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.

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 textent. In The Dream Life of Balso Snell, the self-conscious narrator goes in seach 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

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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 coherenc e.

A disjointed or rather a broken speech characterizes the Westean 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.

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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