in presenting such twisted, fragmented, mangled, confused bits and pieces, is only projecting the malaise of a totally meaningless, illogical, demented and thwarted world. Therefore, we see that West's works are conspicuous for the delineation of anti-hero, a person who, instead of manifesting largeness, dignity, power and heroism in the face of fate, ignominious, ineffectual, or passive.

There is no coherence or logicality in the

presentation of characters. Characters in recent works like Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose and Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five are highly complex and incomprehensible. In the former, the characters are dislocated from present time and space into the medieval world of monks and textual intrigues. In the latter, all comprehensibility and sanity are being wiped out by the time travels and adventures of Billy Pilgrim. All this provides a context for the grotesque in fiction. In West, though such dislocation and displacement of time and space are not seen, nonetheless the incoherencies offer a touch of the grotesque. For example, R.E. Long compares "Homer to a bundle of incoherent gestures, and in many ways he is so infantile that he seems to struggle merely to be 'born into life'" (Long 1985:132). Homer in many ways reminds us of the stutterer in Rabelais' work. Every action Homer performs is the result of some great effort which could be likened to the stutterer grimacing and wincing to utter a word. The image of pain associated with childbirth is brought into focus here. Perhaps such parallels are drawn to connect West's notion of the grotesque with Rabelais concept of the same in fiction and moreover, to present the essential and fundamental traits of the grotesque.

Perhaps Homer could offer a case study of the

implications of the grotesque in West; his subsequent actions will conform to the portrait of grotesqueries. In Homer, the sleeping state merges with the waking state to such an extent that "even when he was fully awake, people thought him to be Sleep-Walking or particularly blind" (CWNW 1957:296). His hands are in complete discordance with his body, even if every part of his body was awake, his hands still slept. In one episode, Homer carries his hands into the bathroom where he places them in a basin of cold water. West further observes that they looked with "a pair of strange aquatic animals" (CWNW 1957:289). David Madden presents a very clear picture of Homer's death-like passivity. He says that Homer's passivity is so intense that even "his act of waking is a long struggle towards consciousness, and when he achieves the "victory" he has to reassemble himself methodically, mechanically" (ed. D. Madden 1973:210). Homer can be hardly called a "human" because he has no sense of identity. He is like a bundle of incoherent gestures and an infant in many ways because throughout we see how he struggles merely to be born into life. His servility, his lack of assertiveness, is exploited to full advantage by the likes of Faye who treat him like a dog. Finally Homer explodes into violence and the total release of his pent up emotions is the climax that sums up the entire aspect of such a grotesque portrait.

A kind of unfathomable destruction unleashed by the collective mob fury in The Day of the Locust is the final grotesque picture which is apocalyptic in nature. Such untold terror is inspired by the disintegration and the subsequent collapse of the world system which more or less borders fury of the mob and the final outrage demolishes all sanity and intelligibility. The Day of the Locust reinforces the idea that violence and destruction is inevitable and the eruption of volatile uncontrolled anger is the climax which hails the final doom of such a dislocated world. All this drives home the fact that West's works, in seeking to be non-representational and radical, turn more fragmented and incoherent. The Westean man is not only physically grotesque but the madness that surrounds this world is a terrible combination of the features that in some sense qualifies the notion of the grotesque.

West was also influenced by Rabelais' work in many ways. Rabelais' artistic logic of the grotesque image "ignores the closed, smooth and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depth. Mountains and abyss, such is the relief of the grotesque body or speaking in architectural terms, towers and subterranean passages"

(Morris 1994:234). Nathanael West's The Dream Life of Balso Snell perhaps qualifies this aspect of the grotesque because a sense of disgust permeates this novel. West talks about "Houses that are protuberances on the skin of street-warts, tumors, pimples, corns, nipples, sebaceous cysts, hard and soft chancres" (CWNW 1957:32). Balso's speech is replete with genital images. For example, he says, "I wore my heart and genitals around my neck" (CWNW 1957:26). "Bowels of my compassion, depth of my being, receding vistas of my memory" (CWNW 1957:24). Besides these, in West, most of the characters appear as abnormal and weird. Samuel Perkin's face is dominated by his nose, Janey Davenport exhibits one hundred and forty-four exquisite teeth in rows of four, Mrs. Doyle appears monstrous and perverted. These show how West makes full use of caricature and distortion and paints them in exaggerated colours to drive their grotesqueries and abnormalities home.

Likewise, West's works appear as a highly distorted, deformed painting. His paintings in The Day of the Locust consists of grotesqueries in the form of "a cockfight in the garage, the showing of an obscene film, several formidable debauches, a crazy riot" (Daniel Aaron 1951:636). This distorted and hellish painting of the fragmented and confused lot is perhaps presented by West through the

following lines: "Everyday of their lives they read the newspaper and went to the movies. Both fed them on lynchings, murder, sex-crimes, explosions, wrecks, love-nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, war. This daily diet made sophisticates of them. The sun is a joke. Oranges titillate their jaded palates. Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing" (CWNW 1957:411-12). Such emptiness is resounded throughout West. Lemuel Pitkin in A Cool Million, is considered a prototype of this resounding emptiness, riot and violence. Lem earns his living by letting himself be thrashed, cheated and demolished. Chapter thirty records a detailed account of the dismantling of all his vital organs i.e. eyes, legs, dentures and even his scalp. "For a final curtain, they brought out an enormous wooden mallet labelled 'The Works' ... and with it completely demolished our hero. His toupee flew off, his eye and teeth popped out, and his wooden leg was knocked into the audience ..." (CWNW 1957:350). Lem is adorned as a comic victim. The blows and thrashings he receives become only a comical source of laughter and merriment with the audience. "At the sight of the wooden leg, the presence of which they had not even suspected, the spectators were convulsed with joy. They laughed heartily until the curtain came down, and for

sometime afterwards" (CWNW 1957:250). Most of the characters in West are deluded by their consistent but pathetic acting that finally they reach a stage where they become unable to distinguish between reality and mere acting.

In the same continuous light that Rebelais had remarked would further illuminate these hollow and superficial characters - "They do not see themselves in the mirror of time, do not perceive their own origin, limitations and end; they do not recognize their own ridiculous faces or the comic nature of their pretensions to eternity and immutability. And thus these passages come to the end of their role still serious, although their spectators have been laughing for a long time" (Bakhtin 1981:225).

It is this ridiculous and pathetic laughter which reflects their pretensions and emptiness. Moreover, it not only manifests the absurdity of contemporary society and its rational and coherent promptings but also presents the absurd, chaotic universe in new and different ways. The laughter echoed in West's works are rather monstrous and hollow. A typical example of such a laughter is that of Harry Greener. Harry's laughter is a part of his pantomime act, he must laugh thus to earn his livelihood. The bitterest quarrel between Harry Greener and his daughter

Faye takes this form - he laughing, she singing. Harry has a large assortment of unsettling laughs that he works up. His favourite one begins with a "sharp metallic crackle ... then gradually increased in volume until it becomes a rapid bark, then fell away to an obscene chuckle ... then to the nicker of a horse, then still higher to become a machine-like screech...." (CWNW 1957:307). As in Harry's laughter, the medley of sounds are incoherent in West. This lends a grotesque touch and such a laughter could be recognised as black humour. R.E. Long recognizes West as one of the progenitors of the 'black humour' which dominated the contemporary period of the early sixties. Hence, we see that West in many ways is perceived as a forerunner of almost everything new in fiction.

West attempts to drive home the distortions and monstrous creatures through a dream-like structure. This technique itself is highly experimental and incoherent. West's genius lies in the fact that while he imbibes this idea from Freud and Joyce, he goes a step further by analysing intensely the "irrationality of their disconnectedness". This is a term used by James Light (Light 1961:320) which in a way appropriates the crux of West's characters. Light sees the grotesque even in the sequence of dreams - "the adventures end when Balso has the sexual

climate of a wet dream; between these two points Balso meets a collection of dream grotesque:..." (Light 1961:320). In The Dream Life of Balso Snell, the dream grotesques are encountered soon after Balso enters the posterior end of the wooden horse which leads right into a physical domain. We as readers, along with Balso are plunged right from the start into a grotesquely unfamiliar world inhabited by even more weird characters. The first of the grotesque is the guide that Balso meets to the bowels of the wooden horse. The second is Maloney the Areopagite "a man naked except for a derby in which thorns were sticking who was attempting to crucify himself with thumb tacks" (CWNW 1957:9-10). West introduces such weird characters one after the other so as to heighten the effect of grotesquery in new and different ways.

From the foregoing discussion it should be clear that man and woman in West no longer act in an organized manner for they are under the direct control and prompting of their own primal impulses. The concept of the author being the overall controlling force and authority behind his creation no longer holds true in West's works. Hence, we see a freakish kind of celebration of fantasies and dreams which is dissipated into grotesqueries.

Though such a demented and warped world picture

predominantly figures in all of his four works, West cannot be branded merely as a writer obsessed only by such nightmarish and negative values. R.E. Long goes to the extent of saying that West's works begin and end "with the drama of human absurdism" (Long 1985:147). Unlike what critics like Long hold, I feel that it became imperative for West to employ nightmarish and repugnant images for only such images could vividly portray a demented and warped world. It is this troubled vision that motivates the grotesque in West as also provides the proper vehicle of expression to convey the terror inspired by the unthinkable and the unfathomable in fiction.

We have seen West's affiliation with the grotesque. West is traditionally considered as one of the progenitors of the grotesque in fiction. Together with writers like Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor and others, West's fiction provides a context for the grotesque. In fact, John Hawkes compares West with Flannery O'Connor and argues that "although the sources of their aesthetic authority are different, both writers demolish man's pretensions to rationality" (Malin 1972:8). Hyman also draws a parallel between West's Miss Lonelyhearts and O'Connor's first novel Wise Blood (1952). According to Hyman, "Wise Blood is clearly modelled on Miss Lonelyhearts ... and contains many

specific reminiscences of it. Hazel Motes has a nose 'like a Shrike's bill'; after he goes to bed with Leora Watts, Hazel feels like something washed ashore on her ...." (Long 1985:158). We can therefore say that West's concern with grotesque characters became, in course of time, the shaping influence on later writers of the grotesque.

Nathanael West is rightly considered a forerunner of grotesque writers. Gilbert H. Muller remarks: "Among the major writers of the thirties, the grotesque was a seminal impulse in the fiction of Faulkner and Nathanael West, and it continues to pervade the best contemporary fiction - Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth, James Purdy, John Hawkes and Thomas Pynchon" (Muller 1972:20). The main concern of the present chapter is thus fully legitimized. With West before us, we have to recall that the fiction of the 1930's was not a matter of reportage or speculation. It was rather a new kind of experimentation and one of the finest examples of such experimentation was provided by the works of Nathanael West.

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CHAPTER IV

CERTAIN HERMENEUTIC QUESTIONS -  
PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

The title of this chapter is perhaps a predictable sequel to the preceding two chapters. The breakdown of the traditional concepts of fiction writing into posturing and self-parody and the dissipation of character into grotesqueries could be considered as the perfect vehicle of expression to convey a non-interpretative and a non-conventional world that West's world prefigures. With the breakdown of traditional values, all illusions of constructing an interpretative world are shattered. Now, with the advent of postmodernism, the domain of meaning and interpretation has began to lose ground more intensely and hence it has become too difficult to please the reader.

The postmodernist believes that the world is not created for our interpretation and therefore meaning does not become their concern. The domain of interpretation is characterized by its precarious nature in postmodern works. Susan Sontag, denounces the interpretation of the works of art on the ground that "to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world - in order to set up a shadow world of meaning" (Sontag 1967:17). We have come a long way since the time Forster made the claim that the basis of a novel is the story and the story is a narrative of events arranged in a time sequel (Forster 1927:30). Some examples of contemporary

works as cited here to show how everything meaningful and logical is subverted. Pynchon's novel The Crying of Lot 49 decries and refutes the very concept of meaning. This novel reveals nightmare by nightmare, dream vision by dream vision, the realities beyond the appearance of America and the meanings behind her empty words. Oedipa Maas takes the will, of which she has been named executrix, from person to person seeking interpretation. As readers, like Oedipa, we come to embrace the reality of ambiguity, uncertainty and a highly confused world. Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five appears equally confusing and incomprehensible. In this novel time, space and event proliferate with no logical end in sight. All logical and rational interpretations are subverted by the adventures of Billy Pilgrim. This is the kind of world we have entered, where the very sense of meaning is depleted and subverted.

Such problems of interpretation and questions of hermeneutics are taken up in this chapter in relation to West. West's novels signify a loss of confidence in the older claims of the moral and interpretative authority of art. This according to Gerald Graff is the advent of a new sensibility. Graff shows that "this new sensibility manifests itself in a variety of ways in the refusal to take art "seriously" in the old sense; in the use of art itself

as a vehicle for exploring its traditional pretensions ... in the rejection of the dominant tradition of analytic, interpretative criticism..." (Graff 1979:31). Concurrent to this, West's sensibility is manifested in a variety of ways. He uses parody as a vehicle of expression to expose the various poses and pretensions of the American society. He asserts the irrational and the ridiculous by reserting to misshapen and grotesque characters. In this chapter, I will attempt an analysis to see how West's works defy the tradition of interpretation.

West is steeped in the radical changes that took place during the thirties. The first world war brought about upheaval, fragmentation, decadence and cultural emptiness. There was a total breakdown and the once accepted values and beliefs came to be questioned. The denial of straightforward narration and characterization resulted in a total diffusion of meaning and interpretation. Ulysses is famous among unreadable books - "The close reading of Ulysses reveals that the meaningless is deeply interwoven with the meaningful in the texture of the novel.... It is a book and an anti-book, a work of art particularly receptive to accident. It builds up acute and poignant states of consciousness, yet its larger ambition seems to be put aside consciousness as a painful burden" (Hassan 1975:9). With

Finnegans Wake. which appeared to be more like poetry, the profundity of meaning simply disappeared. This novel rejects linear or discursive logic and attempts to re-create reality. Considered in the same light, it is evident that West's imagination also does not adhere to any set norms formulated by the traditional fictional writers. Perhaps a sensitive reader would see West as truly concerned with the fatuous and machined dreams counterfeiting all reality. Kingsley Widmer could apprehend the true essence of West's sensibility for he remarked that "West foresaw the apocalyptic violence of warped and cheated humanity" (French 1967:97). West adopted increasingly a parodic view of the world where all meaning and interpretation has been diffused and decentered within its matrix. Perhaps what Sontag stated could be true of West's world - "To avoid interpretation, art may become parody it may become abstract..." (Sontag 1967:20).

In my earlier discussion I have presented 'Parody as plot' by using parody as a vehicle to expose the various poses and pretensions of the American society. In the same vein I have also attempted to present the grotesque and misshapen beings in West as characters. All these preceding elucidations perhaps converge on the fact that the task of interpretation becomes problematic in West. West's

affiliation to the complex and irrational is his central preoccupation with the extreme primal impulses of what is non-representable.

The Dream Life of Balso Snell (1931) signifies an affiliation with Avant Garde writing in general and Surrealism and Dadaism in particular. This work, in a way, offers an analysis of the Avant-Garde as a revolt against the coherent, rational mind-set of the masses during the first three decades of the twentieth century. The Dream Life of Balso Snell is darkly shaded by what Andre Breton called "humour noir" (Long 1985:22). It has the irrational, cruel, mocking quality of Surrealism. The novel is interwoven along a dream intricacy, each dream more intricate and irrational than the other. This dream world begins as soon as Balso enters the posterior end of the wooden horse. The anal opening of the Trojan horse leads to a decadent and repulsive world of flesh inhabited by unbalanced and grotesque characters who are obsessed with even more weird dreams. These dreams are beyond interpretation and reasoning--for they are so hazy and elusive that their very existence becomes unreal. The grotesque characters that inhabit the dream world of Balso are a Jewish guide, Maloney the Areopagite, a Catholic mystic; John Gilson, a precocious schoolboy and Miss McGeeney, John's eight-grade teacher.

Each narrates a story and merges with Balso's dream in a very confusing and grotesque manner. The account of John Gilson's journal of his Destoevskian murder of an idiot dishwasher is repulsive. John Gilson commits the murder so as to gain the victory of the spirit over the flesh because the idiot is all flesh in all physical sense: his pink, fat throat, his toilet-like swallowing. But flesh overrides his senses for we notice that soon after the murder, Gilson feels in an extremely physical way like a girl and even has an orgasm when some soldiers pass by. This accounts for the futility and irrationality of Balso's dream life. The final climax of all these meaningless and grotesque dreams are "terminated rather than resolved by the orgasm" (Hyman 1962:15).

As mentioned earlier, West wrote his novel when the Surrealistic and Dadaistic ferment were at its height. Dadaism was dominated by the word 'disgust' and this term could be aptly applied to The Dream Life of Balso Snell. A closer reading of the novel will make the reader see how Dada had a strong hold upon West. Art is likened to 'a sublime excrement'. John Gilson uses excremental images while describing journal keepers. "They come to the paper with a constipation of ideas - eager, impartial. The white paper acts as a laxative. A diarrhoea of words is the

result" (CWNW 1957:14). As John beats Sanniette he cries "O constipation of desire! O diarrhoea of love!" (CWNW 1957:27). The entire vision is scatological, fragmented and irrational. Dada was scatological so was Balso Snell. From the above discussion, we can see how Balso's dream world is far removed from reality.

The portrait that West paints is a dislocated and a deformed one that goes to construct a splintered portrait of a society. The pursuit of the real loses its meaning and purpose. Robert I Edenbaum makes this point in one of his articles on West: he says that "the word 'real' has little meaning in a Surreal world" (Madden, 1973:203). It is true that West opens up into a Surreal world where one dream is intricately woven upon the other. The waking state merges into the sleeping state, the sane into the insane, and the characters into grotesque mechanical entities. Such merging of states of mind is significant of the grotesque and insane merging of dreams and reality in Cervantes' Don Quixote. This sort of mix-up is brought home when the narrator remarks that "Sancho awake was worse than his master asleep..." (Cervantes 1979:365). This is the inevitable aspect that is being confronted in West's works too. The inevitability and undeniability of the merging of such grotesque states of mind in West presents the ultimate

disorder proliferating into a nightmarish and disgusting failure. Such a demented and dislocated picture militates against a meaningful order or structure in the novel.

The process of disintegration of values is an inevitable and undeniable fact in West's world. A sense of alienation and lovelessness is the logic behind the irrational presentation of human values and principles. The Westean man sees nothing ahead but a future of lovelessness. The world Miss Lonelyhearts represents is one devoid of love. The grievance underlying every letter centers upon the isolation and helplessness of those who write them. Sick-of-it-all has been made pregnant yet again by her Catholic husband who will not permit her to have an abortion, although she has been advised by her Doctor that she will die in giving birth again and her kidneys ache agonizingly. 'Desperate' is a girl of sixteen years born without a nose. She is being shunned by her friends and she moans over the fact that no boy will ever love and accept her as she is. A letter from Harold S, fifteen informs Miss Lonelyhearts that his sister, thirteen, a dumb mute has been sexually abused by a stranger, but is "afraid to tell mother on account of her being liable to beat Gracie up". These letters, according to R.E. Long, "suggest an almost insane lack of caring or of compassion toward those who have every right to

look for understanding" (Long 1985:58). This becomes even more acute when we examine the thwarted marital bliss of the two families in Miss Lonelyhearts Shrike's and Doyle's. To Fay Doyle, her husband, a cripple, "is all dried up" and devoid of life. She simply married him only to cover up her pregnancy. Mary Shrike too has a loveless marriage ravaged by violence. Both Mrs. Shrike and Mrs. Doyle refer to their husbands as 'skunks'. The irony of their married life is that though they live together, they feel so lost and alone. R.E. Long presents them as being 'devastatingly alone' (Long 1985:58). All intelligible communication breaks down between husband and wife. If there are any, then those are along the lines of abuses, threats and aggression. There is indeed a horrifying hostility in their relations. Fay treats her husband like a dog, physically assaults him and betrays him sexually. Shrike and his wife despise each other so much that they live with constant hatred and in a state of sexual warfare. We also see a very sterile kind of relationship between Miss Lonelyhearts and Betty. Betty is being treated like a sex object, he never misses to taunt her for her sexuality and in one episode we see how with sadistic cruelty Miss Lonelyhearts reaches under her robe and gives a sharp tug to her breast.

West's world looks like a dead world where a spirit

of lovelessness is paramount. This could be traced even in his other novel The Day of the Locust. Here, we see how all logical relationship between mother and son, father and daughter, are demolished. Mrs. Loomis is the prototype of a mother who considers her son Adore Loomis a money-making machine and prods him on to act out all grotesque roles till the final violence breaks out. Faye and her father Harry Greener are so much enclosed within their show business illusion and so can never be authentic. All display of affection and love between them is just a hoax. Their farcical lives reach a crescendo in the scene where Mr. Greener who is sick cannot stop playing roles. On the other hand Faye is shown to be extremely insensitive to her sick and dying father. Through all these character portrayals, West brings out the abject barrenness and sterility that has no human depth. Perhaps, what R.E. Long says is so true of their meaningless, illusionary life: "West's isolated characters are driven inward upon themselves, forced to embrace illusion, and living through illusion as they do they cannot establish contact with others. They are all participants in the theatre of the absurd, acting out illusionary parts" (Long 1985:79). In this sense, an attempt is made to study the miserable state of poverty of the human soul yearning for love and friendship.

Perhaps all these are repercussions of the various complexities inherent in the pattern of social existence. This is also the outcome of a massive invasion of human privacy that has taken place, of man rushing ever faster because of the dizzy rate at which the changes tend towards a destiny overcast with many puzzling questions. In the process of this mad pursuit, life has turned more shadowy and elusive. The Western man combats with shadows throughout. In The Dream Life of Balso Snell, he tries to seize the shadow of the pencil with which he is writing and this in itself indicates an exercise in a futile and meaningless pursuit. True to this, West's invisible edifices are shadowy structures that characterize a grotesque world bereft of any order and logic.

"For the older forms of Modernism - that of Pound, Yeats, Wyndham Lewis, Eliot and even Joyce - the past remains a source of order, even when it is rallied against and decried. For the newer form of Modernism, which Kermode calls the schismatic form, "order itself is what must be denied" (Ricoeur 1985:26). Perhaps West's world could be seen as a straining towards "the newer form of Modernism" for the world which he delineates is one devoid of order. In the following discussion, we will see how there is a shift towards a chaotic and meaningless universe. A major part of

the answer to this shift lies in the role played by the first world war and the Great Crash of 1929 which developed into a deep-seated and widespread depression. In Miss Lonelyhearts, West shows how all attempts to restore order meet with a frustrating failure. In one episode, we see how Miss Lonelyhearts attempts to create order by arranging the paraphernalia around him is likened to a kind of Sisyphus struggling with an impossible task. However hard he tries to balance and compose the multiplicity of the physical universe into some static, ordered harmony, the result is that it always explodes into insanity. Like Balso, Miss Lonelyhearts must face the sad truth of man's dilemma: "Man has a tropism for order.... The physical world has a tropism for disorder" (MFS 1958:327). This implies the impossibility to create order and coherent interpretation out of chaos. His last and most desperate attempt to set some order with 'Love' is thwarted miserably. Miss Lonelyhearts delivers a sermon of 'Christ is love' to the Doyle's but know that he has failed miserably, in effect he "felt like an empty bottle, shiny and sterile" (CWNW 1957:129). The final delusion occurs when Miss Lonelyhearts runs out to embrace the crippled Doyle, and the whole humanity of Desperate, Harold S., Catholic mother, Broken-hearted, Broad shoulders, Sick-of-it-all, tubercular husband to succour them with love, when the gun accidently fired and "both Doyle and

Lonelyhearts rolled part of the way down the stairs" (CWNW 1957:140). This in a way accounts for the final destruction of the final vestiges of traditional American viewpoint that sanity and order directs the Universe. While summing up Miss Lonelyhearts, Victor Comerchero very aptly remarks that "the layers of meaning in the novel do not, as they might seem to, sit on top of one another as oil sits on water, they dissolve into each other. The purity of each line has been blurred by the other" (Comerchero 1964:101-102). Interpretation becomes blurred because meaning ceases to exist. The modern world with all its falsities, complexities and sufferings cannot be interpreted nor the ills diagnosed and located. It ends in a deadlock giving no definite solution because their physical illness and defects cannot be ameliorated nor cured.

Next, we may observe that in West coherent thinking is less important than the irrational dreams we share. Therefore, it is important to note how one has to go through madness in order to release the energy of creation. Lacan points out that madness is a process of the "total release of the real" (Lacan 1996:2). This is true of the Western man: the moment his characters express their unchecked emotions, they are left in the freedom of the insane, belonging to no one, not even to themselves. The flavour of

violence is strongest in The Day of the Locust but almost like everything in the novel it is artificially flavoured. In an atmosphere of superficial emotions, faked-out personal conflicts and social rebellion, Tod Hackett tries to become real but leads to his own destruction. Tod's unexpressed hysteria is located within the collective mass. The moment he loses all hope of ever reaching Faye, he gets literally and symbolically immersed in the boredom of the anonymous masses whose betrayed emotions explode into collective violence. In the final violence, Tod merges along with the mad army of the anonymous crowd and is swept along with their mad fury. Tod finds himself absurdly part of the hysteria for he too finds himself screaming loudly with the siren and the mob at the end. The sounding of the siren perhaps marks the apocalyptic doom or rather the final release into the irrational. Tod finally comes to appreciate the fury of the anonymous masses by identifying himself with the same maddeningly mad promise that has pathologized the cheated masses" (Roberts 1996:75). Finally we agree with Widmer that "violent hysteria provides the only available simulation of a return to life" (French 1967:106). The above elucidation shows that the pursuit of madness or the irrational leads to some form of sanity. West's world in a way is restored through madness which Klug defines as "a total surrender to the irrational that would release the

full creative power to the image but at the same time would destroy the artist, his tradition and his society" (Klug 1987:18). Such meaningless violent explosions of mad fury undercut all meaning and logical interpretation.

The concept of 'reality' loses its meaning in the world that West presents. John Gilson in The Dream Life of Balso Snell cries out 'Reality! Reality! If I could only discover Real. A Real that I could know with my senses" (CWNW 1957:14). Perhaps, this is the Reality that eludes West's world. Instead of moving towards the Real, what we have here is a movement towards the irrational and the unfathomable. Such a shift is seen in West, which labels him as a highly experimental and an individualistic writer. What now holds the centre of attention in West is the incompleteness of personality, the irrational character of feeling which in itself is fragmented and inconsistent. Such fragmented and splintered experience is what West tries to depict through his novels. He clearly seems to have gone ahead of his contemporaries in articulating the inevitability of a demented and warped world system.

By way of relocating West, I would like to consider both Modernism and Postmodernism. The concept of Postmodernism is more unstable than Modernism because the latter is marked by a sense of uncertainty and randomness.

Most students of literature understand and accept modernism but many fail to understand and accept Postmodernism. The Modernist world is widely studied and interpreted. The How?, Why? and What? part of this world can be answered, at least, partially. Umberto Eco's novel The Name of the Rose is poised on the Modernist/Postmodernist cusp posing epistemological questions through its detective story that is transformed into an anti-detective story hinging upon ontological destabilizations. Postmodernist works assert their authority not only for amusement but also to multiply and compound complexities.

In this regard, the quest image which is of an open-ended nature in Modernist art has become indeterminate in Postmodernist art. For example, The Name of the Rose by Eco is a detective novel in which the characters get more deeply embroiled in the mystery while trying to unravel the plot. Gradually it turns into an anti-detective novel. This aspect of the quest image is also very strongly projected through West's novels. The Westean man is in pursuit of a definite sense of life but is confused and unsure of the nature of his quest/mission. Miss Lonelyhearts is in quest of an answer to ease the world of pain, misery and destruction. The novel records the pathetic and passive attempts of Miss Lonelyhearts to unravel the mystery and of how the quest is

unsuccessful. This failure is intensified further by a tone of non-finality. The faint traces of story-line that may be present proliferate and diffuses as the novel progresses. This quest image in Miss Lonelyhearts ends in a parodic outburst just as the dream sequences in The Dream Life of Balso Snell ends in a nightmarish failure. Hence we see that the very domain of interpretation becomes hazy by the total mystification and subversion of the very nature of the quest.

Modernist art, though of an open-ended nature, leaves behind some signposts and the reader does not feel totally lost. In Postmodernist art, on the contrary, the meaning is indeterminate. For example, in a work like Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 the Oedipus myth is brought in, which has no direct connotation with Greek tragedy. The association is brought forth to mock at the previous techniques of writing. To elucidate further, I want to quote an example from The Name of the Rose. Here, there is a continuous diffusing of the storyline which turns intricately dense as the novel advances into its enigmatic and vacuous end. The 'Library' which was considered as the epitome of mystery disappears into a kind of vacuous oblivion leaving behind myriad queries unsolved. Hence we see that in the contemporary age, we are grappling with such unresolved, mystified and

decentered aspects of novel writing which tends to be rather unsettling.

Such an unsettling aspect is held in ironic tension even in West's works. A sense of ambivalence echoes even through his writings. He does not possess a closed mind and his works are never compartmentalized. He gives us no final solution and so the readers are left bewildered, grappling with the unknown dark forces. In Miss Lonelyhearts "they both rolled down part of the way ..." (CWNW 1957:140) symbolizes his refusal to write an easy conclusion by fixing guilt and offering rewards. The end splinters into diverse readings. Darryl Hattenhauer indicates the ambiguity that the novel reverberates with. The conclusion takes us by surprise for we cannot know who, if anyone, is shot or killed. "The fact that both Doyle and Miss Lonelyhearts fall down does not necessarily indicate that anyone has been shot, much less killed. In fact, it could even be that Betty is shot, because Doyle has tried to turn in her direction and is struggling with Miss Lonelyhearts when the gun explodes" (Hattenhauer 1991:121). Such non-final conclusions not only mark the ambiguity; in fact, they undercut meaning and significance too.

An action is considered whole and complete if it has a beginning, a middle and an end. This is the Aristotelian

myth of tying a beginning to an ending. But when we study West, we seem to have left all these notion behind and in fact now we have entered into a world which we no longer recognize nor understand. We are cast adrift within a world where the beginning has no link with the middle nor the middle with the ending. Hence we can see how complex West's works are and how difficult it is to interpret them.

A refutation of interpretation or "a flight from interpretation", as Susan Sontag puts across, could be associated with a refutation of meaning and logicality in West too. His affiliation to the parodic form of art and grotesqueries stands as a perfect vehicle of expression to drive home the unresolved, mystified aspects of the world his fictional characters inhabit. For example, in "Pierre Menard, the author of the Quixote", Borges also shows how the techniques of reflexiveness and self parody suggests a universe devoid of interpretation.

The convergence of West's world with that of Borges might not be congruent. I am here referring to Borges simply to indicate what an uphill task it is to interpret West. In The Dream Life of Balso Snell, all sense of logicality gets mystified as the reader along with Balso enters the posterior end of the wooden horse and becomes more perplexed as he is accosted by even more weird characters, bordering

on the grotesque. West's lesser known work A Cool Million also harps on the refutation of meaning. Lemuel Pitkin's misfortune leading to his final dismemberment is significant of the mockery of the American dream of success. Hence we see West as an artist fascinated by what is difficult and paradoxical.

The dissipation of identities into mere grotesqueries refutes the very structure of meaning and rationality. The reader of A Cool Million is unable to perceive anything clearly for reality and unreality are merged together. Nowhere in the book do we see Lem in his real person; he is always in the guise of someone other than himself. His real identity is splintered into different bits and pieces and he assumes all these identities stoically so that he is likened to objects like a 'glass eye' or 'false teeth'. This accounts for the 'duplicity theme'. This is a term used by Malin Irving (Malin 1972:79) to reinforce the theme of duplicity and superficiality that lies beneath the American dream of success. Finally, it becomes difficult to place Lem because of his many missing parts. But the irony lies in the fact that he is hired with a vaudeville team as an object of merriment. Lem is regarded as a personification of a stooge/dummy. He is a parody of the American innocent without any motive, direction or personality. He becomes a pawn in the

hands of others who dictate, give orders and determine even the course of his life. Lem is a performer and has to deliver the goods to the jeering audience till the final act and, like the audience in The Dream Life of Balso Snell, tolerates any amount of loose excrement being dumped as long as it is part of the show.

An intense case of West's stooge is Homer in The Day of the Locust. Homer is an etherized entity who has no function of his own. He has no self identity and, like Lem Pitkin, waits for a dozen of decisions as they are given to him by others. His death-like passivity likens him to a mechanical entity or rather to a robot. Peter Doyle along with Homer is also likened to a dummy or a stooge. Peter Doyle merely slips in and out of many roles "as the sport", the "husband", the "fool", and the "gas-meter inspector" (CWNW 1957:49). All of West's stooge are impoverished in manner and gesture. This very impoverishment is a travesty of their own existence and they are all a part of the act. They must participate in the mass malaise of self-scrutiny till the final act even if it is at the stake of their lives. Their suffering cannot be released into anything productive but only into self-conscious and meaningless performance.

Nathanael West shows us that it is this sense of

irrationality, this sense of impoverishment of the human soul that underline all actions, individual as well as collective. We need only to examine our own lives to see how much this irrational system directs our attitudes too. West's novels are a systematic study of the process of disfiguration, dislocation, decentering and indeterminacy. Victor Comerchero, more than anyone else, sees West as a visionary. He clearly says that "without him, we would be likely blind to the specific process of disintegration of which we are victims" (Comerchero 1964:170). Therefore, it may not be entirely pointless to hold that in the great masquerade that is the world, West's sensibility will probably remain intriguing and significant.

West stands out even among his contemporaries, for during the thirties while the main focus was on 'proletarian' writings, West went on to become "a masquerader as well as a masquerade breaker", terms used by Widmer Kingsley who remarks: "West is both a masquerade as well as a masquerade breaker, wildly fantasizing and sardonically attacking fantasies. He puts forth large "dreams" - or Modernist art, Christianity, the American gospel of success and mass romanticism - while exposing them as masturbatory, escapist, fraudulent, violently vengeant, catatonic" (Widmer 1967:2). Such a paradoxical involvement

with fantasies makes West a difficult writer to interpret. The answer we sense in West's novels is a very different one; for him, the meaning lies not in the presentable and the logical but in the terror that is inspired by the unthinkable and the unfathomable. Similarly in Sterne's novel Tristram Shandy, Milan Kundera also concludes that "the poetry lies not in the action but in the interruption of the action" (Kundera 1986:161).

West's novels never proceed in a linear, systematic narrative. As soon as the novel opens, one dream is built upon the other in an intricate and complex manner. These dreams are not inter-connected nor are they rational and representable. This creation of dream structure juxtaposed one upon the other gives a sense of fragmentation and disconnectedness. Sterne's narrative in Tristram Shandy is also interrupted throughout. The book starts with a description of the night when Tristram was conceived and another idea suddenly strikes him in the course of which the book's hero is forgotten for quite a while. Hence the form in Sterne's novel is seen through the intermittent interruption. Likewise, in West, all logical interpretation disappears in a hazy process of floating from one dream to the other. Lyotard has pointed out that "a Postmodern artist or writer is in a position of a philosopher; the text he

writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text of the work. These rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for" (eds. Ihab & S. Hassan 1983:340-341). Perhaps considering West in this context, we can probably assume him as being viewed increasingly as straining towards Postmodernism.

West's world has no unifying centre. The very notion of a centre holds no meaning. It is a chaotic world positioned on a slippery ground of uncertainties. Perhaps in the world of fiction, it was Don Quixote who in setting out from his home ventures out into a world he could no longer recognise or comprehend. The world appears fearsome and chaotic and in such a world of profound ambiguity the Westean man is left bewildered and confused. West is aware of this cosmic chaos in its entirety and does not try to evade it, rather the Westean man learns to adapt himself to the irregular beat of such a chaotic world. The recognition of the final demise of all centres and all logical sense of order leads to an acceptance of chaos and hence attunes itself to the irregular beat resonant with such a chaotic world. Yeat's often quoted line "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold..." may be used to highlight the

decentering aspect of a meaningless and chaotic world in West's fiction.

I have made an attempt in this chapter to trace out some problems of interpretations concerning Nathanael West's works. I have also briefly shown West as an artist fascinated by what is difficult and paradoxical. I would therefore like to suggest that as West is a complex writer, one has to strain one's nerves to interpret his interpretation-unfriendly works.

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CHAPTER V

NARRATOR AS READER AND WRITER

The shift from traditional novel writing to the craft of fiction developing in postmodernism brought about a radical shift in the nature of language and discourse. In traditional novel writing, the presence of an omniscient narrator was very important. The God-like author was invested with the sole authority of creating his own works. This concept gradually underwent a change and then greater importance was placed upon the text. But in contemporary fiction-writing a radical change has been brought about. The multiplicity of meanings derives from the reader who alone deciphers the text. In between the traditional mode of narration and that of the present times, the interior monologue predominates over conversation or action much as it does in Woolf's and Joyce's fiction. This suggests that Modernist fiction lost touch with the everyday world by deliberately creating a difficult and challenging art for the elite as seen in the works of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis in one way or another.

invested with.

To emphasize what I am trying to say, I would like to refer to Roland Barthes' concept of the 'Writerly' texts and 'Readerly' texts. According to him, 'Readerly' texts are closer to the conventions of the nineteenth century fiction, presenting a ready-made world, one that can be comprehended

with the minimum of effort by a reader who finds the fiction straightforwardly constructed and the nature and motives of characters clearly, objectively explained. In Barthes' view, a 'Writerly' text is one in which readers are almost forced to become writers or at least, to enter into an active collaboration with the author, who obliges them to "construe meanings and develop the text's significances for themselves" (Randall 1992:216).

In the light of what has been said in the foregoing paragraphs and by way of relocating West, I would like to consider him vis-a-vis Modernism and Postmodernism. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of language underwent a radical change. Joyce's Ulysses and Finnegans Wake totally broke down the coherent aspect of the linguistic communication. The 'unreadability' of these works accrues from the fact that they have no story, no plot, almost no action and practically no language in the conventional sense. Here, we see a complete breakdown of the traditional aspect of novel writing. As Lyotard puts it:

The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation. The decline of narrative can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the second world war, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means (Lyotard 1984:37).

The subversion of language is what Postmodernism is all about. The complexity of syntax implied complexity in thought and sensibility. The complexity in Postmodern art is innate and irremovable. Kurt Vonnegut's novel Slaughterhouse Five appears confusing and incomprehensible. In this novel, time, space and event coalesce and this idea is effectively conveyed in the narrative structure. Postmodernism totally subverts language and leaves the reader with nothing tangible except to reflect upon the disorder and indeterminacy of the times.

As the 'author' gradually departed and disappeared from the seat of authority from where he directed the universe, we also see the dissipation of all sensible and logical features into a total disarray of things illogical and unrepresentable. Perhaps it was Cervantes' Don Quixote who first set out to confront a world he could no longer understand or comprehend. This sense of incomprehensibility prevades West's world too, for even in West the overall controlling force or authority seems to have departed. The world appears fearsome and chaotic and it is into such a world of wide ambiguity that the Westean man is left bewildered and confused. In this chapter, as the title indicates, I will attempt an analysis to show how the reader has gained a place of importance more than the author.

To begin with, I would first like to point out the non-uniformity and inconsistency of West's style of narration. This is so because the world he paints through his novels is a maimed and distorted one where the traditional narrative style will seem inappropriate and out of place. The narrative pattern is fractured, broken and taut with tension. The broad and elaborate discourses that characterized the nineteenth century works underwent a gradual change. West was caught up in this turn of events specially in the use of language. West, as sensitive as he was, believed that 'grand discourses' would not solve the inevitable threat looming large upon mankind. In Miss Lonelyhearts, the pathetic cries in the form of letters opens a chain of communication among the characters. Fear, pity, immobility and passivity paralyse him and even the system of communication is broken down. These letters of agony are concretized into fragmented bits of pain, fear, disease, frustration, anger, humiliation and deceit.

The complexity in deciphering West's texts into a meaningful context is perhaps undeniable. As mentioned in the preceding chapters, West was thrown amidst the throes of various new and radical movements like Avant-Garde, Surrealism and Dadaism. This accounts partly for the complexity even in the mode of narration. In The Dream Life

of Balso Snell, the language used is extreme, radical, replete with scatological images which has an underlying tone of disgust. T.S. Eliot's form and style in The Waste Land is represented by voices which have no identity. This lack of identity gains monumental proportions in West as in The Dream Life of Balso Snell, Miss Lonelyhearts. They present us with a menagerie of rhetoric. Between them they make up a splintered portrait of a society that has become consumed by its own cliches. Here, the reader is confronted with confused and depressed voices which ultimately become one universal voice shouting hoarse the cruelties and the injustices meted out to them. The narrative structure is made up of different voices, confused and dejected fragments of a mass world. As the voices become noisier and unintelligible, the images become more and more contorted to the point of growing surreal.

Considered in the same vein, Miss Lonelyhearts presents a study in the breakdown of any intelligible communication in West. The tongue is compared to a "fat thumb" here. The presence of the tongue instead of assisting the speech process, freezes the oral activity. The speech mechanism is frozen into silence in the face of life's complexities and abnormalities. In such a world of unspeakable pain and hatred, silence is fraught with

with meaning. In the final chapter in Miss Lonelyhearts, when the Doyles and Miss Lonelyhearts share the silence, there is excitement in this kind of communication. Once this silence is interrupted by meaningless chatter, the inevitable happens, violence and aggression erupt breaking into chaos and confusion.

West uses this condition of wordlessness ironically as a vehicle of expression to impart a breakdown in the system of discourse. This indicates how West seems to depart from the traditional vein of grand and uninterrupted dialogue. Randall Reid has touched upon this aspect for he very clearly observes that "Miss Lonelyhearts does not talk much, except to himself. He is unusually a silent auditor for the extended and formal speech of others ... he is only intermittently articulate and only intermittently conscious" (Reid 1967:52-53). Such lack of organised discourse further adds to the complexity of his character because all his preoccupations are private and introverted. In general West never indulges in using direct statements or elaborate details to familiarise his characters with his readers and in this way not only his characters but also his entire work appear cryptic and enigmatic.

West has explicated the symbol of a disappearing narrator. The concept of the presence of an omniscient

narrator is no longer valid in West's works. Tod Hackett in The Day of the Locust is a very thin version of Melville's Nick Carraway. The so called narrator functions mostly as a passive and voyeuristic auditor here. Kingsley Widmer observes that "Tod's 'talent' is asserted along with the contradictory appearance of being 'almost doltish'. He further adds that underneath this was really a very complicated young man, with a whole set of personalities like a nest of Chinese boxes" (Widmer 1982:69).

Tod acquires a privileged status in the text no doubt. But he is presented as a parasite and is another victim of the mass violence that ultimately leads to the final destruction in the book. The former concept is justified well by Roberts. It is Roberts who states: "Tod's observations and experiences organized most of the narrative and, together with fragmentary description of the painting itself, provide the major vehicle for the novel's presentation of the cheated and its diagnosis of American mass-culture" (Roberts 1996:67). To explicate the latter claim, I would like to consider Kingsley Widmer's notion of the narrator Tod in The Day of the Locust. "The painter-narrator, in spite of his insight and decency, carries the plague; he too, is one of the sexually defeated, a voyeur of grotesque violence, and a reluctant part of the mob which

literally cripples this artist" (Widmer 1967:104). The fact that the narrator himself gets implicated in the final violence goes on to show that the narrator has no control over the happenings in the text. He is no longer the omniscient narrator. West creates his characters, breathes life into them but leaves them to their own devices. The reader then becomes almost like the writer for it is up to him to interpret the text and construe meaning to it. This aspect of West brings him closer to Barthes' concept of the 'writerly' texts.

In stating thus, I do not simply mean that West's works could be fitted only into the 'writerly' text concept. Herein lies the genius in West which is accounted by the fact that he is an individualistic writer having no set norms of novel writing. An act of pre-empting the reader present both in Modernist and Postmodernist fiction could be seen in West too. This act of pre-emption originated as early as the seventeenth century in Cervantes' Don Quixote. In Don Quixote, we have the concept of the author slowly being relegated to the background. Cervantes was totally eclipsed behind Don Quixote that the world lost sight of Cervantes. "In Part II, we have two Don Quixotes and Sancho Panzas; we have the Don Quixote and Sancho whose life story the author continues to relate, but there is another Don and

another Sancho who live outside that story and will judge and criticize what has been written about them" (Cervantes 1979:32). This is an act of pre-empting the reader. The author has already read the reader and anticipated his reaction. Therefore, Don Quixote though written during the early part of the seventeenth century, foreshadows what the Postmodern author talks about now.

Lawrence Sterne's Tristram Shandy could also be considered as one of the first novels along with Don Quixote which presents the act of pre-empting the reader. Sterne's novel creates itself before our eyes. "Tristram makes the process of composition part of his narration. He does not cover up the seams of the narration - the leaps in time, the alterations of voice, the digressiveness - but exposes them to scrutiny and comments on their weaknesses" (Melvyn 1992:111-112). This tradition of a self-conscious narrator is present both in Modernist and Postmodernist writings. The act of pre-empting the reader is very strongly projected by Pynchon in The Crying of Lot 49. Oedipa-Maas takes the will and takes it from person to person, seeking interpretation. The reader's understanding of the novel will depend on her interpretation of the will. 'You hypocrite reader' in The Waste Land is also an act of pre-empting the reader rendering the reader at a loss to construe meaning from the

text. West also continues in the same tradition and this in a way signifies that he was influenced by Sterne and Cervantes to a great extent. In The Dream Life of Balso Snell, the self-conscious narrator goes in search of his own audience. The narrator is so self-consciously preoccupied that he even goes to the extent of deciding who his readers will be. The artist in West is emotionally incapacitated for he cannot escape his own watchful eye.

Therefore, in West it is parody which pushes the narrative forward. The self-conscious narrator, in The Dream Life of Balso Snell tries to read his own actions that sometimes even before an act is performed, the entire action as well as its consequences are replayed in his unconscious mind. Such a case is seen through the little dramas of Beagle Darwin's consciousness in which Janey Davenport is the actor. In his musings he replays the entire scene in his unconscious mind and ponders what his reaction ought to be for every action that is replayed. In The Day of the Locust, the domination of the conscious mind is undeniably strong in Harry Greener. Harry has a large assortment of unsettling laughs that he consciously works up - his favourite one begins with "a sharp metallic crackle, then gradually increased in volume until it becomes a rapid bark, then fell away to an obscene chuckle ... then to the nicker of a

horse, then still higher to become a machine-like screech..." (CWNW 1957:307). The performance of Harry and his daughter Faye - he laughing, she singing appears rehearsed.

Perhaps West's novels could be placed within the tradition of Sterne and Cervantes not only in pre-empting the reader but also in its resistance of being absorbed into a straightforward narrative. It projects a narrative pattern that is necessarily open-ended. In Miss Lonelyhearts, the narrative ends with "and they both rolled down the stairs" (CWNW 1957: 140). This incomplete narrative symbolizes a refusal to write an easy conclusion by fixing guilt and offering rewards. Such incompletions in West leave various associations upon the reader's hands. The reader is left to construe meaning to the text.

Roland Barthes has stated that "... a text is not a line of words releasing a single theological meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (Barthes 1984:146). This is the theoretical position which West's writings also take. The multi-layered interpretations tend to be complex and cryptic and it breaks down all logical and rational interpretations. West presents personalities and events that are incomplete and

disconnected. The narrative is even more incomplete which perhaps suggests a disconnected sensibility slipping between the extremes of a meaning and a world devoid of meaning. A consoling sense of order or completeness is denied by its fragmentary structure and lack of coherence.

A disjointed or rather a broken speech characterizes the Western man. Perhaps all these lapses in the system of communication could be the repercussions of the various complexities inherent in the social set up. It is evident that West anticipates such a break and so he presents this aspect very strongly through his works. He shows us how Faye's speech pattern is disjointed. Faye's assortment of gestures like her smile, laugh, shiver, whisper, her meaningless body movements like crossing and uncrossing her legs, sticking out her tongue, widening and narrowing her eyes, tossing her head are weirdly dissociated performances of gestures and words. Kingsley Widmer provides an apt statement to capture the meaningless gestures of Faye - her body language disconnects from her words, "her gestures and expressions didn't really illustrate what she was saying" (Widmer 1982:74). What we see is a great tension between the arrangement of words.

The inability to speak in West, hammers home the essential traits of grotesque even in the pattern of

narration. In The Dream Life of Balso Snell, words come to the paper "with a constipation of ideas, eager, impatient. The white paper acts as a laxative. A diarrhoea of words is the result" (CWNW 1957:14). The constipated ideas of words being let loose into a diarrhoea-like flow is likened to Homer unable to speak towards the end of the book. But once he starts, he cannot stop himself. He speaks rapidly like a dam bursting. Homer's words are not simultaneous but continue so much that Malin Irving compares them to "flashing images on a screen" (Irving 1972:112). His words flow out in jerks and spurts and hence it is aptly named 'diarrhoea of words'. This is likened to the stutterer in Rabelais ... A stutterer talking with Harlequin cannot pronounce a difficult word. "His face is swollen, his eyes pop out, it looks as if he were in the throes and spasms of childbirth" (Morris 1994:232). This sense of inconsistency in the narrative pattern is echoed through West's Homer as stated above.

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In exposing the disjointed pattern in the narrative, West drives home clearly the fact that his narrative can never proceed in a linear line. This is so because the picture he paints is a tainted and a distorted one - a rather sterile and demented portrait. West transposes all these broken and twisted forms of words into disjointed

speech pattern that renders the world highly elusive and complex. All these could signify in a way that the epoch when the writer photographed the life about him, with the mechanics of words, is drawing to a close.

The collaboration of a writer (Narrator) and reader has been with us since Don Quixote and Tristram Shandy. In the latter work, this is what the narrator advises the reader as they progress from 'slight acquaintance', to 'familiarity' to 'friendship' and on his willingness to accept the writer's aberrations. Both Tristram Shandy and Don Quixote are being increasingly relocated in the contemporary times. Though written much earlier, they contain many seminal ideas which could be interpreted in the present context. The very fact that they allow wide diversity of critical approaches is significant of their influence upon twentieth century works.

With the coming of Postmodernism, it has posed fresh problems in fiction writing. Borges, the Argentinian writer prefigures Postmodernism. In "Pierre Menard 'the Author of the Quixote'", he has copied out the original Quixote word for word and claims that his work is more original than Cervantes' Quixote. "The text of Cervantes and that of Menard are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer" (Borges 1970:11). This short fiction is

more like a criticism. If fiction writing itself tends to be a critical exercise, then what will the reader and critics do?

Such questions lead to an unstable and incoherent world. Perhaps, West's world is also perched upon such an unstable and precarious position. Owing to such complexities, West's fictional work could not conform to any literary tradition since they were highly individualistic and experimental. His works according to Malin Irving, "shy away from the full-bodied, substantial materials used by George Eliot or Jane Austen. They are flat, stylized and nocturnal. Their very strength lies in such qualities. They refuse to accept the world as it is ... They want to believe in the values of everyday life - as the English novel does - but they know that such values cannot exist with certainty in a world of illusion, deception and violence" (Irving 1972:7).

Jonathan Raban has termed West's style of writing "soggy", "inadequate" (Martin 1971:220). In the like manner, many readers of West see his style of writing as a maimed one. But I would rather consider West's works a cut above the rest of his contemporaries. His so-called maimed style has worked itself so successfully into the texture of literature. As sensitive as West was, he had his hands full

in trying to understand and then describe the concept of American sensibility. Therefore, only such a maimed and fractured style of writing could depict such a sterile and demented sensibility.

The pattern of narration in the fiction of Nathanael West implicates the reader as the writer. For example, to quote Jonathan Raban - "The reader's central problem in Miss Lonelyhearts is to shape the hectic and confused voices of the book into the stylized patterns offered him by West" (Martin 1971:225). It also presents the reader as a self-conscious narrator, reconnecting itself to the works of Cervantes and Sterne's. What distinguishes West from the Modernist writer in his active concern with the emergence of the new.

In the light of the above discussion, it can be pointed out that Nathanael West's works evidence a breakdown in the traditional concept of plot, characterization, meaning and narrative structure. No doubt West is truly one of the innovative stylists of his times. He adhered to an extreme form of art, though now, such exacerbated sensibility has become almost normative for sensitive intelligence. He was known as an intensely pessimistic writer who seemed to glorify only the disgusting, the irrational and the maimed image in fiction. But a sensitive

reader sees him as one truly concerned with the fatous and machined dreams counterfeiting all reality. Kingsley Widmer apprehends the true essence of West's sensibility and remarks that it was West who "foresaw the apocalyptic violence of warped and cheated humanity" (French 1967:97). No doubt West very successfully envisions the tumultous age after Modernism and specifically underlines the process of disintegration and collapse of the modern man of which we are victims.

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CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

"I have not defined Modernism; I can define Postmodernism less" - (Hassan 1975:54)

Taking this standpoint, I would like to refer back to my earlier standpoint that the concept of postmodernism remains moot and beyond derivation or definition. The composition and historical boundaries of the postmodernist canon are still being debated. There are, however, broad areas of agreement and it will not be inaccurate, historically speaking, to say that postmodernism is a post-world war phenomenon, features of which are shared by writers and artists in Europe as well as in America. In this context, it should also be added that, as modernism haunts postmodernism, literally and physically, their inter-relationship should not be ignored.

In the preceding chapters we have taken note of how the radical repercussions of writing during an age beset with turmoil and pessimism in the aftermath of the war and the depression affected West's tone and tenor. West's fiction reflects the anger and frustration of his times. This was one reason why his books were criticised and rejected. The glaring absurdities, the horrid sexual images and grotesque, surreal dreams pervade his works. He does not try to offer solutions to the problems. His writings have no

cure, no relief from the pain and suffering that is being inflicted on humanity: "His writings received rather limited responses during his lifetime, but they became widely recognized as important and influential a generation later. His role in American literary history and modernist sensibility will probably remain intriguing and significant" (Widmer 1982:1).

It is only now that West's originality and modernity are being appreciated. The Westean man is more complex than he appears to be. The fact that West's works are so ambivalent may account for this complexity. Although West creates his art with great care, he does not possess a closed mind; his novels are not compartmentalized and he gives us no final solution. As elucidated in the preceding chapters, the novels are open-ended and ambivalent. His baffling conclusions symbolize his refusal to hand in simplistic solutions, fixing guilt and offering rewards. West tries to present the rampant chaos that is present in a world devoid of order and rationality. The very nature of the vagueness of truth lends itself to the chaotic atmosphere discussed earlier. This element of the elusive nature of truth is what the postmodern writer underlines in his work. We cannot be really sure about truth because things are so problematical and fuzzy that their very

existence becomes unreal. West's genius lies in the fact that he inter-weaves all these ambiguities, chaotic symptoms, disconnected, surreal dreams and grotesque images into an intricate and compact work of art. This is also the reason why his works are differentiated from the most popular 'proletarian' novels of the thirties.

Such anomalies led to an unstable and incoherent world in West. Perhaps, such a world is perched upon an unstable and precarious position. Owing to such complexities, West's fictional work does not conform to any literary tradition. It is highly individualistic and experimental. His works, according to Irving Malin,

Shy away from the full-bodied, substantial materials used by George Eliot or Jane Austen. They are flat, stylized and nocturnal. Their very strength lies in such qualities. They refuse to accept the world as it is .... They want to believe in the values of everyday life as the English novel does - but they know that such values cannot exist with certainty in a world of illusion, deception and violence (Malin 1972:7).

Perhaps, ultimately what makes West's work so unpleasant and upsetting is this ability to generalize an image of man as a diseased, endlessly suffering victim. Jonathan Raban has termed West's style of writing as "soggy" and "inadequate" (Martin 1971:220). Likewise, many readers of West term his style of writing as a maimed one. But I

would consider West's striking distinctiveness from his contemporaries as a sure sign of his creative genius. His so called "maimed" style has worked itself successfully into the texture of literature. As sensitive as West is, he has his hands full in trying to understand and then describe the concept of American sensibility. Therefore, only such a maimed and fractured style of writing could depict such a sterile and demented sensibility. Perhaps West's strength lies in his being too unique to be classified sums up West as a great novelist of his age.

In the light of what has been said above, one can conclude that Nathanael West's works evidence a breakdown in the traditional concept of plot, characterization, meaning and narrative structure. West remains one of the innovative stylists of the thirties. He subscribes to an extreme form of art, though now, such extreme sensibility has become almost normative for sensitive intelligence. He is known as an intensely pessimistic writer who seeks to glorify the disgusting, the irrational and the horrid in fiction. A sensitive reader may find in him a writer who is truly concerned with fatuous and surreal perceptions, counterfeiting all reality. Kingsley Widmer appreciates the true essence of West's sensibility and rightly remarks that it was West who "foresaw the apocalyptic violence of warped

and cheated humanity" (French 1967:97). No doubt West very successfully envisions the tumultuous age after modernism and specifically underlines the process of disintegration and collapse of the modern man of which we are victims.

Postmodernism does not believe in the organising capacity of the imagination nor does it have any confidence in the ability of literature to impose value and order on an otherwise chaotic world. In the fictional works of Nathanael West, as seen in the foregoing discussion, man seems to be grappling with such unresolved, mystified and decentered aspects of life. In saying this, I do not mean that West's novels fully highlight the postmodern features but it nevertheless prefigure postmodernism.

The presentation of a world highly irrational and devoid of meaning is the stamp that West has left unforgettably on modern writing. West, being a visionary could foresee the demented and warped world picture that is to follow after modernism. Victor Comerchero considers West as one of those rare American phenomena, a visionary. He goes on to say that "Without him, we would be likely blind to the specific process of disintegration of which we are victims" (Comerchero 1964:170). M.A. Klug goes a step further by saying that West was "the prototype of the postmodernist. While the first waves of modernism were still

breaking on American shores, West was already anticipating a decadence, a period in which literature along with the other arts, must pass into posturing and self parody" (Klug 1987:17).

There seems to be a wide agreement that Nathanael West's fictional works signify a continuation or extension of modernism into postmodernism. The title of my thesis "proto-postmodernist" is therefore fully legitimized. By "proto" I mean prototypical, not in the sense that West is the originator of postmodernism but that he could be considered more a precursor of postmodernism. The point is simply that it would be an anomaly to term West as solely a modernist writer and at the same time he cannot be termed as being an out and out postmodernist writer too. In this sense it will be apt to point out that the arrival of postmodernism was facilitated by such a transitional writer as Nathanael West.

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