CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Researcher: In 'Gore Vidal' you imply that Mr. Ray Lewis White has not viewed you in the right perspective. In this regard how would you like critics and scholars (me for example) to view your work?

Gore Vidal: I've no interest in how I am viewed. I'm the one who does the viewing of others.

(See Appendix)

7.1.0 Vidal's powerful satire of the religious, mythological, historical, sexual, literary and academic ideologies of America in the characteristic method of textual play of conflictive discourses which engenders a decenterted world-view thus proves beyond doubt that he is a deconstructive satirist. But this has so far been lost on critics, clouded by his reputation as a popular writer. This is further compounded by the fact of his versatility as writer. The ease with which he succeeds in every field he enters has baffled many critics. More than either of these factors, however, the radical indeterminacy of his works has made it difficult for critics to categorize him. Yet the spirit of satire, mockery and ridicule and above all the exposure of the falsity of ideological assumptions with a combination of Horatian jest and Juvenalian indignancy that
uncovers the truth bind together all his writings and rightly make him a deconstructive satirist.

7.2.0 In Chapter I: "Introduction: Deconstructive Satire" this kind of satire was defined in the context of postmodern fiction. Delineating the differences between the traditional, modern and postmodern views of the world, the chapter pointed out the postmodern's acceptance of the chaotic and disordered nature of his universe resulting in two tendencies, namely, indeterminacy and immanence and expressed in two modes within postmodern fiction -- referential and reflexive. It was then posited that satire belongs to the referential mode and that this type of satire to which is central the vision of a decentered world is in a sense deconstructive since the concept of decenterment derives from Derridean deconstruction. The term deconstructive satire was defined as a spirit of questioning the veracity of assumptions or ideological beliefs through a method of textual play of conflictive discourses with an open-ended implication of value. With a brief review of literature on Gore Vidal, which drew attention to the fact that Vidal is not subject to serious scrutiny, it was proposed to analyse the operation of deconstructive satire in his novels.

7.2.1 The poetics of deconstructive satire was detailed in Chapter II: "Intertextuality: Reading qua Writing".
Deconstruction and deconstructive satire were identified as intertextual processes which involve a reading / writing dialectic. Both Derrida and Vidal were compared as readers who convert their reading into writing, into criticism and fiction respectively. Through his method of reading qua writing Derrida uncovers all claims to an unequivocal mode of signifying. Vidal also follows this direct method of deconstruction. But in his novels, it was held, Vidal renders the text deconstructive by introducing an opposing signification while retaining the original significance of the intertext which he converts into his writing. This indirect method of deconstruction, it was noted, is to be read as the ironical / parodical conflictive discourse of the text which not only deconstructs the text but simultaneously satirizes what it deconstructs. It was then proposed to study the deconstructive process in his novels classified as religious/mythological, historical, social, sexual and theoretical fiction.

7.2.2 Chapter III: "Demythification", analysed how Vidal deconstructs and ridicules the religious ideology of the States in Messiah, Julian and Kalki. It was shown how he illustrates the fraudulence of religions, Christianity and Hinduism, in particular, and the numerous cults that emanate from them. Vidal also deconstructs the Christ and Kalki
figures by exploiting the volatility of these signifiers which do not have any objective signified and by a reversal of the Christ / Antichrist opposition in John Cave and the God / Man opposition in Kalki. This puts in jeopardy the doctrines of Christianity and Hinduism and ridicules the blind adherence to them. It was also discussed how the powerful satire cuts at the core of the superstition, affectation and hypocrisy bred by these religions and cults as seen in Vidal's analysis of historical Christianity in Julian. It was also elucidated how the commercialization of religion, its power and hegemony over the masses, could result in a totalitarian religious order as in Messiah or unleash a potent destructive force that can destroy the whole world through the machinizations of a crazy cult leader as in Kalki. It was shown that Vidal's uncovering of the evils within the ideology of the system of organised religion ruptures any blind adherence to it.

7.2.3 In Chapter IV: "Dehistoricisation", Vidal's satire of historiography and history in Julian, Creation, Burr, Lincoln, 1876, Empire, Hollywood and Washington D.C. was delineated. It showed how Vidal shatters the relationship of seeming equality between history and truth and how history-writing is as pseudo as literature itself. The chapter described Vidal's detotalization of narrative
through which he uncovers historiographical methods and equates history-writing with fiction-writing. It also elaborated upon his re-writing of the past which subverts the ideological content of history by revising the powerful players of history, viz., Washington, Burr, Jefferson and Lincoln. Finally it delineated Vidal's undoing of the notions of a glorious past through his symbolic and metaphoric satire of it in *1876*, *Empire*, *Hollywood* and *Washington D.C.* Vidal's deconstruction of historiography and revision of past, it was stated finally, results in a new perspective on the past and elevates history to literature.

7.2.4 In Chapter V: "Deprofanation", Vidal's questioning of the sexual ideology of America was dealt with. After defining the triune sexual ideology as the belief in a puritanic marital ideal, its deviance in the permissive heterosexual and its hatred of the homosexual, the chapter analysed the debasement of these ideologies through a series of novels from *In a Yellow Wood* to *Myra Breckinridge*. Vidal's strategy of displacing marital ideology from the center and replacing it with homosexual ideology was described. The effects of this displacement, that is, the undermining of marital ideology and the exaltation of the homosexual ideology as sacred and divine, the subversion of
the concept of "heterosexual dictatorship", and the mockery of the stifling, encumbering, dead-cold laws imposed by the puritanic marital ideal were also outlined. In his deconstruction of the sexual ideology of the States, Vidal desecrates the center (marital ideology) and deprofanes the marginal (homosexual ideology).

7.2.5 Chapter VI: "Detheorization" discussed Vidal's attack on theories of novels which he does by translating the mimesis of their deictic to a mimicry of them. Targeting the reduction of the novel to a quasi-theoretical enterprise, Vidal ridicules the style and formal structure of the *nouveau roman*, its eschewal of the description-representation of reality as also the self-reflexiveness, self-consciousness and other techniques of the metafictional novel. He also mocks at the elaborate and ingenious film theories of auteurism and remotivation which adulated commercially successful films as aesthetic and artistic ones. But his use of postmodern techniques in both straight and satirical manner undermines his attack of them resulting in a critique of his own deconstruction.

7.3.0 The vision of a decentered world is obvious in and through Vidal's methodical 'demythification', 'dehistoricisation', 'deprofanation' and 'detheorization'
which entail a radical epistemological and ontological doubt and indeterminacy at work in his novels.

7.3.1 His 'demythification' places man in a world where the "death of god" has become a reality. Thrown into a world where old religions no longer provide solace or succour, man seeks for new myths and religions to live upon. But in uncovering the fraudulency of religions and their cults, Vidal destroys the myth of man's dependability on a 'god' to save him from the dreariness of existence. He points out the absurdity of man's beliefs which provide no solution to his existential dilemma.

7.3.2 His 'dehistoricisation' challenges the epistemology of history. The post Mc Luhan world allows men no faith in the traditional discourses of mankind nor the official discourses for: "Most REAL events were productions, elaborate technological and electronic productions. . . . (Federman 1984, 97). The knowledge that facts were in fact filtered through a long process, through a variety of mediums, before they could reach the people has ruptured any sense of the truthfulness of history. As Federman puts it:

For indeed, if the content of history can be manipulated by the mass media, if televisions and newspapers can lie, or distort, or justify,
especially when reporting news events, then the unequivocal relation between the real and the imaginary disappears. The line that separates reality from fiction is blurred. Consequently, history must be questioned again, and particularly recent historical events as presented, or rather as re-presented to us by the mass-media (ibid.).

Vidal expresses such an epistemological doubt about history. The dilemma of finding no difference between fact and fiction places history in an abyss and man in an ahistorical world where knowing the truthfulness of events, both past and present, becomes a mirage.

7.3.3 His 'deprofanation' is the natural outcome in this context of a world which lacks in religious, historical and cultural values. Sex is no longer a traditional cultural signifier with a meaning imposed upon it from the outside by the conventions of society. It becomes a language which is in a constant flux of signification. Without social restrictions, man/woman is no longer strictly an unigender creature and his/her relationship is defined according to what he/she creates out of it. In such a world, man is no longer the superior and woman the inferior or vice-versa. Each acquires status and authority in accordance with the role he/she plays in society.

7.3.4 His 'detheorization' exposes the intrusion of theory into literature and constitutes a critique of
literature that is groaning to express the epistemological and ontological doubt of the world. This gives rise to the innovation of new techniques, the notions of self-reflexiveness and self-consciousness and the expressions of a plurality of worlds in the mixture of interdisciplinary discourses. In this decentered world neither the discourses of literature, criticism, history, geography nor the discourses of science are privileged. Therefore criticism cannibalizes literature and vice-versa. In 'narrative' all kinds of discourses inform each other so that a new consciousness emerges. Thus at the center of Vidal's novels is an epistemological and ontological doubt which unhinges man's hold onto either religion/mythology or history and places him in a world where he is a liberated creature, a creature without a center which he is challenged to express in innovative forms of what is called postmodernism.

7.4.0 The study also underscores the radical indeterminacy at work in the novels of Vidal. Various kinds of conflictive discourses inform his novels and rupture the singularity of any one mode of signifying. 'Demythification' brings the binaries like Christ / Antichrist, Man / God, religion / science, mythology / technology, faith / reason into conflict with each other and undoes the very system of conceptual oppositions. In 'Dehistoricisation', the play of fact / fiction, History /
Novel war with each other so that these distinctions are completely blurred. In 'Deprofanation', the very binaries male/female, heterosexual / homosexual are erased in the character Myra Breckinridge who is an amalgam of the male/female archetypes. In 'Detheorization' the oppositions literature/criticism, academic/popular inform each other and emerge into a new genre within fiction which renders the novels critiques of themselves. Thus breaking down all traditional barriers or oppositions, Vidal's novels involve themselves in an "intracultural dialogue" (Calinescu 1983, 275) which render them plural. Moreover Vidal's preference for the referential mode within postmodern fiction as also his unwitting and forced practice of self-reflexive forms place his novels in the category of what Alan Wilde describes as "mid-fiction". Defining "mid-fiction" as "a narrative that negotiates the oppositional extremes of realism and reflexivity", Alan Wilde says:

Further, it seeks to reveal the extraordinariness of the ordinary, frequently and paradoxically by trafficking in limit situations -- thereby subjecting to interrogation the very foundations of the writer's (and the reader's) beliefs. And finally, it invites us not through but in the relationship and actions of its characters -- and by way of some strategic ecart or swerve in its fabric - to perceive obliquely and ironically, the moral perplexities of inhabiting a world that is itself, as "text" ontologically ironic, contingent and problematic (qtd. in Bertens 1986, 37-44).
Wilde's descriptions agree with Vidal's method of questioning and uncovering the system of the ideologies and overhauling it thereby rupturing its wholeness. What emerges is an "other", a shift in perspective that destroys the validity of the hitherto commonly accepted view.

7.5.0 The essays of Vidal also, as direct denunciations of the traditional ideologies are corollaries to the subjects of his fiction and are evidence of his deconstructive satire. Review essays like "How to find God and make money" (1978) and "Armageddon" (1987) deride the twin ideas of the merchandising of religion and the belief in an after-life offering themselves as fitting complements to his novels of 'demythification'. "Homage to Daniel Shays" (1972), "The State of the Union" (1975), "The State of the Union Revisited" (1980), "The Real Two-Party System" (1980), "The Second American Revolution" (1981), "A Note on Abraham Lincoln" (1981) and "The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas" (1987) deal with the same subject as the novels discussed under 'dehistoricisation'. The novels of 'deprofanation' are also supplemented by some of Vidal's most revealing and polemical essays, namely, "The Twelve Caesars" (1969), "Sex and the Law" (1965), "Sex is Politics" (1979) and "Pink Triangle and Yellow Star" (1981). The novels discussed under "Detheorization" are better understood when read in conjunction with essays like

7.5.1 The affinity between his novels and his essays is borne out by the fact that Vidal calls all his writings a piece (see Appendix ). Not only are the subjects of the novels and essays similar, but also their tone, intent and method. As Vidal uncovers the traditional ideologies/"societal vices" in his novels by a statement of thesis, antithesis, exemplar and proof, so he does in his essays. The satirical stance that encompasses his novels also marks his essays.

7.6.0 It is the decentered view of the world combined with the radical indeterminacy in his novels and essays which makes it difficult for critics to categorize Vidal. The indeterminacy of his novels is further evidenced in the dual nature of his works which also defies a critic's attempt at any final say on Vidal's art. Having been persistently anti-American, anti-institutional, anti-Christian and anti-traditional, Vidal's purported allegiance to the eighteenth century aesthetic of the novel has puzzled many critics. Christopher Lehman Haupt rightly points out that one would have expected a person so anti-traditional to
have accepted the vanguard of experimental art. Yet Vidal with his iconoclastic outlook of life and his ridicule of all that is traditional only mocks at experimental art / postmodern theory. This is rather difficult for critics to reconcile with (Lehman Haupt 1982, CII).

7.6.1 The popularity, moreover, of Vidal's writings is a sore in the eyes of the academicians. For years Vidal's books have been on the list of bestsellers. But, he has also proved to his critics and readers alike that his books are not mere slapstick entertainers without substance. The painstaking research of the historical novels and scholarship of all the works in general, as well as the parody of the academic / experimental novels show that even Vidal is academic to an extent and can play with the academic as the academic plays with words. Again, Vidal's mobile skills defy unambiguous labelling.

7.6.2 Facing such contradictory features in Vidal's works, critics find it difficult to assess Vidal. White suggests that Vidal be recognised as speaking to his age in several voices (White 1968, 130). Kiernan echoes the same view and adds that since Vidal is a writer with several voices, his career seems a "history of elaborate feints and passes" (Kiernan 1982, 142). Kiernan further describes Vidal's performance as ventriloquistic and finds that he
cannot with any certainty place Vidal because Vidal plays several roles, that of a reactionary, a classicist, a Petronius and a radical (ibid., 143). Other critics and reviewers have raised the question of seriousness. By stretching his radicalism to the very extreme Vidal himself makes even the most serious seem frivolous. This question of seriousness is furthered by the popularity of Vidal's writings. The question is put forth in the form of "if he is so popular how can he be serious". Therefore, critics have wondered aloud as to how seriously Vidal is to be taken (Bargainneir 1984, 45-52). Epstein asks, "How serious is Gore Vidal? And how seriously ought he to be taken?" (Epstein 1977, 74). This play of seriousness and levity in Vidal's novels leave a touch of oddity that eschews definable categorization.

7.6.3 Such factors, however, amply testify to Vidal's multifacetedness, a fact that is borne out by the indeterminacy of his works and the variety of themes which his novels traverse as illustrated in the chapters of this thesis. Vidal's scourge of the American ideology in the spheres of religion, sexuality, history and literary theory and his ridicule of its choices reveal the canker that emanates from it. Evaluating American society, Vidal finds it steeped deeply in ideologies, that instead of building and making America, contain the powerful seeds of rupture
which Vidal uncovers through deconstruction and delineates in the spirit of sheer abandon, mockery, ridicule and satire.

7.7.0 It is this deconstructive spirit that is the hallmark of Vidal's writings. In spite of a departure from traditional satire, Vidal's pose of independence, security and self-sufficiency parallels a Horatian independence that signifies cultural stability. Like Horace, Vidal too rejects all philosophical and ideological commitment. But unlike the conservative satirist, Vidal is a non-conformist in his views. The non-conformity of works such as Private Eye and OZ pervade Myra Breckinridge, Myron and even The City and The Pillar. Vidal is not by any means moderate or orthodox in his views. This has led many critics to accuse him of irrational anger (against Jews and academics) because of his personal discontentment at not being a successful novelist (Epstein 1977, 72-5) thereby reducing him to the image of Juvenal. But neither is this picture of him true. That his writings are totally coloured by vituperation or Virus iratus is questionable. It is true that some of Vidal's works express naked anger, yet many are mellower. In the novels especially there is the vigour and rigour of Juvenal's denunciations of great and small vices with equal seriousness, a vehement rebuke of man's irrationality, yet this is done without resorting to irrational anger.
Thus, while Myra Breckinridge and Myron contain acerbic humour and cynical wit that is Juvenalian, Messiah and Kalki hit at man's irrational religious beliefs with the stance of a rational man, cool and good humoured as well as with a mixture of sophisticated charm, cynical wit and gentle irony. The "historical" novels like Burr, Lincoln, 1876 and Empire exhibit tones that shuttle between the two ends of the satiric spectrum. The denunciation of the fathers of the constitution in Burr, the witty asides on the president in Lincoln, and the cynical view of a fallen democracy in 1876 -- all verify the varied tones of Vidal that are more than an amalgam of the gentle Horatian and the indignant Juvenal. In fact Vidal's satiric tone goes beyond the fusion of Horatian and Juvenalian tones, that of jesting (ridiculum) and the indignant or serious vigour, produces an emergent Nietzschean tone of "jest in earnest," which aims at unveiling the truth and revitalizes the exposure of false ideologies. This is the tone of deconstructive satire. Thus Vidal's novels defy traditional categorization and in the traditional perspective Vidal seems not to be serious as deconstruction viewed from the traditional perspective is taken to be nihilistic. But Vidal's exposure of the falsity of traditional ideologies in his characteristic method of questioning with "serious ridicule" or "jest in earnest" should be seen in the 'positive sense' of Raymond Gauss's classification of ideologies as a condition of positive
knowledge which is created by the writer through his critique of the ideologies of American society.

7.8.0 It is, thus, seen that the works of Vidal form a statement of his *weltanschauung* that is preeminently satirical and deconstructive. With his characteristic spirit and method of questioning, of overhauling a system, along with an accompanying rigour of ridicule, mockery and satire, Vidal engenders a radical point of view, a shift in perspective that ruptures the traditional and commonsense view of the obvious. His fiction, therefore, emerges as a counterpart to Derrida's deconstruction. Like Derrida, Vidal does not accept any view of the world *prima facie* (whether it be traditional or postmodern) but puts it to a close scrutiny not only to undo the primacy of this view, but to break its hegemony, while simultaneously subjecting it to mockery and ridicule. It is this spirit that binds together all his writings / novels making him a deconstructive satirist.

7.9.0 Vidal's versatile skills and poly-generic writings provide ample scope for further research. Topics like the satire of Vidal's plays and essays, the historicity of Vidal's 'historical' novels, the homotextuality of his 'sexual' novels and the affinity between the essays and the novels, which this study has touched upon could be subject
to closer scrutiny. Vidal's application of theatre and film techniques in his novels, his conversion of novels into films, his television plays are areas worth researching. His interesting collection of short stories, *A Thirsty Evil*, provides further scope. Vidal as a postmodern writer, Vidal as a political writer, Vidal as a popular writer and Vidal as a writer of detective fiction (under the pseudonym of Edgar Box) are some other areas which could be explored in the future. In fine, Vidal's *oeuvre* reveals the multifacetedness of his personality as a writer, whose one aspect, that is, the deconstructive spirit of his novels, was addressed in this study, the rest needs further scrutiny.