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 organizing 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.


