CHAPTER III

GROTESQUE AS CHARACTERS
I have tried to show in the foregoing chapter that the traditional unbolding 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 Kusch, 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 con-
tinuous 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 William, 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 excrecences (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 chancre..." (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 sophisticated 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 disconnection". 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.
WORKS CITED


