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 problematical 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 see 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 - poststructura
dlism, 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 morilistic 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-interpretable 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-à-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 analyze 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 kinds 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 siècle 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 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 predetermined 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 automatisms 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' Don 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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