

# **The Crying of Lot 49 Study Guide**

## **The Crying of Lot 49 by Thomas Pynchon**

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# Plot Summary

Oedipa Maas is surprised to find that she has been named co-executor of the will of her former lover, real estate investor Pierce Inverarity. Her husband, Mucho Maas, an overly sensitive DJ, is not helpful, and neither is her psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarius, who calls her in the middle of the night and encourages her to participate in a study in which housewives take LSD.

In San Narciso, California, a suburb of Los Angeles where Inverarity had many financial interests, Oedipa begins to untangle the estate with the help of her co-executor, the attorney and former child actor, Metzger. She stays at Echo Courts Motel, where she becomes acquainted with the manager, Miles, member of a Beatles-wannabe rock group called the Paranoids. Metzger and she become lovers, as she watches a film he supposedly starred in as a child, frequently interrupted by commercials advertising properties and companies in which Inverarity had financial interests. These include a housing development named Fangoso Lagoons, and Beaconsfield Cigarettes, which marketed a cigarette with filters made of bones.

Oedipa and Metzger begin to frequent a bar named The Scope, a hang-out for electronics assembly workers from the Galactronics Division of Yoyodyne, Inc., a high-tech conglomerate which Inverarity was instrumental in bringing to San Narciso. The workers appear to be utilizing a secret mail delivery system called WASTE, whose symbol is a muted post horn. One fellow, by the name of Mike Fallopian, tells them about the Peter Pinguid Society, a group named for a disgruntled Civil War naval commander who unsuccessfully attempted to open a new front for the war off the coast of San Francisco. Fallopian is writing a book about the federal government's purported attempts to suppress independent mail routes around the time of the Civil War.

On a trip to Fangoso Lagoons with Metzger and the Paranoids, Oedipa meets Manny Di Presso, a lawyer representing Tony Jaguar, who has filed suit against Beaconsfield Cigarettes for nonpayment for a shipment of bones. Di Presso reveals that the bones came from Lago di Pieta, a lake in Italy where a company of American GI's perished during World War II. Oedipa and Metzger then see a performance of *The Courier's Tragedy*, whose complex Jacobean plot includes an Italian lake where a number of soldiers were killed, a postal conspiracy referred to by the mysterious name, Tristero. Oedipa seeks out the director, Driblette, in his dressing room afterwards to ask about Tristero, but he evades her inquiries.

While attending a stockholders' meeting at Yoyodyne, Inc., Oedipa meets a frustrated inventor named Koteks who tells her about a machine called the Nefastis Machine created by John Nefastis, member of a secret society of frustrated inventors. Oedipa also visits a home for senior citizens, Vesperhaven House, which Inverarity founded. There she speaks with Mr. Thoth, whose grandfather rode for the Pony Express in the Gold Rush days. Mr. Thoth shows Oedipa a ring given to him by his grandfather which bears the muted post horn symbol. Subsequently Oedipa learns from a philatelist,



named Genghis Cohen, about counterfeited stamps from Inverarity's collection which contain further evidence of the postal conspiracy.

Oedipa makes a trip to the San Francisco Bay area to see John Nefastis, and seek a copy of the book containing the text of *The Courier's Tragedy*. After determining that the book's editor, Prof. Bortz, is now a professor at San Narciso College, Oedipa embarks on an all-night odyssey around San Francisco, where she catches sight of the muted post horn symbol in a number of locations. She also learns of another secret organization using the muted post horn symbol, Inamorati Anonymous, whose members are dedicated to avoiding love.

On the way home she stops off in her hometown, Kinneret, to find that her psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarious, is suffering a paranoid episode and has locked himself in his office with a rifle. He reveals to Oedipa that he worked at Buchenwald concentration camp, doing research on experimentally induced insanity. When Oedipa seeks his opinion as to whether she too is suffering from a paranoid delusion, Dr. Hilarious counsels her to cherish her fantasies. After he is captured by the police, she finds out that her husband, Mucho, has multiple personality disorder due to ingesting LSD.

Professor Bortz provides her with more information about the history of the Tristero organization. At the same time, Mike Fallopian suggests that all her sources of information are suspect. Unable to determine whether she has truly detected an alternative communications system secretly embedded in modern capitalist society, or is herself suffering from a paranoid delusion, Oedipus sinks into complete isolation. She finally decides to attend the auction, known as a 'crying,' of Inverarity's stamp collection, and to confront the secret bidder for the counterfeit Tristero stamps, collected as Lot 49.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Mrs. Oedipa Maas arrives home from a Tupperware party, a bit drunk from a fondue with too much kirsch, to find that she has been named executor of the estate of Pierce Inverarity. A former lover of Oedipa, Inverarity was a real estate mogul with sufficient assets to make the execution of his will a large job. The letter, from a legal firm, states that Pierce died in the spring and his will has just been found. It takes Oedipa the rest of the afternoon -- while shopping, harvesting herbs from her garden, reading book reviews, cooking, and mixing cocktails - to remember a three a.m. phone call last year from Inverarity. Pierce spoke with several kooky impersonated voices. Oedipa's husband, Wendell 'Mucho' Maas, lying in bed beside her, advised her to hang up. Pierce heard the comment, and said it was time Wendell Maas had a visit from 'The Shadow.' Now The Shadow has finally come, in the form of the job of executor of Pierce's will.

When Mucho returns from his job as a radio station disk jockey, he is suffering one of his regular crises of conscience over his profession, in which he doesn't believe. His previous job, as a used car salesman, bothered him for the opposite reason. There he took too seriously the used cars brought in for trade-in, feeling saddened by their rusted parts and debris-filled interiors which revealed the pathetic lives of their owners. The endlessly repeated trade-ins of one malfunctioning car for another depressed him. He experienced it as endless incest. Oedipa counsels Mucho that he is too sensitive.

Oedipa compares that experience to some husbands' memories of combat. But in the case of war veterans, they can ultimately be comforted out of their nightmares, while Mucho never forgets. Nonetheless, Mucho appears calm as he recalls a conversation at work that day with Funch, the program director. Funch finds that Mucho's interaction with people who call in with music requests is too overtly sexual, and he tells Mucho to tape all phone talk so that he can censor it before it is aired. Mucho fears Funch will edit out everything Mucho says. Such interactions between Funch and Mucho occur regularly.

Oedipa shows Mucho the letter from the legal firm, and asks what she should do. Mucho withdraws, saying he is no good at accounting, and suggests she contact their lawyer, Roseman. That night she is awakened by another phone call at three a.m., this time from her psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarius. He asks why she isn't taking her tranquilizers, and reminds her that they still need subjects for an experiment in which hallucinogenic drugs are given to housewives. Oedipa responds that she trusts neither pills nor the doctor, and doesn't want to participate in the study. Dr. Hilarius' insistence reminds her of the well-known military recruiting poster on which Uncle Sam points at the viewer saying, "I want you."



She hangs up, reflecting that she doesn't want to become hooked on the pills, but chooses not to leave her 'shrink,' even though she recognizes there will never be a way to know if she is cured. Dr. Hilarius has a theory that a face is like a Rorschach blot, and thus elicits a psychological reaction which reveals personality traits. Oedipa recalls the doctor's face number 37, the 'Fu-Manchu,' which is the face children often use for taunting, with eyes, nostrils and lips pulled wide by the fingers. This face replaces the image of Uncle Sam in Oedipa's mind as she lies awake with insomnia after the phone call.

The next morning she visits Roseman, who also had a sleepless night. As she walks into Roseman's office, he is guiltily hiding his manuscript-in-progress, a work which seeks to undermine the television lawyer, Perry Mason. Roseman sometimes attends group therapy sessions with Oedipa. At lunch Roseman plays footsie with her under the table, but Oedipa's boots insulate her, so she doesn't make a fuss. After lunch, when he asks her to run away with him, Oedipa responds by asking where. Roseman finally outlines all the tasks she will have to carry out to execute the will.

As a result of her involvement in Inverarity's will, Oedipa will have many revelations about some magical presence, external to herself, which somehow both insulates and imprisons her. She has noticed a lack of intensity in her life, as if she were watching a movie rather than living. She has also deceived herself into assuming the role of a modern Rapunzel, imprisoned in the town of Kinneret where she resides, waiting for someone to tell her to let down her hair. She happily let down her hair for Pierce, but he had only climbed to the halfway point when the hair turned into an unanchored wig and he went tumbling down onto his backside. Using one of his credit cards for a shim, he slipped the lock on her tower and entered. However, their relationship never escaped the tower.

On a visit to Mexico City, they stumbled into an exhibition of paintings by the Spanish exile, Remedios Varo. Oedipa stood in front of the central panel of a triptych entitled "Bordando el Manto Terrestre" [Embroidering the Terrestrial Mantle] and cried. Her tears, hidden by green bubble shades, went unnoticed. She even wondered if the sunglasses might hold the tears, so that she could carry the particular sadness occasioned by the painting with her forever. The painting depicts girls in a tower embroidering a tapestry, containing all the buildings and creatures, waves, ships and forests of the earth, which spills out the windows into a void. This image made Oedipa realize that her own reality is woven in her personal tower, and so no matter where she goes, it cannot be escaped. Yet her tower, like her ego structure, is incidental, and so is not the source of her imprisonment. Rather, the problem comes from some magical malignant external force. Oedipa has only fear and female cunning to explore and measure this formless magic. If the tower is everywhere, and the knight can't help, what is she to do?



## Chapter 1 Analysis

This chapter establishes the setting, characters, and problem. The setting is the United States in the era of the counter-culture, the 1960's, when experimentation with psychedelic drugs was rife, and identity crises pervasive. The problem is the crisis of meaning present in modern life, as this manifests through identity crises, relationship and sexuality problems, injustice in the economic system, and loss of cultural consensus as to what constitutes truth. The names of the major characters are allegorical, and so give a clue as to what each represents. Each name equates the character with a particular quality, function or fate. Since the main character's name is Oedipa, the reader is immediately alerted that this narrative will consider the Greek myth of Oedipus from the point of view of a female protagonist.

The myth has different versions, but the story as related in the play by Sophocles is as follows. Laius, ruler of Thebes, is told by an oracle that his son will kill him. With the agreement of his wife, Jocasta, the baby's feet are pinioned and he is given to a slave to be exposed. The slave pities the baby and so gives him to a shepherd from Corinth. The shepherd presents the baby to the King of Corinth, Polybus, who raises him, giving him the name Oedipus (swollen foot). In adulthood, someone calls Oedipus a bastard, and he goes to the oracle at Delphi to confirm his parentage. The oracle predicts that he will kill his father and sleep with his mother. To avoid this fate, Oedipus heads away from Corinth toward Thebes. En route, at a place where three roads meet, he comes upon an old man traveling with slaves. In response to the old man's rudeness, Oedipus kills him along with, as he supposes, all his guards.

Oedipus comes to Thebes, which is threatened by a monster, the Sphinx, who destroys any who cannot solve her riddle. The riddle asks which animal has one voice but two, three or four feet. Oedipus' correct answer - man - wins him the throne and marriage with the king's widow. Oedipus fathers four children with Jocasta. Then Thebes is struck by a plague, caused, it is believed, by some type of pollution or sin. Oedipus sends his brother-in-law, Creon, to consult the oracle at Delphi. The oracle states that the plague is caused by the unpunished murder of the former ruler, Laius. Oedipus places a curse on the unknown killer, and then consults the blind seer Teiresias. Teiresias says that Oedipus is the killer, and author of even worse crimes. Oedipus sends for a witness to the murder of Laius.

Instead a messenger arrives from Corinth with news that Oedipus' 'father,' the king, died, and Oedipus is the new ruler. Fearing the prediction that he would kill his father, Oedipus refuses to return to Corinth. However, the messenger assures him that he was not the true son of the king of Corinth, but rather was brought as a baby by a shepherd from Thebes. Jocasta, now realizing the truth, rushes out. The Theban shepherd is summoned and unwillingly reveals that he brought Jocasta's child to the Corinthian king. Oedipus now knows the truth. He rushes to Jocasta to find she has hanged herself. He takes the pins from her dress and blinds himself. Creon becomes ruler of Thebes, and places Oedipus under house arrest. Oedipus insists he should be exposed on the mountain as the gods originally intended.



This play is a meditation on the nature of fate and human choice. It says that no matter what conscious efforts we may make, the will of the gods will determine our fate. Pynchon has already stated that the problem in Oedipa's life is not psychological, and his portrait of Dr. Hilarius makes it clear that psychoanalysis is pointless. Since the myth of Oedipus is the story of Oedipus' efforts to avoid his fate, efforts which ironically facilitate fulfillment of his fate, Oedipa's name suggests that this novel will concern her perhaps futile efforts to become aware of, and have some control over, her fate. We will see over the course of the novel how Pynchon both evokes and modifies the Oedipus myth.

Oedipa's husband is named Mucho Maas, an approximation to the Spanish phrase 'mucho mas,' or 'much more.' This suggests that he will represent excess. The deceased, Oedipa's former lover, is Pierce Inverarity. While verarity is not a word in itself, it suggests the word root *ver-* which can be traced to the Middle English *verray*, from Old French *verai* (*vrai* in Modern French), all of which mean 'truth' or 'true.' The word *rarity* can also be discerned. Thus, Inverarity becomes not + truth + rarity. In other words, this name is a jumbled comical reference to an absence of truth, truth itself being rare. The first name, Pierce, suggests someone who can pierce, or let light in upon, this lack of truth. This is another reference to Oedipus, who sought the truth, and then when he saw it, pierced his eyeballs, the organs of seeing and of knowing. There is also a sexual connotation related to the act of penetration, itself connected to knowledge, as in the Biblical expression to 'know' a woman.

Here Pierce pierces the insulation surrounding Oedipa's meaningless life of conventionality and neurosis. He does it first with that phone call at three a.m. which literally wakes her out of unconsciousness. Then the letter, naming her as executor of his will, sets out the path by which she will find her way to the truth. In this case the path travels through the worlds of language, communication, and the law. In the Greek myth, Oedipus tries to solve his identity crisis by seeking the truth of who actually killed the former king of Thebes. Here, Oedipa will try to solve her identity crisis by seeking the truth surrounding the financial holdings of her former lover. Thus, this modern version of the myth will seek evidence of the workings of fate in the economy and communication systems, the means by which mass technological society is organized.

Oedipa is figured as a modern Rapunzel locked in a tower from which no prince can free her. She tries to use her feminine attractions, symbolized by her long hair, to escape, but she loses that possibility when the wig falls off. Pierce manages to break into her isolation by using a credit card, that is, by means of his wealth. But their relationship never escapes from the tower. The tower is not to be analyzed psychologically merely as a neurosis or identity crisis which makes relationships difficult. Rather, Pynchon repeatedly emphasizes that what confines her is visited upon her from outside, like Oedipus' fate. The mystery of what constitutes this malignant external force will drive the entire narrative.

Mucho Maas, Oedipa's husband, is abnormally sensitive. He is sensitive to lack of ethics, for he can't drink honey in his coffee since it reminds him of substances which conceal a used car's piston problems. He is so sensitive to the unprincipled use of





language that even metaphorical mention of the word 'creampuff' drives him to flee a party. And he assiduously avoids any taint of shadowy qualities upon his own person, shown by the fact that he shaves three times each morning to eliminate the least 'shadow' of a beard. What he believed in - cars - he could not bear to see, because it brought so much evidence of the shabbiness and futility of life.

He cannot bear the ritual trade-ins of used cars. Rituals are repeated symbolic ceremonies which enact a particular social truth. The rituals carried out on a daily basis at the used car lot act out the fact that poor disadvantaged human beings can never improve their lot, since they only exchange one malfunctioning car for another. This allows him no hope for the future, no belief in progress. That this loss of faith in progress comes to Mucho from a used car lot is ironic, because cars, and advanced technology in general, are usually cited as proof of human progress. Mucho instead experiences the modern world of high technology as "endless, convoluted incest." Incest in ancient Greek society was one of the worst possible crimes, a crime based on lack of respect for and knowledge of one's origins. Mucho suffers from a hypersensitivity which allows him to perceive the brutalities of the modern world - a world which is incestuous since it has forgotten about, and shows no respect for, its own origins.

While Mucho believes in cars, he does not believe in the radio station where he now works. His lustful feelings, which he considers authentic or true expressions of his human nature, are censored. So the radio station is a place which gives him a voice, but edits out any authentic display of feeling. Thus, radio is an inauthentic medium of communication, for he speaks the truth but because of tape editing capabilities, his listeners do not hear it. Mucho rebels on a weekly basis but his rebellions are ineffective. Similarly, Mucho announces himself incapable of helping Oedipa with the will. He is sensitive, but ineffective.

The presence of numerous male characters in the narrative who are unable to truly love Oedipa alludes to Freud's theory of the Oedipal complex. According to that theory, a boy in the phallic phase desires to have sexual relations with his mother and thus feels jealousy toward his father. He wishes to kill the father so as to have the mother to himself, but fears the father will castrate him for trying to take the mother. The complex is resolved when the boy accepts renunciation of the mother and identifies with the father, thus gaining his own phallus and freedom from fear of castration. The phallus is understood by many theorists as mastery, or power in the social structure. Mucho has been ineffective at challenging the father, i.e. societal power structures, and yet is too sensitive to simply assume the phallus, i.e. a dominant role. Thus, he is left perpetually castrated and unable to either love or help his wife.

Oedipa is woken at three a.m. again, three being the number in fairy tales when something magical happens. This time it is her psychiatrist. His name, Dr. Hilarius, baldly states his identifying trait: he is laughable. Thus, his character suggests that modern medicine's efforts to deal with such bedrock human experiences as sexuality, identity development, and differentiating reality from illusion, and determining one's fate, are a preposterous failure. That psychiatry is a joke is further emphasized by the fact



that the doctor is calling his patient to chat, rather than the reverse. Jokes often rely on inversion of the expected, and this doctor, pushing Oedipa to take pills and calling her at home, is the opposite of the stereotypical situation where a mental patient calls the doctor at home and requests drugs to eliminate symptoms. The doctor wants to give her tranquilizers, which she refuses. Oedipa will not resort to further numbing to escape the challenge confronting her. The doctor also wants to give her hallucinations. But Oedipa replies that she is already having hallucinations. In other words, her life is hallucinatory, a delusion that does not show the truth of being or reality.

Roseman is the name of Oedipa's lawyer. This may allude to the central symbol in Orson Welles' classic film, *Citizen Kane*, where the rose is the clue to a past which the film unravels. Roseman has an ambivalent relation to Perry Mason, the television lawyer. This begins the novel's series of comparisons between lawyers and actors, showing over and over that the law - whether in the courts which supposedly uncover truth, or in written laws which define right and wrong - no longer functions to reveal or define truth. The simulation of reality is now indistinguishable from and interchangeable with reality itself.

Roseman's perpetual envy of and resentment toward Perry Mason puts him in the position of a boy in the midst of an Oedipal crisis, admiring the father's capabilities and wishing to take his place. Since he is unable to be as successful as Perry Mason, he hates the father figure and fantasizes about killing him. Roseman thus stands as another castrated male, who also tries to love Oedipa, by playing footsies under the table, but cannot penetrate her insulation, symbolized by her boots. Roseman's use of feet to propose love also refers to Freud's discussion of foot fetishism. According to that theory, a man who cannot bear sight of the woman's vulva, and is thus impotent, displaces sexual attraction onto the foot. So Roseman's impotence is both professional and personal.

Roseman challenges Oedipa to take on the task of executing the will herself, without help. Since she accepts this challenge, the narrative tells us, she will have many revelations. However, as opposed to the cure offered by psychoanalysis, the knowledge she gains will be not about herself, but about this unknown external force which causes the events unfolding around her.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

Oedipa leaves Kinneret, heading for San Narciso to confer with Metzger, the co-executor of Inverarity's will. At their farewell, Mucho whistles the song "I Want to Kiss Your Feet" by Sick Dick and the Volkswagons. San Narciso proves to be more a name than a place, a designation for a part of the massive sprawl which constitutes Los Angeles. Viewing it from a hilltop, the houses and streets remind Oedipa of a circuit card she once saw in a transistor radio when changing the battery. This moment has a religious quality, for both the circuit and the street plan of San Narciso seem to her like hieroglyphics containing a concealed meaning which is just outside her grasp. Oedipa wonders if Mucho feels something similar when, at his job, he looks through the soundproof glass at a colleague cuing up a record with movements as stylized as those of a religious officiant conducting a ceremony.

Oedipa drives into a neighborhood with all the characteristics of the periphery of sprawl. She passes a huge complex surrounded by barbed-wire-topped fence, its entrance flanked by sixty-foot missiles with the name Yoyodyne, Inc. lettered on each nose cone. This is the Galactronics Division of a company in which Pierce owned shares and which he helped to bring to this town. Oedipa seeks a motel to escape the illusion of speed and freedom driving provides. She muses that the road is actually comparable to a hypodermic needle inserted into a freeway vein, injecting some addictive drug into the city to keep it happy and protect it from pain.

The motel, named Echo Courts, sports a huge sign depicting a nymph holding a white blossom. A blower underneath keeps her white gauze dress in constant agitation, revealing breasts and thighs. Oedipa parks and stares, remembering an idea she had about a slow whirlwind and words she couldn't hear. The room opens on a courtyard with a swimming pool, and a fountain with another nymph. No other guests are visible. The manager, Miles, a sixteen-year-old high school drop-out, sings a song with an English accent as he carries her bags. He is part of a rock group called The Paranoids. Oedipa says that her husband is a disc jockey, and she could ask him to plug The Paranoids' music. Miles thinks she's trying to seduce him and responds. Oedipa brandishes a TV antenna in self-defense, and his demeanor turns to fear that she hates him.

When Metzger, the lawyer, arrives with a bottle of wine, Oedipa finds him so handsome she thinks he must be an actor. Metzger reveals that he was a child actor, performing under the name of Baby Igor. He laments that his mother "cashiered" him, and worries that it turned him into what such mothers usually turn their male children into. Metzger says that he lives within his looks. Oedipa realizes it is all just words. Metzger asks Oedipa if she wants to know what Inverarity said, but she declines and turns on the TV. An image of a child appears on the screen, which Metzger claims is himself, appearing as a child in the movie *Cashiered*. He explains that the movie is about a father, unjustly



discharged from the British Army for cowardice, who builds a midget submarine, and with his son and their St. Bernard, sneaks into the Sea of Marmara near Gallipoli to torpedo Turkish merchantmen. Oedipa thinks either Metzger made this up, or bribed an engineer at the local TV station to run the movie.

The film clip is followed by a commercial for Fangoso Lagoons, a housing development in which Inverarity owned stock. A map of the development conveys a sense of hidden meaning to Oedipa, like the view from on high of San Narciso. The movie returns to show the father and son and dog in the submarine facing an underwater minefield. Metzger's wine runs out and he produces a bottle of tequila. He reveals that he knows that Inverarity and Oedipa went to Mexico together, because Inverarity listed it as a business expense. Oedipa rails against lawyers. Metzger defends lawyers' capacity for convolution, and reveals that a pilot for a TV series on his career has been made. The actor in the pilot is Manny Di Presso, a lawyer who became an actor, the opposite of Metzger, an actor who became a lawyer.

Metzger asks her to bet on what will happen in the movie, even though he must know the ending. Next on the screen is an ad for Beaconsfield Cigarettes, which use bone charcoal filters. Metzger says Inverarity owned a 51% interest in the filter process. Oedipa finally bets that the father, son and dog do not make it. When the father is next shown alone on a cliff with shrapnel flying, Metzger claims the film reels must be out of order. Oedipa asks a question, and Metzger proposes a game of strip Botticelli. On screen the Turkish massacre of British forces begins.

Oedipa slips into the bathroom/walk-in closet and puts on multiple layers of clothing. Upon glimpsing her padded image in the mirror, she falls to the floor laughing with a can of hair spray in her hand. The can hits the floor, breaks, and begins careening around the bathroom. Metzger rushes in and hits the floor with Oedipa to avoid the ricocheting can. The can knows where it's going, thinks Oedipa, but she doesn't. Just after the can has broken a mirror and a panel of frosted glass in the shower, the hotel manager, Miles, his three fellow band members of the Paranoids, and their girlfriends, appear in the doorway and remark on the scene's kinkiness. They hook up their electronic instruments in the room, run the cords outside, and begin playing a song entitled *Serenade*. A commercial comes on TV for a Turkish bath in downtown San Narciso called Hogan's Seraglio, which Metzger says Inverarity also owned.

Oedipa and Metzger continue their game of strip Botticelli while drinking. Oedipa asks questions about the movie, and removes one item of clothing for every 'no' answer. To every commercial which appears on the TV, Metzger comments "Inverarity's" or "big block of shares." Oedipa returns from the bathroom to find Metzger asleep. Oedipa kisses him awake, he spends twenty minutes removing all the clothes she's put on, and they make love. At the climax of their sexual relations, the lights go out because the Paranoids have blown a fuse. When the lights come back on, the father, child and dog of the movie are inside a sinking submarine. Oedipa jumps up and yells in anger that she won the bet because they didn't make it. She asks Metzger what Inverarity told him about her. He answers that Inverarity said she wouldn't be easy. She begins to cry, he tells her to come back, and she does.



## Chapter 2 Analysis

As Oedipa sets out on her quest for truth, she encounters various kinds of hieroglyphics in the landscape which seem to contain a meaning she cannot yet decipher. For example, she senses meaning in the street patterns of San Narciso's sprawl. Pynchon terms this moment 'religious,' for it intimates a higher reality or truth beyond or within what is perceived. Oedipa wonders if Mucho feels the same intimation of hidden truth at his job at the radio station. Mucho's colleague cueing up records is described as a 'holy man' sending out messages to the 'faithful.' This passage constitutes an extended metaphor comparing secular experience in modern life to the rituals and dogma of formal religion. The story of Oedipus takes place in a society which explains events by reference to the ancient Greek pantheon of gods. The story of Oedipa, by contrast, takes place in a modern world which has lost faith in its gods and their rituals, and which explains events with scientific formula or economic forces which don't account for larger questions of personal destiny and the meaning of life. So Oedipa seeks ritual and meaning in a world which has lost both.

This emphasizes a point made in the first chapter that Oedipa's problem and quest are not psychological. Rather, the meaning or truth she seeks is in the world around her, although she cannot yet decode it. The sacralization of secular ugliness also adds a quality of buffoonery to the story, for the reader finds Oedipa's perceptions of meaning in sprawl ridiculous. In literary terms, this is known as the grotesque, a style which exaggerates or distorts certain traits, or combines incompatible ones, for a comic effect which reveals the corrupt nature of this world. Examples of the grotesque include the novels of Kafka and Jonathan Swift.

The giant facility for Yoyodyne, Inc.'s Galactronics Division attests to Inverarity's role as a 'founding father.' Use of this term humorously compares Inverarity to the founding fathers of the United States, those men who participated in the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, or fought in the Revolutionary War. However, Inverarity shows that the role of a founding father in modern industrial capitalism is to secure tax breaks from local authorities in exchange for construction of barbed-wire-encircled plants. Such physical facilities and the mega-corporations they enclose give the lie to the founding fathers' ideal of a political and economic system based on individual freedom and equality. Thus, Pynchon's novel is a tale of a fallen age, a time when the ideals on which the United States was founded have been trampled under by the burgeoning military-industrial complex which Yoyodyne, Inc. parodies.

San Narciso is named for Narcissus, the Greek god who fell in love with his image seen in a pond, and then pined away, unable to embrace the object of his love. This name signals that in San Narciso Oedipa will encounter a landscape of narcissism, where self-obsession prevents love from being consummated. Oedipa chooses the first motel she comes upon, supposedly by chance, although the narrative continually suggests that it is fate or destiny which governs the unfolding of events, not chance. The hotel is Echo Courts. Echo was a nymph in Greek mythology. Hera reduced her power of speech to



echoing the words of others because her incessant talking prevented Hera from discovering the infidelities of her husband, Zeus, with the other nymphs. Echo fell in love with Narcissus, but, spurned by him, she died and faded into the natural landscape, where her echoes remain. Thus, Echo is an appropriate motel to place in a town named for Narcissus. Together, the two represent a play of frustrated desire, lost voice, and self-obsession.

The motel is advertised by a garishly huge, trashy representation of Echo done as Marilyn Monroe in the famous photograph of her standing over a vent, her chiffon white skirts blowing up around her thighs. That iconic image of American pop culture represents both desire and the unveiling of truth in the context of commercial culture: desire, since Marilyn Monroe, at the height of her fame, was billed as the most desirable woman in the world, and the unveiling of truth, for truth is depicted as something hidden and desirable which must be revealed to be known. The nymph holds a white blossom, showing her attachment to the flower named for Narcissus. She stands over a concealed blower system creating a constant wind to blow her skirts. While the force which unveiled truth in the Oedipus myth was fate and the will of the gods, in the modern commercialized world the revelation of truth is faked by a hidden fan. Thus, the Echo Courts sign symbolizes that there is no truth to be revealed in the modern world, just a shabby counterfeit image of a goddess, portrayed as a movie star, trying to draw customers with the false promise of revelation. The nymph's face is similar to Oedipa's, which shows that Oedipa's predicament resembles that of the nymph: seeking love but finding self-obsessed males instead, and forced to repeat the words of others rather than speak for herself.

The hotel manager, Miles, a Beatles wannabe and member of the Paranoids, is, like the motel and southern California in general, a mishmash of borrowed styles and faked effects. Metzger, the lawyer, is as gorgeous as Narcissus could have been, and stands before the motel's swimming pool, a modern version of the pool in which Narcissus saw his image. In this version of the myth, however, Metzger sees his own image on the TV screen. The Paranoids want to make it as a rock bank, to gain access to the world of media celebrities. Media has become a substitute for reality. Similarly, Metzger was an actor and became a lawyer, as Di Presso was a lawyer and became an actor and then became a lawyer again. This revolving door between movies and law symbolizes that the 'real world' is now interchangeable with illusion, and therefore appearances are all equally empty of truth. Metzger appeared in movies as Baby Igor. Igor is the hunch-backed lab assistant to the mad scientist in Bela Lugosi's early films *Son of Frankenstein* and *Ghost of Frankenstein*. Thus, Metzger's film double is his opposite, a deformed ugly baby, another grotesque figure which emphasizes once again that representations do not show truth.

The movie is repeatedly interrupted by commercials for ventures in which Inverarity had a commercial interest. *Fangoso* means swampy in Spanish, making Pierce's housing development Swampy Lagoons. The housing development centers upon a typically Disneyesque fabrication, a pond with fragments of sunken galleons and Atlantean columns and a recreated European pleasure-casino. This pond provides an artificial means for residents to dive into the unconscious, often symbolized by water, to view





history. Yet, in Southern California, real historical relics, like fragments of sunken ships, are mixed willy-nilly with fake relics of historical fantasies such as the sunken continent of Atlantis. Thus, truth and fantasy are mixed without distinction in an economy based on image creation. Another commercial mentions the bone charcoal filters of Beaconsfield Cigarettes, foreshadowing another of Inverarity's commercial ventures which will be explored in subsequent chapters.

Oedipa agrees to a bet about what will happen in the movie. This humorously compares fate as it was portrayed in the Greek tragedies, with fate in the modern world. In the Oedipus myth, his fate was determined by the will of the gods long before he knew of it. Oedipa similarly must gamble on an outcome which has already been determined, but in this case those who determine fate are the illusion makers in Hollywood. This recalls the poor car buyers who troubled Mucho at the used car lot, imagining they could trade up but in fact doomed by social forces to stay in the same tawdry poverty forever. Thus Oedipa's bet serves as an analogy for Pynchon's portrayal of life in modern industrial society, where commercial forces determine the fates of individuals, even though these individuals think they have some choice in the matter.

When Oedipa plays strip Botticelli, she is literally enacting her psychological insulation, and the search for truth which leads her to strip away that insulation. Once stripped naked, what she actually finds is a momentary perception of pattern, compared to a guitar fugue, bookended on one end by sleep and on the other by blackout. This scene suggests that Oedipa's quest for a truth external to the human mind is futile, for if one escapes from unconsciousness long enough to perceive something, what will be perceived is a meaning made up by humans, a constructed meaning. It also demonstrates the influence of the picaresque genre upon this novel. Like a famous example of the picaresque, Don Quixote, Oedipa embarks on a ludicrous and satiric quest which is doomed to failure.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Oedipa's revelations continue about what she will come to label The Tristero. She receives a letter from Mucho, which elicits her fear that Mucho will commit adultery with a teenager, as he has done in the past. It comes in an envelope Mucho swiped from the radio station, stamped with a misprint by the post office which reads 'potsmaster.' Metzger jokes that he hopes the government will be more careful about not pressing the wrong button.

One night, to escape the voyeurism of Miles and his friends, who now have copies of the passkey and enter Oedipa's room in search of bizarre sexual action, Metzger and Oedipa flee to a bar called The Scope near the Yoyodyne plant. The bar's patrons, electronics assembly employees from Yoyodyne, are not friendly. The bartender explains that the bar plays only electronic music. They have a Sinewave Session on Saturday night, a live electronic music jam session. When Metzger questions how electronic music can be live, the bartender responds that the back room is full of sound-making equipment such as oscillators and gunshot machines.

A frail young man named Mike Fallopian slips into their booth and begins proselytizing for the Peter Pinguid Society. This group was named for the commanding officer of a Confederate man-of-war, the *Disgruntled*, who, during the Civil War, set sail around Cape Horn to attack San Francisco. Unknown to Peter Pinguid, Nicholas II of Russia had dispatched his Far East Fleet to San Francisco Bay as a ploy to keep Britain and France from intervening on the side of the Confederacy. On March 9th, 1864, an undertermined Russian ship at an undetermined location at an undetermined hour sighted the *Disgruntled*. One or both or neither fired, and one or the other fled. Despite lack of specificity about the facts, Fallopian emphasizes that this was the first military confrontation between Russia and America - a confrontation which today, in the midst of the Cold War, engulfs them. Oedipa asks if Pinguid was killed. Fallopian responds that he was not, that in fact he spent weeks in his cabin brooding over a possible alliance between abolitionist Russia, which had freed its serfs in 1861, and a supposedly abolitionist Union, which in fact kept its own industrial workers in a kind of wage-slavery.

Metzger objects that if Pinguid was anti-Communist he could not also be against industrial capitalism. Fallopian responds that Metzger thinks like a Bircher, that Pinguid and his followers were and are against both industrial capitalism and Marxism, since they are part of the same creeping horror. Fallopian goes on to recount that Pinguid resigned his commission in dishonor, settled near L.A., and spent the rest of his life speculating in California real estate. Oedipa sprays the drink out of her mouth and collapses in giggles. At this moment a fattish pale young man carrying a mail sack appears in the doorway, climbs up on the bar, and starts throwing envelopes into the crowd. Metzger notes that the mailman is wearing a Yoyodyne badge. Oedipa suggests it may be an inter-office mail run, but Metzger doubts this would take place at night.





Oedipa goes to the ladies room, where, among obscene graffiti, she spies a scribbled note advertising a group called WASTE, with a curious symbol penciled in below. She notes the information in her memo book, and returns to the booth to find Fallopian with an envelope of his own. Instead of a postage stamp, the envelope bears the initials PPS. Metzger theorizes that Pinguid Society members would be opposed to any government monopoly such as the postal system. Fallopian says that they use Yoyodyne's inter-office delivery on the sly. Members must send one letter each week or get fined, even if the content is mundane. It turns out that Fallopian is doing a history of private mail delivery in the US, trying to link the Civil War to the postal reform movement. He suggests that the government's attempts to suppress private mail delivery constitute a parable of power.

This initial contact with The Tristero is compared to a performance where the costumes of historical figuration are layered as thickly as Oedipa's own clothes were that first night with Metzger. Events continue to unfold as she and Metzger, accompanied by the Paranoids and their girlfriends, head out to Fangoso Lagoons for the day. They arrive at the development to find the usual hieroglyphic geometry of roads, as well as a social hall in the middle of an artificial lake which recreates some European pleasure-casino. The Paranoids and their girlfriends decide to 'pinch' a boat from the dock. Metzger comes upon Di Presso, the actor who plays him in the TV pilot, hiding under a tarp in a skin-diving suit. Di Presso reveals that he has returned to working as a lawyer, and is currently representing a client in a suit against the estate of Pierce Inverarity. Di Presso is hiding from this client in order to avoid his requests to borrow money.

All travel in the boat over to the island where Oedipa, Metzger and Di Presso converse while having a picnic. Di Presso explains that his client, Anthony Giunghierace, alias Tony Jaguar, is in trouble with the leadership of the local mafia. Tony Jaguar's law suit against Inverarity's estate claims that he was never paid for a shipment of bones which were subsequently used in the filters for Beaconsfield cigarettes. Di Presso goes on to recount that Tony Jaguar harvested the bones from the bottom of Lago di Pieta in Italy, where a company of American GI's perished during World War II. He then used his connections with the mafia to sell the bones through an import-export firm. After several transactions and a year in a warehouse in Fort Wayne, Indiana, the bones were bought by Beaconsfield. Metzger responds that Inverarity did not own stock in Beaconsfield itself, but in Osteolysis, Inc., the company set up to develop the filter.

One of the Paranoids' girlfriends comments that this story resembles the plot of a Jacobean revenge play they saw the previous week, entitled *The Courier's Tragedy*. They then catch sight of a boat approaching with two figures in gray suits. Di Presso says it's his client, and flees, taking the boat they had 'pinched' and leaving them stranded. After sunset, the Paranoids and their girlfriends make SOS signs with the glowing ends of their marijuana cigarettes, and gain rescue by the Fangoso Lagoons Security Force.

Oedipa and Metzger go to see *The Courier's Tragedy* at Tank Theater. The intricate plot, written by Richard Wharfinger in the 17th century only a few years before the English civil war, captures Oedipa's interest. Angelo, evil Duke of Squamuglia, has poisoned the



good Duke of the adjoining Faggio some ten years before the play begins. Pasquale, the evil illegitimate son, was able to take over as regent for his half-brother Niccolo, the rightful heir and good guy of the play. Secretly allied with Angelo, Pasquale plots to do away with Niccolo by enticing him to hide inside a cannon. Ercole, commanded to fire the cannon, substitutes a goat and smuggles Niccolo out of the ducal palace. Niccolo confides this story to his friend, Domenico, at the court of Angelo, where he pretends to be a special courier of the Thurn and Taxis family, who hold a postal monopoly throughout the Holy Roman Empire. Niccolo ostensibly is trying to obtain Angelo's postal business, but in fact is waiting for a chance to kill him.

Angelo schemes to unite the two duchies by marrying his sister, Francesca, to Pasquale, the Faggian usurper. Francesca protests the marriage because she is Pasquale's mother, having had an affair with the poisoned Duke. Angelo responds that incest is no barrier, since he and she have been having an affair for ten years. Domenico attempts to betray Niccolo's secret to Angelo, but instead tells his story to Ercole, now an administrative assistant to Angelo. Since Ercole remains loyal to Niccolo, he tortures Domenico to death in a ghastly fashion, including castration.

The second act portrays the protracted torture and murder of a cardinal who refuses to sanction the proposed marriage of Francesca to Pasquale. Ercole spreads the word in Faggio that Pasquale is planning to marry his mother. Niccolo hears the tale of the Lost Guard, a body of some fifty Faggian knights who vanished without a trace, and vows revenge.

The third act depicts the murder of Pasquale as the culmination of a coup fomented by Ercole. Present at an orgy being held by Pasquale is an ape from the Indies, actually a man in an ape suit, and six female impersonators disguised as dancing girls. They leap on Pasquale and torture him to death, after which Gennaro, a complete unknown, proclaims himself head of state until the rightful Duke, Niccolo, can be located. During the intermission, Oedipa searches for graffiti in the restroom, in particular the same message she saw at The Scope, but finds none.

Act four finds forces led by Gennaro and the Pope approaching Squamuglia. The Duke finally has Ercole summon the Thurn and Taxis courier, since he fears he can no longer trust his own men to convey messages. With Niccolo present, Angelo takes out a quill, parchment and ink, to write to Gennaro, assuring him of his good intentions in order to forestall attack. He makes cryptic remarks about the ink he is using. Niccolo leaves for Faggio with the message, unaware of the coup and his impending restoration. Vittorio, the Duke's courier, then informs Angelo of Niccolo's treasonous talk. Domenico's body is found with a message in his shoe, scrawled in blood, revealing Niccolo's true identity. Angelo orders Niccolo's murder.

At this point in the play a new mode of expression takes over. Termed 'ritual reluctance,' it is neither literal nor metaphoric. Certain things well known to all the characters, and to audiences of the period, will not be spoken on stage. Informed that Niccolo is coming, Gennaro rejoices, but the cheering stops when he reminds everyone that Niccolo rides under the Thurn and Taxis colors. Gennaro's forces approach the lake where Faggio's



Lost Guard were last seen. Meanwhile, at Angelo's court, Ercole has been found out, and after a travesty of a trial, is stabbed to death by a crowd. Niccolo pauses by the same lake, reads the letter which lets him know he is to be restored, and then sees three sinister black figures approach.

Angelo begins an orgy. Gennaro arrives at the lake to find Niccolo's body. Gennaro reads the parchment found on Niccolo's body, which is the letter written by Angelo. It has miraculously transformed into a long confession by Angelo of his crimes, closing with the revelation that the Lost Guard were massacred by Angelo and thrown into the lake. Later their bones were fished up, made into charcoal and the charcoal into ink, which Angelo used to write messages to Faggio. All fall to their knees, praising God, mourning Niccolo, and vowing revenge. Gennaro finally names what all have avoided naming: Trystero.

The fifth act is an anticlimax taken up with many forms of death inflicted on the court of Squamuglia, at the end of which Gennaro, played by the director, Randolph Driblette, is about the only character left standing. Oedipa tells Metzger she's going backstage to talk to Driblette. Metzger rails against liberated women. Oedipa protests that she's Republican, and she's not motivated by a desire to right wrongs, but simply by curiosity. Metzger says he'll wait in the car.

Oedipa finds Driblette still in his gray Gennaro costume. He says the play is pure entertainment, not literature, and doesn't mean anything. Oedipa asks to see a script, and Driblette responds from the shower that he copied the script from an anthology entitled *Jacobean Revenge Plays* which he found at Zapf's Used Books by the freeway. Driblette complains that everyone is too interested in texts. When Oedipa asks who, he gives her the same look she recalls from the stage whenever Trystero was mentioned. Driblette explains that he added that touch, along with the three black garbed assassins. He launches into a diatribe against the obsession with texts, like Puritans making a literal interpretation of the Bible. In fact, he says, words are like bones, to which the players must give life. Unable to obtain any more information about Trystero, Oedipa says she'll call and leaves. In the car, KCUF radio plays and the disc jockey on air is her husband, Mucho.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Again the author engages in explicit foreshadowing, signaled by use of the future tense. The first paragraph speaks of what Oedipa will come to label the Tristero System, of what will come to haunt her. The author speaks directly to the reader, providing knowledge of which the character remains ignorant. This is a literary device often used to create suspense, but here is used in an artful ironic manner, exaggerating a common device for comic effect. The future tense is also used at other points in the chapter to foreshadow Oedipa's continuing relationship with Mike Fallopian, and the predicted unveiling of The Tristero. Use of future tense enhances the sense that Oedipa's fate is already decided, and again links Oedipa's story to that of her namesake, Oedipus.



Oedipa's search for The Tristero is compared to her own strip tease in the second chapter's seduction scene with Metzger. According to this metaphor, the costume of a strip tease dancer is equated to the diverse figures of the historical record. When these are removed, in other words, when one can see behind the complex colorful events of history, the truth will be seen. Here truth is equated to nakedness, or living flesh. So Trystero points to a mystery behind apparent events, which, like the woman's clothed body, is not yet seen or known.

The narrative continues exploration of central themes such as: the lack of spiritual significance in modern life, the role of sensitive individuals in an insane world, and the nature and function of language. As in Chapter 2, the language of description repeatedly suggests that Oedipa's quest for truth is also a quest for religious or spiritual significance in a world apparently devoid of it. For example, Oedipa compares the way her experiences fit together logically, as if she were surrounded by continual 'revelation,' a word usually used to describe knowledge obtained mystically or through divine intervention. Revelation will come through Pierce's stamp collection, the reader is told, even though Oedipa currently views it as a headache to be inventoried and appraised. Use of such language is ironic, as the modern world Oedipa inhabits is portrayed as corrupt and despoiled. Oedipa's search for meaning and significance in this world is a fool's quest, a quixotic adventure. The theme of a foolish quest is found in the picaresque novel, of which Don Quixote is perhaps the best known example. Pynchon's novel mixes elements taken from several different genres, or types of literature, as will be explained further below.

The letter which Oedipa receives from Mucho provides another example of the author's meditations on language, and the ability or inability of words to convey truth. It also continues the interrogation of where truth can be found, whether in language, love, or some order which transcends the individual. Regarding the first of these, language, the fact that the envelope contains more information than the letter itself is ironic. It also suggests that the context of information transmission may be more important than the information itself. This is to say that the literal meaning of written words, the text, as Driblette puts it, is just the relic of an act of writing that took place in the past, and is not meaningful for the present.

However, the envelope, the part used by the postal service, reveals several things. First, we see that Mucho commits petty thievery of office envelopes, so his moral sensitivity does not extend to personal ethics. Next, the postmark about governmental efforts to control obscenity suggests the government's intrusion into realms considered personal, a realm which Mucho considers an authentic expression of personal truth. So modern government is interfering with efforts to find truth in the personal, even though any societal consensus about truth has already crumbled. Finally, the typographical error in the postmark - 'potsmaster' rather than postmaster -- is an example of black comedy, lampooning the incompetence of a government which has life-and-death control over millions of people through the famous 'button' of the Cold War, reputed to initiate nuclear attack.



Regarding the second theme, love, the letter brings up Oedipa's infidelity and failure to confess it to Mucho in a previous letter. Although no such information is contained in Mucho's letter, Oedipa now fears that Mucho is having an affair with a teenage girl. In the past, Oedipa avoided questioning Mucho about his infidelities in order not to call attention to the painful subject of his possible impotency. This is another reference to castration, and will be followed up in the narrative by the impotence, or inability to love, of virtually every other male character with whom Oedipa has any contact. It also exemplifies the breakdown of communication in their marriage, suggesting that communication in the modern world is impaired on the level of personal relations as well as on the societal level. The question of whether or not Metzger will prove a true mate for Oedipa remains open, but does not look promising. Thus, it is not relationships which will dismantle her insulation and reveal the truth, but rather her investigations into The Trystero.

This chapter contains a play upon seeing, which continues the overall reference to the Oedipus myth. Recall that the truth was told to Oedipus by a blind seer, and that upon realizing the truth, Oedipus blinds himself. In the Freudian revision of the Oedipus myth, Freud equates blinding to castration. In the Biblical usage, to 'know' a woman is to have sexual relations with her. Since knowing and seeing are linked in Western culture, the penis becomes an instrument of knowing, and its impotency a form of blindness akin to ignorance. Thus, the impotence of so many male characters suggests that men do not have the necessary knowledge to solve the problems of modernity.

The incursions of the Paranoids into Oedipa's motel room to view sexual acts provides another example of the interplay of seeing, knowing and sexuality. Voyeurism is a means of achieving sexual excitement through the eyes, rather than the genital organs. These young people seek knowledge indirectly, by viewing events rather than participating, as if they were watching TV or a movie. This implies that the younger generation is caught up in media representations and has lost touch with reality.

In response, Oedipa and Metzger flee to a bar named The Scope, which is an electronic instrument for viewing. Ironically, to escape being viewed, they go to a place which champions technological means for viewing. The neon sign for the bar depicts the face of an oscilloscope, with Lissajous figures. The term 'Lissajous figures' refers to the patterns of horizontal and vertical lines on an oscilloscope which represent a frequency ratio between a known and unknown source, such as sounds or radio waves. Such figures - seen in the image of a screen with jagged lines zapping across it -- were often used in 1950's science fiction films to convey a sense of unseen sinister presences partially detected by technology.

References to electronics and seeing continue, for the crowd in the bar is made up of electronics assembly workers from Yoyodyne, all of whom wear glasses and stare, emphasizing vision. The bar has electronic music jam sessions called Sinewave Sessions. Sine waves are a type of wave which occurs often in nature, in ocean waves, sound waves and light waves, and are visualized on oscilloscopes as undulating wavy lines. The bartender's description of these electronic music jam sessions parodies language usually used to describe jazz jam sessions, jazz being an improvised style of





music which truly is live, while taped electronic music by definition is the opposite of live. The joke is that a dead form of musical composition, taped electronic music, parallel to bones and words, could be given life and performed live. Thus, *The Scope* is a secret cultish place which claims to give life to dead language through use of technology.

The Peter Pinguid Society parodies the plethora of special interest groups in modern life, its name evoking 19th century societies which supported exploration in then remote corners of the globe, and which were an outgrowth of the imperialist expansionism of the European powers. The character who introduces Oedipa and Metzger to this group, Mike Fallopian, continues the author's practice of using ridiculous yet meaningful names for characters, this one referring to the fallopian tubes through which the human egg travels on its passage from the ovaries to the uterus. This character may thus be seen as one who facilitates the giving of life.

The mission of the Peter Pinguid society ties together the themes of civil war and the Cold War. Mike Fallopian recounts the incident which became the founding myth of the group in comically vague terms, uncertain as to who did what and whether anything happened at all. This is compared to the literal manner in which people from the 'Bible Belt' read scripture. In other words, two attitudes toward language are contrasted, one which views language as a transparent conveyer of truth, and the other which fails to find any certain truth in language. The joke is that there is little fact in this founding myth on which the Pinguid Society is based, implying that there is little truth in the founding myths of nations and religions. In addition, this incident from the Civil War is humorously framed as the inciting incident for the Cold War, the ideological conflict and arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, accompanied by wars in client countries, which raged at the time of the book's publication in 1965.

Fallopian debunks the ideological battle between Communism and Capitalism by saying that underneath they are both part of the same "creeping horror." This points to one of Pynchon's central targets: industrialism, or "industrial anything," as Metzger puts it. In Fallopian's account, Pinguid went on to become a real estate investor in Los Angeles, just like Pierce Inverarity later would. Investment in real estate foments the development which has led to appalling landscapes of suburban sprawl, such as that which Pynchon lampoons in San Narciso. Thus, both Pinguid and Inverarity are portrayed as causes of the mess of modern life, which Southern California exemplifies.

With the entry of the Yoyodyne mail deliverer, postal delivery is added to this mixture of themes. Postal delivery moves information from one party to another. Since the ability of language to convey truth is one of the author's central concerns, he uses the figure of mail delivery to explore what is actually sent or conveyed in a 'letter.' Just as with Mucho's letter to Oedipa, Fallopian receives a letter devoid of important content. Yet the way in which mail is delivered has importance for the story, again suggesting that the politics of information transmission are important, even if the individual 'letters' are meaningless. The continued exploration of mail delivery systems and government attempts to monopolize them in subsequent chapters will further explore the degree to which politics and ideology influence communication. Fallopian's book project links the



Civil War to postal reform, suggesting that changes in the apparent ability of language to convey truth from sender to recipient lead to civil breakdown

In *The Scope*, Oedipa suspects that everyone in the bar is a member of a secret society which waylays a corporate mail delivery system for its own sinister purposes. This is a hilarious miniature representation of the paranoia which pervades modern society. In general terms, paranoia is an exaggerated distrust of others, and in psychology constitutes a diagnosis including delusions of grandeur and persecution. However, a number of modern thinkers have described paranoia as a typical response by human beings to a modern world which far exceeds their comprehension, and operates on a logic which is non- or anti-human. Ironically, paranoia taken in this broader social sense may be seen as an effort to imbue the fragmented modern landscape with meaning, for the idea of an ubiquitous sinister conspiracy underlying all the accidental details of this complex world imbues everything with significance. This notion of paranoia will drive the plot of the narrative, as Oedipa seeks to unravel a supposed conspiracy, centered on postal delivery, which has played out over centuries and nations since the beginning of the modern era.

Oedipa's emerging awareness of *The Tristero* parallels Oedipus' search for historical truth. She senses some reason, some force which can account for the insanity of modern life, and the meaninglessness of her life in particular, just as Oedipus began to see clues which would lead him to discover the truth of his own life. Oedipa finds clues in so-called hieroglyphics, such as the muted post horn symbol scribbled next to a message for WASTE on the latrine wall. While Oedipa takes such intimations seriously, the reader finds them ridiculous or absurd, reinforcing the separation between reader and protagonist. This allows the novel to be read as a parody, that is, a literary work which imitates another style for comic effect or ridicule. This story parodies the Oedipus myth, along with several modern genres. These include: 1950's science fiction movies about evil creatures from outer space appearing in our midst to take over, detective stories which unravel clues to find the truth of a death, medieval epics of a hero's quest, and Elizabethan plays, such as the one recounted in this chapter.

Oedipa's search for truth leads her to visit, along with Metzger, the Paranoids, and their girlfriends, Inverarity's housing development. Fangoso Lagoons is a monument to fakeness, with its fake lake and island, capped by a stylized copy of a European pleasure-casino, i.e. a place to take pleasure in gambling with fate. Here everything is topsy-turvy. The Paranoids commit a crime rather than fearing a criminal conspiracy as the definition of paranoia suggests. One lawyer covers his eyes in an effort not to see a crime being committed, whereas lawyers usually try to reveal a crime. Another lawyer flees his client, who is chasing him for money, a reversal of the usual state of affairs. Furthermore, the actor-turned-lawyer, Metzger, meets the lawyer-turned-actor, Di Presso, to find that Di Presso has become a lawyer again. This formula of lawyer-to/from-actor expresses the interplay of truth and representation. Courts are supposed to uncover the truth, while films portray lies, i.e. fiction. Since these lawyer-actors go back and forth between the two professions, it suggests that truth and fiction in the modern world are interchangeable.



Di Presso's client is involved with the Mafia, another reference to secret societies which engender paranoia. And Oedipa's perception is paranoid, as she wonders whether their gray-suited pursuers have guns or not. In this case paranoia is justified, as the client, Tony Jaguar, is filing suit against Inverarity's estate. The disputed bones provide another figuration of dead language as opposed to living truth. Bones are like words, dead fragments leftover from an earlier living moment. The story of the bones in the lake may be understood symbolically. A body of water often symbolizes the unconscious, so the traces of murder are hidden in the unconscious, that is, forgotten. The clues to this truth are retrieved by a member of a secret society. This historical truth is sold for profit. It is then used on a new product which kills people, thus leading to more murder. In other words, in the modern world even the remnants of truth which can be found in language, and which show what has been killed, are sold in the marketplace and then used for more killing.

The Paranoids escape the toxicity of cigarettes, that is, the toxicity of modern society, by smoking pot instead. Thus, the youth of the sixties cultural revolution react to the toxicity of their world by substituting illegal psychoactive drugs for legal addictive ones. They rebel against society but continue in the same patterns they condemn. The marijuana cigarettes, symbols of a failed rebellion, ironically function to form an SOS message which secures help from the authorities, for whom the young people have nothing but contempt.

The possible crime related to Inverarity's estate, the use of GI bones, is coupled to a Jacobean play about crimes also set in Italy, *The Courier's Tragedy*. The play makes fun of the conventions of Jacobean and Elizabethan revenge plays, of which *Hamlet* is perhaps the most famous example. Jacobean refers to the reign of King James of England who followed Queen Elizabeth. The revenge play typically involves a murder which a family member vows to avenge. The revenge is delayed throughout the play, and is finally accomplished in a terrible manner, killing most major characters and leaving the minor characters to deal with the situation. The revenge play usually includes some type of forbidden sexuality, and sometimes a supernatural element, such as the ghost in *Hamlet*. *The Courier's Tragedy* parodies the revenge play through its exaggerated torturous deaths, incredibly complicated intrigue, and Francesca's doubly incestuous affairs, both with son and brother.

It also includes themes previously introduced in the novel, forming a play-within-a-play, a common Shakespearean technique important to the plot of *Hamlet*. These themes include disputed postal delivery systems, and the comparison of language to bones, as in Angelo's use of ink made from bones. The figure of ink made from the bones of murdered enemies questions how language conveys information about the past. The truth of the crimes is hidden in Angelo's cryptic use of figurative language, so the words themselves do not reveal the truth. But the ink itself, the means of conveying words, tells the tale. Once again the transmission of information is more important than the information itself.

Pynchon goes on to describe a mode of using language which is neither literal nor metaphoric, something he terms 'ritual reluctance.' This is another instance where





language does not tell the truth, no matter whether it is used literally or figuratively. In this case the truth is consciously withheld due to some sort of ritual prohibition against speaking. This figure of speech invented by Pynchon alludes to a practice found among many tribal societies whereby it is deemed taboo, or inappropriate and even dangerous, to mention certain names, such as that of a deceased relative. It also illustrates the author's concern to find a middle term between two incompatible opposites, here literal and figurative.

Niccolo, the rightful heir of Faggio, reads Angelo's letter written to Gennaro with the ink made of bones, and though the letter is nothing but lies, he perceives a truth - the truth of his impending restoration as Duke. The ability of language to convey truth is further twisted, for while the words tell lies, the reader understands an unspoken truth. Then, in Gennaro's hands, the letter is miraculously transformed into a confession of Angelo's crimes, that is, it is transformed from lies to truth. The power that turned lies into truth is the name that begins with 'T,' the letter Niccolo stuttered when his murderers appeared. This word is not Truth, but Trystero, the word Gennaro uttered when he finally overcame ritual reluctance. Thus, Trystero (spelled with a 'y' in the play-within-a-play, and with an 'i' in the larger story) has something to do with converting the lies contained in words into the truth of crimes which actually occurred.

The last couplet of the play refers to a skein of stars, alluding to the stars of astrology which influence one's destiny. Since even such celestial influences cannot prevent a meeting with Trystero, Trystero represents something stronger than personality type or even worldly influence. Trystero is as unavoidable as was the will of the gods in the story of Oedipus. Driblette emphasizes that the truth was not in the text of the play written by Wharfinger, so analysis of the words, no matter how endless, will never reveal the truth. Trystero cannot be contained in language. Driblette reveals to Oedipa that the three black-garbed murderers of Niccolo, the Trystero assassins, were his own invention. The trinity - the three aspects of the deity - is a feature of the Christian religion. Triads also occur in Greek mythology, as in the Three Fates and the Three Muses. The Trystero triad also represents some superhuman force, but it is a dark murderous force.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

All Oedipa's experiences are being subsumed into her search for The Tristero. She now considers her job as co-executor to be similar to Driblette's job as director, that is, to give life to what remains. She compares this work to the process of projecting stars onto the dome of a planetarium. Continuing her investigations at a Yoyodyne stockholders' meeting, she observes identical old men present in a routine business meeting. This is followed by a Yoyodyne songfest, and a tour of the plant. Oedipa gets lost, and ends up at the desk of Stanley Koteks, who is doodling the sign of the muted post horn. He complains of the company's practice of requiring engineers to sign away patent rights to future inventions. Koteks tells her about the Nefastis Machine, invented by John Nefastis. The invention contains a Maxwell's Demon, a sorter of hot and cold molecules, which violates the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Only 'Sensitives,' people with a gift, can work the machine. Oedipa asks coquettishly if she would make a good sensitive. Koteks gives her Nefastis' address in Berkeley. Then he apparently feels he's made a mistake, and tries to tell her Nefastis lives in San Francisco. When Oedipa mentions the WASTE address, Koteks says it is an acronym, and then clams up.

Oedipa has a growing desire to bring order, and something of herself, to Inverarity's estate. She feels that a pattern having to do with mail delivery is emerging. She ponders a historical marker at Fangoso Lagoons which commemorates a massacre of Wells, Fargo men in 1853, one of whom traced a cross or 'T' in the dust. 'T' was the letter stuttered by Niccolo in *The Courier's Tragedy*. After an attempt to phone Driblette, Oedipa goes to Zapf's Used Books to buy a copy of *Jacobean Revenge Plays*. Perusing the book back at Echo Courts, she finds a penciled note by the word Trystero: cf. variant, 1687 ed. She finds that the book was taken from a hardcover entitled *Plays of Ford, Webster, Tourneur and Wharfinger*, published in Berkeley in 1957, and decides on a trip there, to include a visit to John Nefastis.

The next day she visits Vesperhaven House, a home for senior citizens. A resident, Mr. Thoth, wakes from a doze and mentions his grandfather, who rode for the Pony Express in the gold rush days and loved to kill Indians. Oedipa asks what he was dreaming about. He responds that the Indians, who wore black feathers so as not to be visible during nighttime attacks, were mixed up in his dream with a Porky Pig cartoon from the 1930's about Porky Pig and the anarchists. Mr. Thoth muses that the Indians weren't Indians, and tries to remember their Mexican name, which he thinks might be written on a ring. He pulls a gold signet ring out of his knitting bag, which he says his grandfather cut from the finger of an Indian he had killed. The ring bears the WASTE symbol.

In a conversation a few days later at The Scope, Mike Fallopian explains that there exists an underground of frustrated inventors, who were told as children a myth about American inventors and unfettered individualism, but found when they grew up that they had to work as anonymous members of a team. Metzger tells Fallopian he is so right-



wing that he's left-wing, and possibly a Marxist, since he is invoking the surplus value theory.

Oedipa questions Fallopian about the attacks on mail carriers. He believes it will be difficult to find documentary proof, and postulates that the attackers were hired by the Federal government. Oedipa asks if the attacks could have been carried out by rival carriers, and shows him the WASTE symbol.

Later, Oedipa receives a call from Genghis Cohen, a philatelist retained by Metzger to appraise Inverarity's stamp collection. When she visits him, he offers her dandelion wine made from dandelions picked in a cemetery bulldozed to make way for the East San Narciso Freeway. Oedipa recognizes this fact as a symbol, and compares it to the sign preceding an epileptic seizure. She wonders if, when all this is over, she will only remember the sign, and not the truth it represents. Cohen shows her a Pony Express stamp from 1940 with the WASTE symbol on the back, which he wishes to forward to a group of experts. Then he shows her an old German stamp with Thurn and Taxis printed on it which has a post horn, resembling the WASTE symbol, in each corner. He suggests that the extra mark on the WASTE symbol is a mute. Oedipa connects this to the black costumes, silence and secrecy, and the aim to mute the Thurn and Taxis post horn. Cohen claims that the stamp, which depicts a Pony Express rider galloping out of a western fort into a black feather, is a counterfeit.

Cohen has found eight errors in the stamp collection, all of which, except for one from 1954, date back to 1893. Oedipa comments that the forger would be seventy years old by now. Cohen says that Omedio Tassis organized the courier service in the Bergamo region around 1290. He has never heard of an 800 year tradition of postal fraud. Oedipa tells Cohen about all the places she has seen the WASTE symbol, but he retreats from the subject. He offers her another glass of dandelion wine. He explains that the wine is clear now, but becomes cloudy in the spring when the dandelions begin to bloom, as if the dandelions in the wine remembered. Oedipa muses that it is not just a memory, but as if their home cemetery somehow still exists in a land where people can walk and do not need freeways, where bones can rest in peace.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Oedipa is involved in a process of meaning creation. She compares Inverarity's will to the text of the play she saw, and herself to Driblette, the director who bestows life on residues contained in the written word. The mental action of projecting a world, which Driblette did by creating a theatrical work and which Oedipa is trying to do in her investigation of Inverarity's estate, is figured as the projection of stars onto the dome of a planetarium. This recalls the reference to the stars of astrological influence in the last couplet of *The Courier's Tragedy*. However, here the stars are created rather than read, meaning that reality is what individuals make of it, not something external which determines individual lives. It appears to Oedipa that she now finds meaningful symbols around her at an accelerating pace, so much so that at some point everything she perceives or experiences will be related to The Tristero. This may be paraphrased as:



life is invested with meaning by coming to know one's destiny, and then retrospectively relating all aspects of life to that discovery.

As part of this quest for meaning, Oedipa visits the Yoyodyne plant. Yoyodyne parodies corporate culture. Shareholders, proxies and company officers sing songs of loyalty and lament as if Yoyodyne were their beloved alma mater. Oedipa finds her way through the plant by subliminal cues, meaning cues operating at the level of the unconscious. This suggests that Oedipa is unconsciously creating the clues that she then finds, and so, like someone suffering from paranoid delusions, is contriving this entire conspiracy which she experiences as external. It seems to her an accident when she comes upon a man doodling the WASTE symbol, which reinforces her growing sense of an ubiquitous conspiracy. However, Oedipa consciously participates in the apparently chance encounter by pretending that Kirby, the author of the WASTE graffiti, sent her. In this passage the novel is continuously mixing what is external to Oedipa, or objectively true, e.g. a conspiracy, with what is within the range of her will, or subjective, e.g. her pretense. In Pynchon's hands, the notion of an externally imposed destiny, such as that which Oedipus enacted despite his best intentions to the contrary, becomes much more ambiguous. Oedipa's destiny, as Dr. Hilarius would argue, may come as much from within her as from without.

Koteks bemoans the loss of individuality in corporate America. He goes on to describe an invention which apparently epitomizes what unfettered individual talent could create. The Nefastis Machine realizes the Demon which Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell imagined in an 1867 thought experiment. Maxwell posited two containers with the same gas at equal temperatures connected by a trapdoor. A demon positioned by the trapdoor could watch for molecules approaching at higher than average speed, and selectively let those into one of the containers. In this way one of the containers would come to have a higher temperature (associated with molecules moving at higher speeds) than the other, without any work invested to achieve that result. This appears to violate the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which dictates that the entropy, meaning the randomness, of an isolated system must increase over time. This is to say that an orderly system, whether the entire universe or a single machine, must fall into disorder over time. Maxwell's Demon, on the other hand, seems to prove that the presence of intelligent perception can cancel out the Second Law and create energy, enhancing the ordering of molecules without any input of physical work.

Subsequent scientific responses to the puzzle have concluded that Maxwell's invention would not work. This is because the Demon must expend energy to measure and store information, and so the amount of entropy in the system as a whole must still increase. However, Pynchon seems to be offering the possibility that the mind, through its capacity for bestowing order on what it perceives, can in some sense increase order (lessen entropy) in the universe. It is no accident, then, that when Oedipa writes down Nefastis' address, she again notices the note written in her memo book: "Shall I project a world?" The narrative suggests that the work of the subjective mind can create order where none existed before, and thus counteract the forces of brute physical reality, which doom all to death and decay.



Although pulled into this process of meaning creation by circumstances, Oedipa now begins to consciously reflect upon and participate in it. This conscious participation in the workings of external fate is also figured in the Nefastis Machine, which requires 'Sensitives' to make it work. In other words, only those who are sensitive to the process of meaning-creation, and who consciously involve themselves in bestowing order on the world, can actually alter the course of the universe and save it from dissipating into chaos. The question of how multiple individuals, with their unique subjective worlds of meaning, can live harmoniously in society will be addressed through the author's subsequent reflections on anarchism.

Fallopius explains that the focus on team work in corporate culture has driven individualist inventors like Koteks into hiding. This suggests that those who still try to create meaning for themselves, rather than anonymously participating in group-think, do not fit into contemporary society, and so have been forced into a secret society. Nefastis' machine, the inventors' underground, and Oedipa's growing perception of a mail delivery conspiracy illustrate the ongoing themes of paranoia and conspiracy. They also point to another theme which explores the politics and possibility of information transmission, whether through texts, letters, or demons in boxes. How can information be communicated, if language does not tell the truth, courts are full of actors, texts are unreliable, postal conspirators waylay letters, and Demons and Sensitives are required to provide information about the current state of physical reality?

Oedipa sees Genghis Cohen, the philatelist, framed in a long succession of doorways. This image suggests to her the labyrinthine nature of the quest for truth. Deciphering truth among a scattering of cancelled stamps and obscure historical markers is not a straightforward process. One can get lost in it, just as one can get lost in a maze, without ever finding the way out. Ironically, the truth can be found in counterfeits, for the counterfeit Pony Express stamp contains truthful information about a conspiracy. Conversely, authorities cannot be trusted to tell the truth, for the stamp expert ends up lying. Only the dandelions captive in the dandelion wine, in their own way, tell a truth, a truth of yearning for a home destroyed to make way for industrial progress.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Oedipa decides to drive to Berkeley to find the source text for Driblette's play, and investigate how John Nefastis picks up his mail. On the way she misses the exit for Kinneret, and so doesn't visit home. She arrives at a German Baroque hotel in the Berkeley hills which is unusually quiet as it is hosting a meeting of the California Chapter of the American Deaf-Mute Assembly. Her room contains a reproduction of a Remedios Varo painting. Exhausted from her trip, she sleeps, dreaming Mucho is making love to her on a beach unlike California. She wakes sitting up, exhausted.

Forced to go from the publisher to a warehouse in Oakland to find *Plays of Ford, Webster, Tourneur and Wharfinger*, she finally opens the volume to find the line about Trystero replaced by another referring to the lusts of Angelo. A note refers to several editions of the play, the Quarto, Folio and Whitechapel, but none include the line as it appeared in the paperback. The note only suggests that Trystero may be derived from the Italian *triste*, meaning wretched or depraved. Oedipa heads to the Cal State campus to find the author of the preface, Emory Bortz. The secretary of the English department informs Oedipa that Professor Bortz is now teaching at San Narciso College.

The campus is full of political activity, very different from the more withdrawn mood on college campuses when Oedipa attended. A politically active university is a response to governmental and societal disfunction and, like some universities in the Third World, could actually bring down a government. Oedipa's education made her unfit for protests but skilled at deciphering texts. She finds John Nefastis in a pseudo-Mexican apartment building, wearing a shirt from the era of President Truman. He is watching young people on TV dancing the Watusi, and comments that he likes 'young stuff,' especially 'chicks,' which Oedipa says she understands. Nefastis then explains entropy, mentioning that the equations for the entropy of heat-engines coincidentally resemble those for communication. In his machine, the Demon may lose energy through the work of sorting molecules, but that loss is offset by the information gained about the state and location of molecules. The exchange of information between the Demon and the Sensitive moves a piston.

When Oedipa doesn't understand, Nefastis explains that entropy is a figure of speech which connects the worlds of thermodynamics and of communication. The Demon makes the metaphor real. Oedipa suggests instead that the Demon exists only because of an accidental similarity between equations. Looking at the portrait of Clerk Maxwell on the machine, Oedipa wonders if he actually believed in the reality of his Demon. Nefastis tells her to concentrate on the picture and await the Demon's message. He returns to the TV. Oedipa sits through four cartoons, awaiting the Demon's communication. At one point she thinks Maxwell's photograph smiles and the piston moves slightly, but then concludes it was only a twitch of her eyes. She thinks perhaps Nefastis is crazy and only those who share his hallucinations are Sensitive. Finally she





gives up. Nefastis says it's alright, and that they can do it on the couch while the news about China is on, which he enjoys. Oedipa flees, and finds herself on a freeway at rush hour, heading for the Bay Bridge, now able to ponder her Trystero problem.

Nefastis made a machine based on a coincidental similarity between two sets of equations. Oedipa has many more than two parts to relate metaphorically, and only the word Trystero unites them. She now knows something about Trystero. It opposed the Thurn and Taxis postal system, fought against the Pony Express and Wells, Fargo, and survives today in California. She wonders if the whole thing could be a fabrication of her imagination, but in downtown San Francisco sees the muted post horn symbol on a lapel pin. She has a conversation in a bar with its wearer, and tells him everything she has learned about Trystero. He explains that the symbol indicates he is a member of Inamorati Anonymous, IA, a support group to help people not fall in love. He recounts the story of the group's founding.

A laid-off Yoyodyne executive couldn't decide whether or not to commit suicide, and so placed an ad in the *L.A. Times* asking if anyone in similar circumstances had found good reasons for not doing so. The letters he received, delivered by a bum with a hook for a hand, offered no good reasons. After seeing an article on a Buddhist monk in Viet Nam who committed suicide by self-immolation, he resolved to set fire to himself in his kitchen. However, his wife and the efficiency expert from Yoyodyne, who had caused him to be fired, came into the house and began sexual intercourse in the living room. He sniggered, they found him, and the efficiency expert ridiculed the ex-executive for taking much longer than a computer would to decide whether or not to kill himself.

The executive laughed while his wife and her lover sought the police. He showered off the gasoline and noticed that the stamps on some of the letters in his pocket had turned white. Underneath one he found the sign of the muted post horn, and swore that hereafter he would avoid love of all kinds, and found a society of isolates dedicated to that purpose. Its symbol would be the muted post horn. The teller of this tale advises Oedipa to write to IA's founder through the WASTE system, and then disappears. Oedipa sits feeling very alone in this bar full of drunken homosexuals. After determining that there are no possible sexual partners present, she leaves.

She finds the image of the Trystero post horn in an herbalist's window in Chinatown, and written in chalk on a sidewalk. She thinks she sees a man spying on her. She spends the rest of the night on buses, where she feels safe. She realizes she was meant to remember, that each clue is supposed to have its own clarity. However, she wonders if the clues are only a substitute for real knowledge of the Word that would eliminate darkness. In Golden Gate Park she comes upon a circle of children dreaming a gathering, who tell her that a dream is no different from being awake, since they will still feel tired in the morning. One girl tells her of a game played by jumping in and out of a scribbled Trystero symbol, singing a rhyme with the word *Tristoe* in it.

In an all-night Mexican diner she runs into Jesus Arrabal, whom she and Inverarity met on a beach in Mazatlan. Jesus, member of a clandestine Mexican society of anarchists and now in exile, shares ownership of the diner with a Mexican from the Yucatan who



still believes in a people's revolution. In Mexico, Jesus explained to Oedipa that anarchists, like the church they hate, believe in another world, an anarchist paradise where revolutions break out spontaneously and consensus is achieved automatically. The intrusion of another world into this one constitutes a miracle. Pierce must be such an intrusion since he so perfectly embodies the stereotype of the privileged capitalist. This was a face of Inverarity that Oedipa had not previously seen.

Over coffee with Jesus, she wonders if without the miracle of Inverarity, Jesus might have quit the anarchist party and joined the majority Mexican party, the PRI, and so avoided exile. The deceased, Inverarity, is coincidentally the reason both she and Jesus are here. Oedipa wonders if anything happens by chance, and notices the image of the muted post horn on a 1904 Mexican anarcho-syndicalist newspaper. Jesus wonders how this old newspaper finally came to him, but decides he must trust the higher-ups.

Oedipa sees the post horn on the gang jackets of delinquents at the city beach, and scratched on the back of a bus seat next to the word DEATH. It is tacked to the bulletin board of a laundromat, and traced on a bus window by a Mexican girl humming along to songs on the radio. The symbol decorates the inside of a book in which poker scores are being recorded at the airport, and accompanies an ad in a latrine for the Alameda County Death Cult. She sees a boy leaving on a plane for Miami to communicate with dolphins, whose mother tells him in her goodbye to write to her by WASTE. Voyeuristically watching and listening, Oedipa encounters a number of other alienated characters who all display the muted post horn in some form.

In the morning she happens upon an old man on the stairs of a rooming house crying. He asks her to mail a worn letter, and holds up a post horn tattoo on his hand, saying it's under the freeway. As Oedipa helps the old man up the stairs into a tiny ill-lit room, she fantasizes about taking the landlord to court, buying the old man clothes, and giving him the bus fare to Fresno to look for his wife. Instead she looks at his letter and sees an airmail stamp with a jet flying by the Capital dome. At the top of the dome is a suspicious black figure, arms outstretched. She gives the old man ten dollars, and ponders his imminent death, the subjective universe that will be lost without a trace when he dies. She knows he suffers DT's. The apparently delusional worlds of alcoholics, miracle workers, clairvoyants, paranoids, and dreamers function as metaphors, which aim at telling the truth but also protect us from it. Oedipa compares the physiological syndrome of DT's to the 'dt' of differential calculus, which stands for an infinitely small change in the passage of time.

Oedipa prowls around under freeways, and finally finds a can with W.A.S.T.E. printed on it. She observes a young wino collect the bag of letters, and follows him to downtown San Francisco, where he exchanges bags with another carrier. Then he takes a bus to Oakland, and ends up at John Nefastis' apartment building in Berkeley, where Oedipa started twenty-four hours ago. Back at her hotel, Oedipa is swept into the ballroom by a crowd of the deaf-mute delegates. A young man waltzes her around the ballroom as she wonders how long these dancers, all dancing to their own inner rhythm, can avoid collisions. But there are no collisions, something Jesus Arrabal would have deemed an anarchist miracle.





The next day Oedipa heads for Kinneret to see Dr. Hilarius, hoping he will tell her that the WASTE conspiracy is really her own psychosis. But arriving at the clinic she hears gunshots, and is told by Dr. Hilarius' assistant that he has gone crazy, shot at a half dozen people, and locked himself in his office. Apparently Hilarius thinks someone is after him. Oedipa volunteers to talk to him. Hilarius laments that he tried to accept all Freud's writings literally, along with Freud's belief that the unconscious could be tamed by therapy and safely brought into society. Oedipa hears the sirens of approaching police cars. Hilarius claims that he can make a particular face which will drive anyone who sees it insane.

Hilarius pulls Oedipa into the office as a hostage. He says that because LSD blurs the distinction between self and other, he chose not to take it, so that his paranoia would remain relative, distinguishing the pursued from pursuers. He asks what message she is to deliver him, and she tells him to accept his social responsibilities and the reality principle. Hilarius then reveals that he worked at Buchenwald researching the experimental induction of insanity. Police arrive outside the door of Hilarius' office, but act as intermediaries for the news media. Hilarius fears the cops are actually Israelis taking him to Israel to stand trial like Eichmann. He says the Allies arrived before the experiment could be concluded, resulting in only a few spectacular successes, such as a young Central European Jew named Zvi who became hopelessly insane.

Hilarius protests that if he had been a real Nazi he would have become a Jungian. Instead, he chose to follow Freud, a Jew. Freud's vision of the world did not allow for the possibility of concentration camps, for he believed that once the instincts of the unconscious were explored, even nightmarish aspects of the world would become socially acceptable and useful. Hilarius tried to believe this, but the angels of death have come for him anyway. Oedipa picks up Hilarius' rifle and points it at him, knowing he wanted her to. Oedipa explains that she wanted him to talk her out of a fantasy, but he exclaims that she must cherish the fantasy, for without it she will go over to the others, and begin to cease being. Oedipa calls the police to break in.

As Hilarius' assistant bemoans the ambulances on the lawn, Oedipa spots Mucho in a KCUF mobile unit. She gets in with him, and he interviews her briefly about what happened in the office, calling her Mrs. Edna Mosh. By way of explanation he says that he was allowing for the sound distortion on these mobile units. Police ask Oedipa to stay in town for possible questioning. Oedipa and Mucho return to the radio station, where Caesar Funch, the program director, tells Oedipa that Mucho hasn't been himself lately. Funch says Mucho is losing his identity and becoming more generic, like an assembly of many people. Mucho and Oedipa go to a pizzeria, where he asks her about Metzger.

Then Mucho notices that one violin, out of seventeen heard on the Muzak playing in the restaurant, has an E string tuned too sharp. Mucho muses that they could electronically combine overtones to create the same sound as a violin. Mucho tells Oedipa that he can do the same thing in his own mind, that is, break down sounds into frequencies, harmonics, timbres and volume, using separate channels in his brain. Mucho posits that everyone who says the same words is, in essence, the same person located at a



different moment in time. If all the timelines of individual lives were aligned, there would be a chorus of hundreds of millions saying the same thing, and it would be the same voice.

Oedipa begins to panic, realizing she no longer knows Mucho. He puts a bottle of LSD pills on the table, which Oedipa realizes were given to him by Hilarius. Mucho maintains it's not addictive, and in fact gives one access to the lives of millions of others. Oedipa assumes he has a young girlfriend, but Mucho denies it. He says the nightmare he used to have is gone, the one where he is in the used car lot and sees the creaking metal sign that says N.A.D.A., for National Automobile Dealer's Association. He offers her the pills. She refuses and says she's returning that night to San Narciso, that she'll be a fugitive from the police. Mucho leaves her at the station whistling a complicated twelve-tone tune, and Oedipa rests her head on the steering wheel, realizing she forgot to ask him about the Tristero stamp cancellation on his letter.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Oedipa's search for information about the play's reference to Tryster, and about John Nefastis, form two strands of the evolving mystery, which are united by their connection to postal conspiracy. The conflicting versions of Wharfinger's play emphasize again the notion that truth cannot be found in writing, in a text. The author of the editor's preface, Professor Bortz, is now teaching at San Narciso College, thus leading that strand of the mystery, which concerns the historical origin of Tristero, back to San Narciso. Bortz' connection to San Narciso, the quasi-mythical capital of Inverarity's empire, bolsters the interpretation of events as a hoax created by Inverarity rather than an objectively real and widespread postal conspiracy. However, Oedipa's meanderings around San Francisco, which begin and end with John Nefastis, seem to prove that the conspiracy is real, neither a paranoid delusion on her part, nor an elaborate scheme created by Inverarity.

Like Oedipa's husband, Nefastis has a weakness for young women, but only watches them on TV. This constitutes another type of voyeurism, which also hints at the impotence which afflicts nearly all male characters in the novel. Nefastis states that communication is the key to connecting the physical world and the world of meaning. The importance which Pynchon places on communication explains why a postal conspiracy, a plot to impede communication, is such a central symbol of this novel, for if communication breaks down then the physical world becomes devoid of meaning. In fact, the meaninglessness of the modern landscape of suburban sprawl is a central problem of the narrative. Nefastis specifies that there must be a sensitive person to receive and return communication in order for his machine to function. Thus, in the machine, the physical world of hot and cold molecules can only be connected to the world of information and knowledge through a sensitive mind. Certain people - whether artists, inventors or other impassioned individuals -- therefore have a special role in society.



Nefastis says that entropy is a metaphor which connects thermodynamics to information flow. This discussion parallels the author's ongoing interrogation of language. He has described three functions for language: literal, or the direct naming of physical objects; metaphoric, a way of using language to connect and compare two otherwise unrelated things; and ritual reluctance, an invented term describing a situation where truth is known but is not mentioned. Overall, Pynchon distrusts written language, since it is merely a residue of a living act of communication which has vanished. Language itself is metaphoric, linking a word to the thing it names, although the word and the thing can never be the same. The map is not the territory. In the novel, entropy is viewed as a mathematical concept which, like language, connects physical reality to human knowledge. Nefastis' genius is to create a machine which can make a direct, not metaphorical, connection between what is and what we call it. This connection takes the form of a demon. Nefastis believes in the demon, meaning that he believes direct perception and manipulation of reality is possible. But Oedipa suggests the demon itself is a metaphor. In this way she voices the opinion that nothing can escape the dictum that all knowledge is metaphorical. This is to say that there is no absolute truth, only myriad perceptions of a reality we can never know.

The machine fails to accurately detect and alter reality because the demon's actions and existence can only be perceived indirectly through the movement of a piston. Oedipa thinks the piston might have moved, but then doubts her own perception. This points to the problem with Nefastis' machine: since it relies on human perception to tell if it is working, it cannot escape the relativity of perception. This question of whether perceptions can be trusted, or how they should be interpreted, is a central theme of the novel. Oedipa's entire quest revolves on the question of whether the postal conspiracy, whose traces she seems to find everywhere, is fact or delusion. The failure of the Nefastis Machine reinforces the novel's contentions that language and knowledge are metaphorical, that technology does not reveal truth, that there is no gold standard against which to measure one's perceptions to determine their factuality, and thus that paranoia is a justifiable response to modern life.

Now begins Oedipa's twenty-four hour odyssey, during which she is swept along by various crowds, the first being the Bay area rush hour. The next crowd she encounters is a bunch of tourists on a guided tour, herded in to experience a gay bar. Here she is told that the muted post horn symbol stands for Inamorati Anonymous, a group of isolated individuals united by a desire to stop loving. The story of this group's founding reveals that their association to the muted post horn symbol is purely accidental. Yet the group forms another underground conspiracy of people who reject a major component of life in modern society, the way of connecting people known as love. Analogously, the Tristero mail delivery conspiracy seeks to provide an alternative means to connect people through the mail. So although their shared use of the post horn symbol is accidental, IA and Tristero form parallel conspiracies seeking secret alternate ways of connecting people.

Oedipa moves around San Francisco spying the post horn in all kinds of places. When she remarks that she was meant to remember these sightings, she is suggesting that there is some force or intelligence behind the world of phenomena, something driving



not only her fate but her experience. This means that through her experience, and through the Tristero clues she finds, she is able to have some sort of connection with the underlying truth of being. However, she immediately considers an alternate possibility, that the clues do not point directly to reality, but merely compensate her for having no contact with reality. The novel thus ponders whether there is a reality, or truth, which humans can perceive through symbol systems such as language, or whether human beings can never know for sure what is true.

The children Oedipa encounters in Golden Gate Park dream both day and night. They roam the world during their dreams, and dream when they are supposed to be roaming the world. When these children warm their hands at an imagined fire, it shows that for those who live entirely in the world of the imagination, there is no need to determine what is real and what is delusion. Oedipa, however, is trying to determine what is real or true, so she, like other adults in the modern world, must confront the terrifying possibilities that either she is mad, or the world is devoid of meaning.

Oedipa's meeting with Jesus Arrabal is a double coincidence, since they have both ended up where they are as a result of meeting Pierce Inverarity. Inverarity has a function resembling that of Maxwell's Demon and of metaphor, for he is the feature which links unrelated things. This points to the fact that the character of Inverarity is a metaphor whose meaning is revealed across the course of the narrative. He is a metaphor for what has gone wrong in modern society, the unprincipled greed and uncontained growth of modern industrial progress.

Both Jesus Arrabal and Maxwell's Demon bring up the theme of anarchism, and question whether anarchism could work. Arrabal maintains his faith in anarchy despite evidence, found in the outdated anarchist newspaper, that corrupt authorities in the anarchist movement manipulate anarchist activists like himself. Nefastis' Machine also considers the question of whether and how an anarchic system could maintain order. The machine posits an intrinsic force which can impose order on a complex disordered system. This is equivalent, in the political world, to an embedded power which would allow a society to govern itself without relying on authorities or institutions to maintain order by administering force from outside. The machine doesn't work, just as Arrabal's formulation of what constitutes an anarchist miracle, i.e. an intrusion from another world, suggests that successful anarchy is impossible. Harmoniously functioning anarchy would require an otherworldly perfection which does not exist in the real world.

The post horn marks individuals who are somehow alienated from society. The marks are everywhere, indicating that alienation in modern society is also ubiquitous. It is said that no individual can truly withdraw from their culture, for the human psyche must have a social context. So any rebellion against society still remains within the terms of that culture, the rebel merely choosing one term, say opposition to war, over another term, support for that war. But the Tristero conspirators are trying to solve this problem by creating a parallel social system into which alienated individuals could actually withdraw. This would give them a third and real alternative, rather than just the apparent but illusory choice between two opposites which are in fact part of the same corrupt system, as Republicans and Democrats form part of the same political system.



In the case of the old alcoholic sailor, Pynchon compares the hallucinations of saints, clairvoyants, paranoids, and alcoholics to metaphor. This is another way of saying that underlying truth, whether we believe it to be contained in a sacred word, or to be indescribable, cannot be directly grasped. Since the underlying truth of reality can only be approximated by metaphors, hallucinations may be seen as metaphors of reality, and thus just as 'truthful' as any other metaphoric description of the unknowable real. Pynchon then compares the alcoholic's DT's to the dt, or time differential, of differential calculus. The dt of calculus is a slice of time so small that it approaches the infinitely small. This slice of time is used to calculate velocity, which is movement across time. So, paradoxically, the freezing of time in a quantity too small to be observable is a method for measuring movement through time. For the author, alcoholic delusions also contain a paradox, for the obviously unreal can still function as a means to view an otherwise hidden reality.

Why are WASTE mail boxes located under freeways? Pynchon repeatedly criticizes freeways for disturbing the dead in cemeteries, creating ugly suburban sprawl, and preventing people from simply walking. He compared freeways to the arterial system through which an addictive out-of-control social system shoots up on its drug. Thus, to use the space under freeways for an alternative system of communication is to find a place for rebellion in the very midst of oppression, just under the surface of modern high-tech life.

The image of deaf-mutes dancing in a ballroom creates another illustration of paradox, which, however, in this case suggests the possibility that anarchism could work. Anarchism posits order without an ordering authority, order which appears spontaneously out of the actions of many individuals. All the deaf dancers are dancing to the beat of their own drummer, following no external rhythm, yet miraculously never collide. This is the miracle anarchist Jesus Arrabal dreams of, yet does not really believe possible. Still, Oedipa cannot find a name for this phenomenon, and so is demoralized by it. Her quest is for meaning and understanding, so merely being able to experience harmony on one occasion does not satisfy her.

Oedipa's trip to Kinneret to see Dr. Hilarius involves another hilarious reversal. She wants him to declare her a paranoid, so that she can dismiss as a delusion the disturbing evidence she has collected of a real conspiracy. Yet the doctor himself is now overcome by paranoid delusions, showing that the very authorities meant to contain dissent are themselves sick or deluded. A slight possibility is offered that Dr. Hilarius' perceptions are not totally delusional, for he claims to be pursued by three terrorists. These are replicas of the three masked men who killed Niccolo in *The Courier's Tragedy*, representatives of a postal conspiracy which may very well be real. Thus, if Oedipa's conspiracy turns out to be the real thing, then perhaps Hilarius is not insane either.

Hilarius presents the view that the unconscious is inherently wild, that it can never safely be brought into society. He now rejects the teachings of Sigmund Freud, who saw psychoanalysis as a means of sublimating socially unacceptable drives from the unconscious into socially acceptable action. Hilarius' new opinion suggests that that the





underground Oedipa perceives is an inevitable counterpart to any social order, and so can't be eliminated through therapy or law. It can only be suppressed by force. Hilarius argues that his allegiance to Freudianism shows he was not a real Nazi, for Freud optimistically believed the savage in humans could be productively channeled, while the Nazi regime showed that savage behavior would occur despite, or even by means of, social institutions. Now rejecting Freudianism, he tells Oedipa to cherish her fantasies as the only place her personal liberty remains. Oedipa allows for the possibility that Hilarius' perceptions are real, not fantasies. Her own dilemma now leads her to accept that conventional truths may not be as true as individual perceptions, even though the latter may be contradicted by other individual viewpoints. This would be anarchy, where each person holds their own idiosyncratic view, yet it does not result in social chaos.

Hilarius 'makes faces,' meaning he tries on different personae, or personalities, in his effort to put a good face on the subjective reality of socially unacceptable desires. Oedipa's husband also now displays many personalities. His use of LSD, apparently obtained from Dr. Hilarius, has led him to believe that individual identity is an illusion. Language moves through individual voices. People are only particular coordinates on a time line, and if those coordinates are brought together, then they merge. Thus, Hilarius and Mucho offer distinct ways of resolving the problem of having no singular truth to which multiple individuals adhere. Hilarius now celebrates the idiosyncrasy of individual subjective perceptions as the only remaining pathway to freedom. Mucho sees freedom through relinquishing individuality, embracing multiple personalities, and giving up any notion of a unique self.

This idea has solved Mucho's original existential dilemma illustrated by his hypersensitivity to used car sales. He was overwhelmed by the hopelessness and meaninglessness of doomed individual existences. This was symbolized by the N.A.D.A. sign at the car lot, which means 'nothing' in Spanish. 'Nada,' or nothingness, refers to the philosophy of existentialism, propounded by French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, one of whose books was entitled (in English translation) *Being and Nothingness*. Another of Sartre's works, *Nausea*, considers the immobilizing sickness the individual feels upon confronting the essential emptiness of being. Thus, Mucho has transcended the central problem of existentialism by an LSD-assisted elimination of the entire notion of individual identity.

Oedipa makes her own choice. Rather than choosing hallucinatory escape from the dilemma of the individual in modern mass society, as does Mucho, or reveling in paranoid perceptions, as does Hilarius, Oedipa chooses to become a 'fugitive.' Thus, at this point in the narrative Oedipa flees the alternatives of psychotropic drugs, surrender to delusion, and empty conformity to convention or law. She will seek another answer.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Oedipa returns to Echo Courts to find the four Paranoids in shock. Serge sings a song recounting how men like Humbert Humbert seduce younger women, and recounts that Metzger ran off with his girlfriend. Serge has found a new girlfriend, an eight-year-old swinger. Metzger left Oedipa a note saying he transferred his executorship to a different law firm. Oedipa calls Driblette, and is answered cryptically by his mother, who says a statement will be issued tomorrow. Her call to Professor Bortz is more successful, and Bortz' wife, Grace, invites Oedipa over.

On the way Oedipa sees that Zapf's Used Books has burned down. She questions the owner of the government surplus store next door, Winthrop Tremaine, or Winner, who says Zapf set fire to the store for the insurance. Winner says that there is a large demand for rifles and swastika armbands, the latter of which he manufactures in a little factory outside San Diego. He is arranging with a clothing company to introduce, in the fall, a line of school clothing in the style of SS uniforms.

At Professor Bortz' house, Oedipa asks Bortz to tell her about the historical Wharfinger. Bortz sneers, saying he can only talk about words. Oedipa recites the couplet from *The Courier's Tragedy* which mentions Trystero. Bortz says the quote came from a pornographic version of the play held at the Vatican. Driblette's production, he adds, was faithful to the spirit of the play, and to the historical Wharfinger.

A young female graduate student reveals to Oedipa that Driblette, dressed in his Gennaro costume, drowned himself in the Pacific Ocean two days ago. Oedipa reflects that she is losing all her men: Hilarius, Mucho, Metzger, and now Driblette. Bortz explains that the night he saw the play it ended without the couplet about Trystero, which only appears in the obscene parody held at the Vatican. Oedipa speculates that something must have happened in Driblette's personal life, on the day of the performance she saw, which led him to include the doubtful couplet. Bortz leads her into a study to view woodcut illustrations from the Vatican edition. Death hovers in the background of the obscene images, expressing a moral rage which Bortz attributes to a religious splinter group known as the Scurvhamites.

Founded by Robert Scurvham during the reign of Charles I, the Scurvhamites believed in absolute predestination, but in a dual world. In the Scurvhamite realm, predestination manifested the will of God. In the rest of the world, it supposedly embodied a brute automatism that led to eternal death. Ironically, Scurvhamites were so fascinated with the evil half of that dualistic world that they all ended up leaving the sect. Bortz explains that the Scurvhamites, like the Puritans, were devoted to literalism, so they believed that changing the words of the play into an obscene version would damn it. He posits that Trystero refers to that brute force which Scurvhamites believed motivated the non-Scurvhamite realm.



Bortz hands Oedipa an ancient book about the Italian travels of Dr. Diocletian Blobb, whom Wharfinger quoted in his notes. Bortz goes out, leaving Oedipa to peruse Chapters Seven and Eight, where she reads Blobb's account of an attack by Trystero brigands near the Lake of Piety, which left all dead except Blobb and his servant. A few days later Bortz suggests that Trystero left Blobb alive to spread the word about Trystero in England, which was about to undergo civil war and the execution of the king. According to this hypothesis, the leader of the brigands told Blobb to warn his king and parliament about Trystero's unstoppable couriers.

Gathering clues from diverse obscure sources over the next few days, Oedipa pieces together an account of how the Trystero organization began. In 1577, a committee of Calvinist fanatics, the Committee of Eighteen, led by William of Orange, took over governance of the northern provinces of the Low Countries. The Committee replaced Leonard I, Baron of Taxis and Grand Master of the Post for the Low Countries, with Jan Hinckart, Lord of Ohain, and a loyal follower of Orange. Hernando Joaquin de Tristero y Calavera claimed to be Jan Hinckart's cousin, the true lord of Ohain, and thus the rightful new Grand Master of the Post.

From 1578 until Brussels was retaken by the Holy Roman Emperor's forces led by Alexander Farnese in 1585, Tristero kept up a guerrilla war against Hinckart. When Farnese reinstated Leonard I, Tristero y Calavera set up his own postal system. He called himself El Desheredado, The Disinherited, and created black livery for his followers to symbolize night. He added the symbol of the muted post horn, and a dead badger with four feet in the air. His followers pursued a campaign of terror and obstruction along the Thurn and Taxis mail routes.

After library research and a reading of Blobb's *Peregrinations*, Oedipa, accompanied by Bortz, Grace and the graduate students, attends Driblette's burial. She tries to reach out to some remaining trace of life in the grave that might tell her if Driblette's suicide had anything to do with Tristero. As with Maxwell's Demon in the Nefastis Machine, there is no response. Further library research produces no additional information about Tristero. Bortz posits that any time Thurn and Taxis went through a period of instability, Tristero would react. Thus, when an uncertain succession of postmasters led to decay in the official postal system in Brussels and Antwerp, the various factions of Tristero might have advocated diverse responses. The militant faction would have agitated for a takeover, while the conservatives would have wished to continue in their role as the opposition. Bortz imagines one visionary militant, whom he calls Konrad, addressing a group of Tristero members in a tavern to propose a merger with Thurn and Taxis.

The historical opportunity passed, however, leading to a period of a century and a half during which Thurn and Taxis remained unaware of their enemy, experiencing only generalized paranoia about the continuing murders of postal riders. This period ended with the French Revolution, which Bortz suggests that Tristero might have caused simply in order to issue the Proclamation of the 9th Frimaire, An III, ending the Thurn and Taxis postal monopoly.





Oedipa now stops researching Tristero, and avoids all mention of Driblette. She returns to The Scope to find Mike Fallopian, surrounded by women and dressed in army fatigues as if he were a guerrilla leader. Oedipa tells him all she's learned. He refuses to say if his group uses the WASTE system, and then suggests that perhaps it is all a massive hoax which Inverarity set up before he died. He recommends that she distinguish what she knows with certainty from what is speculation. Oedipa responds angrily to the suggestion that she should check her sources, and in turn tells Fallopian to contact Winthrop Tremaine for weapons or swastika armbands. He responds that he already has.

Genghis Cohen invites her over to view an old American stamp bearing the muted post horn, belly-up badger, and a motto referring to Tristero's empire. Cohen finds the stamp listed on an addendum to a catalogue he purchased at Zapf's Used Books. Faced with Oedipa's skepticism, Cohen protests that he drove out to San Narciso to see Metzger while Oedipa was away. Oedipa subsequently discovers that the entire shopping center which housed Zapf's Used Books, along with the Tank Theatre where *The Courier's* Tragedy played, was owned by Inverarity. She realizes that every source of information on the Tristero can somehow be traced to Inverarity.

Pondering what this means, she comes up with four alternatives. First, she may have stumbled onto a network by which many Americans are secretly communicating, and which might offer some alternative to the monotony of modern life. Secondly, she may be hallucinating. Thirdly, it could all be a complex practical joke which Inverarity mounted against her. Fourthly, she may be fantasizing a conspiracy between Inverarity and all her sources. Oedipa hopes that she is in fact going mad, and sits for hours in a void, aware that no one anywhere can help her. Suffering nightmares and various symptoms, she goes to a doctor, and, under the name of Grace Bortz, requests a pregnancy test. She never returns for the results.

Genghis Cohen gives her a supposed translation from an article in an 1865 issue of *Bibliothèque des Timbrophiles*, which recounts a great schism in Tristero during the French Revolution. Some aristocratic members of Tristero advocated subsidizing Thurm and Taxis during its difficult times, but at a convention in Milan this motion was violently rejected. The conservative aristocrats withdrew, leaving Tristero without noble patronage, and so reduced to handling anarchist communication and peripheral intervention in political conflicts. The majority of Tristero members fled to America during 1849-50, only to encounter a government which was in the midst of postal reform, eliminating independent mail routes. The Tristero members remained underground, moved westward, and trained their employees in Native American languages. They subtly altered official stamps - many examples of which Oedipa has seen. Bortz suggests she check out the legitimacy of the article.

Cohen informs Oedipa that Inverarity's stamp collection will be put on auction, with the forgeries sold as lot 49. He adds that a mysterious new bidder requested to view the stamps in lot 49, but since his agent refused to give the bidder's name, the request was denied. Cohen suggest that the mystery bidder is from Tristero, and wishes to keep evidence of Tristero out of official hands. Oedipa drives around the freeway at night



without her lights on, and then ends up in a phone booth calling The Greek Way bar in San Francisco. She asks to speak with the man she met there, who is a member of Inamorato Anonymous. When he comes to the phone, she summarizes all she's learned about Tristero, and begs him to tell her whether their apparently accidental meeting was actually arranged. He replies that it's too late and hangs up, leaving Oedipa in complete isolation.

It now seems that San Narciso has merged into America, that, in fact, America is what Inverarity left behind. His need to possess and develop the land, for economic growth, exceeded her love. She wonders if he wrote his will simply with the intention to harass a former mistress, or if he discovered The Tristero and encrypted it in the will. The possibility remains that the conspiracy she has detected is true, and currently operating throughout America. Her thoughts are drawn to the disinherited, the poor squatters who may have worked with Tristero, but by now have forgotten what they were to have inherited. She imagines multiple conversations, communicated over phone lines, whose repetitions must someday trigger the unnamable act, the Word. How has it happened that in America, where chances for diversity were once so good, the middle has been excluded? Now truth is digitally coded in 1's and 0's, either/or alternatives such as the question she faces: whether the country is pervaded by a vast conspiracy, or she is an insane paranoid.

She goes to the stamp auction to somehow confront the mysterious bidder for lot 49. There she encounters an embarrassed Genghis Cohen, who says he has come to bid on some stamps from Mozambique, and explains that an auctioneer 'cries' the sale. Oedipa wonders if she will go through with a confrontation, perhaps calling the police. She takes her seat in the auction room to await the crying of lot 49.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

By seducing a much younger woman, Metzger has acted like Humbert Humbert, the protagonist of the novel *Lolita*, by Vladimir Nabokov. This novel, which concerns the sexual obsession of a forty-ish professor for a twelve-year-old girl, was banned in France after its publication in 1955. A favorable review by author Graham Greene brought it into the spotlight and generated controversy. Movie versions were made by Stanley Kubrick in 1962, and Adrian Lyne in 1997. In the novel Humbert Humbert is presented as a preposterous and absurd figure. Thus, Metzger's comparison to him emphasizes the ridiculousness of this character.

Chapter 6 brings Oedipa, and the narrative, to the crisis point. Metzger flees, and Driblette is dead. Zapf sets fire to his bookstore and disappears. What remains is Tremaine and his booming business in rifles and swastika armbands. Thus, the possibilities of love (Metzger), of redemption through art (Driblette), and of knowledge through books (Zapf's Bookstore) are gone. At the same time, symbols of violence and oppression (Tremaine's store) proliferate. Professor Bortz, representative of the world of learning, lies in a drunken haze, stating that no historical truth can be known. Mike Fallopian is now imitating Fidel Castro, and buying items from Tremaine, thus



undermining the ideal of popular revolt. Cohen, the philatelist, becomes suspect since he proffers a catalogue addendum purchased at Zapf's bookstore. Finally Oedipa begs her only remaining independent source, the fellow at The Greek Way bar in San Francisco, to confess if his meeting with her was arranged, but he won't tell.

The crisis Oedipa faces may be described as: how does one determine what sanity is, and therefore what is real, in an insane world? She has no way to determine if events can be traced to a hoax created by Inverarity, a widespread conspiracy started by the Tristero group, or her own delusions. Central thematic strands of the narrative now culminate. These include: the meaninglessness of modern life, the function of language and its ability or inability to convey truth, and the lack of viable political alternatives. The breakdown of communication on the societal level, symbolized by a postal conspiracy, has been explored throughout the novel. Now communication breaks down on a personal level, as Oedipa finds herself completely isolated, unable to ascertain whether Tristero is real, her hallucination, or a hoax.

Only the word Tristero has held out the promise of containing some sort of truth. But, according to Bortz, the couplet from *The Courier's Tragedy* which mentioned Tristero only appeared in one performance of the play by Driblette, and actually derives from a parody of the play, a pornographic version held at the Vatican. Thus, even this remaining reference to Truth is rendered ridiculous by the paradox of an obscene text owned by the institution in western society arguably most responsible for sexual repression, the Roman Catholic Church. The couplet can not be traced to the historical Wharfinger, the 'true' or original source of the play, but rather reflects a multitudinous history of religious schism and political conflict.

In fact, all of Bortz' Wharfingeriana and Oedipa's research in obscure texts are parodies of the research carried on in modern universities. The Scruvhamites, supposed creators of the obscene version of *The Courier's Tragedy*, parody religious splinter groups of the Protestant Reformation. Like the Puritans, they take language literally as a direct conveyor of truth, a view which the novel ridicules. The peregrinations of Diocletian Blobb parodies early modern travel books, which often described people encountered in distant lands as monstrous or fantastical. Thus, even the methods used in modern universities to ascertain truth are ineffective and ridiculous.

The founder of Tristero, Hernando Joaquin de Tristero y Calavera, called himself The Disinherited. This theme of disinheritance is taken up again in the contemporary setting. The author states that Tristero has lost its purpose, and no one remembers what inheritance they were fighting for. Oedipa contemplates the twentieth century's socially disinherited - the homeless, impoverished, and marginalized - and considers distributing Inverarity's estate among them. The meaning of disinheritance has changed from loss of noble status, to deprivation of social goods. The secret society of Tristero was originally conceived as a response to disinheritance. A modern response to social disinheritance is found in popular revolts utilizing guerrilla warfare.

Tristero's responses to the decay of the Thurn and Taxis monopoly in seventeenth century Europe parallels the options available to modern resistance movements. Militant



factions may attempt governmental takeovers, while more conservative elements opt for a stable ongoing role as the opposition. A visionary element like Konrad, the character Bortz imagines, might propose a merger with established power structures as a means of gaining decisive power. When the oppositional force carries out guerrilla warfare, maintaining no public face, then the established powers begin to see it as a sort of malevolent fate. In the secular age of modernity, this fear comes to focus on selected public enemies.

But even resistance movements in the modern era are corrupted. Mike Fallopiian now effects the look of a guerrilla leader, imitating the appearance of Fidel Castro of Cuba. He refuses to state whether his group is using the WASTE system. However, he admits that they buy goods from Winthrop Tremaine. Thus, a leftist guerrilla group has assumed the tactics of fanatical fascists like the Nazis. This exemplifies what Metzger asserted in their first conversation at The Scope, that the extreme political left and right meet. In this confusing environment where opposites become one, everything becomes doubtful. This is shown by Fallopiian's suggestion that all of Oedipa's sources can be traced back to Inverarity, and so are untrustworthy.

The fact that the truth of Trystero is not contained in the original play suggests that truth is ultimately unknowable, accessible only through corrupted fragments. Just as Maxwell's Demon failed to provide an accurate account of the state of the molecules in the box, no text provides an accurate account of past reality. This view of truth parallels the author's view of language as something which may contain clues to what really happened, but does not directly represent it. This is a relativistic theory of knowledge very much in keeping with the early postmodernism emerging at the time of the novel's writing.

Oedipus of ancient Greece confronted a fate which wielded divine power, and before which his will was helpless. Oedipa lives in a secular world where fate is the power driving industrial and technological development. This socio-economic force also alters communication among individuals in society, as well as the internal environment of the human mind. The Tristero postal conspiracy points to the corruption of official communication in society, and the effort to establish an alternative culture which tells the truth, and thus creates saner social relations. The loss of truth in official communication, from government reports to media representations, isolates the individual psyche, leaving it without a concrete means of establishing what is true and what is delusion. This isolated individual, removed from nature, exploited by industrial capitalism, and deprived of any connection with the sacred or with truth, seeks a path out of solipsism through love, art or knowledge. But with each of these domains corrupted, the symbols and artifacts of violence take over. Such is the dilemma faced by a modern Oedipus.

Oedipa is the only one left who can testify that the word Trystero was spoken. In other words, only the voice of the lone individual remains to testify as to what constitutes truth. Compared to a fluttering curtain in a high window, Oedipa now feels thin, unstable, and poised over an immense void. This is the situation of one who finds no corroboration in objective reality for their perceptions. Just as Oedipa floats in her unsupported subjectivity, Driblette's reference to Trystero in one performance of the play



must have been inspired by some whim in his personal life. Thus, truth is now only known through doubtful individual perceptions. There is no objective proof of Trystero.

In the first chapter the author described Trystero as "magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all (21)." This was in keeping with the Oedipus myth which formed the template for the story, where fate operated completely independently of human thought or will. Oedipa's investigations have revealed a modern version of fate which drives industrial development, destroying nature, community, and integrity. It has been countered by a resistance movement which may or may not exist.

Modern American society constructs reality as a set of polarized either/or choices. For Oedipa the choice is between the conventional world of suburban sprawl, concentration of mammoth economic powers in the hands of a few who exploit the disinherited masses, out-of-control technological development, or the oppositional world of Trystero. There is no compromise. Oedipa is trying to find out the fate of America, not just her own fate. However, if Trystero does not exist, if there is no alternative to official culture, then her only option is paranoia, becoming lost in her own private delusions. She seeks a way out of this by trying to personally confront the Trystero bidder. She is trying to meet Trystero in the flesh, and thus finally determine what is true.



# Characters

## Oedipa Maas

Oedipa Maas is the protagonist, a modern version of Oedipus of ancient Greek myth. She engages in a quest, inspired by the job of sorting out her ex-lover's morally corrupt financial empire. Along the way, she finds out what is wrong with modern America, and what the possibilities are for some kind of secular salvation of the modern individual and modern mass society.

## Mucho Maas

Oedipa's husband is extremely sensitive to contemporary moral corruption, and seeks authenticity in ineffective ways. He is useless to her quest, and ends up losing even the boundaries of his own personality.

## Pierce Inverarity

A former lover of Oedipa, Inverarity appointed Oedipa as co-executor of his extensive estate for unknown reasons. His unprincipled economic activities come to stand for the crisis of moral, political, economic and social corruption in which modern America finds itself.

## Dr. Hilarius

Oedipa's psychiatrist offers her hallucinogenic drugs and calls her in the middle of the night. He eventually renounces the doctrines of Sigmund Freud, and sinks into paranoid delusion.

## Roseman

Oedipa's lawyer is obsessed with a critique he is writing of the television lawyer, Perry Mason. He offers no help whatsoever with the executorship, but encourages her to take on the job herself.

## Metzger

The co-executor of the estate, Metzger was a childhood film star who later became a lawyer. He briefly becomes Oedipa's lover, but absorbed in his own narcissism, later runs off with a young teenager and renounces his executorship.





## The Paranoids

These four Beatles wannabe's - Miles, Dean, Serge and Leonard -- exemplify the state of young people involved in the counter-culture. They are obsessed with rock-and-roll music and drugs, self-indulgent, and live in a world of media representations rather than reality.

## Mike Fallopian

This enigmatic figure provides a contact with the hidden postal conspiracy Oedipa investigates. He is the representative of a secret society, writer of a book about independent postal carriers, and regular at a bar frequented by subversive electronics workers. He later takes on the persona of a revolutionary guerrilla leader.

## Manny Di Presso

The lawyer-turned-actor who is representing Tony Jaguar in his suit against Inverarity's estate for non-payment for a shipment of bones of American GI's found in an Italian lake.

## Driblette

The director of the Jacobean revenge play, *The Courier's Tragedy*, Driblette speaks the word 'Trystero' in one performance, and then commits suicide before Oedipa can find out why.

## Genghis Cohen

This philatelist is contracted to assess Inverarity's stamp collection. He provides information about the counterfeited stamps apparently produced by the Trystero conspiracy.

## John Nefastis

This inventor has created a machine which purports to realize Maxwell's Demon, the vision of Scottish physicist Clerk Maxwell which supposedly violated the Second Law of Thermodynamics. He is a member of a secret underground of independent inventors, rebelling against the group-think and patent control of modern corporate culture.



## Professor Emory Bortz

A professor at San Narciso College, formerly of UC Berkeley, he authored the editor's preface of *Plays of Ford, Webster, Tourneur and Wharfinger*, which contained one version of *The Courier's Tragedy*. He provides information to Oedipa about the different versions of the play, including the Scurvhamite obscene parody which contains the only direct reference to Trystero.

## Crying of Lot 49

This phrase, the last line of the book, refers to the process whereby an auctioneer auctions off the group of counterfeit stamps, likely produced by Tristero, which Genghis Cohen identified in Inverarity's stamp collection.



# Objects/Places

## Tristero

Tristero names the mystery which Oedipa spends the entire novel trying to understand. Tristero resembles truth, and points to the sadness occasioned by the loss of truth in modern life, since *triste* means sad in Spanish. In this modern retelling of the Oedipus myth, Tristero plays the role which fate played in the original. Tristero is a powerful yet invisible force, which cannot be fully comprehended.

## Kinneret

Oedipa's home town in Central California stands for all the faceless suburban towns of America, whose endless shopping malls and cookie cutter suburban houses lack history and meaning.

*Bordando el Manto Terrestre*, a painting by Remedios Varo

This triptych includes a painting of girls in a tower embroidering a tapestry which spills out the windows and becomes reality, depicting the creation of reality.

## San Narciso

A town in the greater Los Angeles area which embodies all that is bad about modern life, including sprawl, corporate greed, personal narcissism, excessive technology, and media saturation.

## Echo Courts Motel

This tawdry roadside motel incorporates symbolism from the Greek myths of Narcissus and the nymph, Echo, into a modern setting. It serves as Oedipa's base for action during her quest, a site for trysts with her lover, Metzger, and hangout and rehearsal space for the Paranoids.

## Cashiered

A movie in which Metzger supposedly starred as a child actor, about a father and son who attack Turkish merchantmen at Gallipoli in support of the British forces. The movie is interrupted repeatedly by commercials advertising financial interests of Inverarity.



## The Scope

This bar is a hangout for disaffected electronics workers at Yoyodyne, and a site of postal delivery for the secret WASTE system. It also hosts live electronic music jam sessions, and is the site where Oedipa meets Mike Fallopian.

## Peter Pinguid Society

The namesake of this secret organization sailed to San Francisco during the Civil War to open a second front in the war for southern independence. After a military confrontation of an unspecified kind with a Russian vessel, Pinguid retired to Los Angeles and became a real estate developer.

## WASTE

An independent secret postal delivery system whose symbol is the muted post horn.

## Fangoso Lagoons

A housing development of Inverarity's with the usual grid of identical homes, along with an exorbitant artificial lake and island topped by an Art Nouveau copy of a European pleasure casino.

## Lago de Pieta

The lake in Italy where a company of American GI's supposedly died during World War II. The bones were harvested by Tony Jaguar, and eventually sold to Beaconsfield Cigarette Company, which used them in a cigarette filter.

*The Courier's Tragedy*

Oedipa and Metzger view this parody of a Jacobean revenge play by Richard Wharfinger, which has a complex plot full of violence, incest, and endless intrigue. The play concludes on the shore of Lago de Pieta, with mention of the word Trystero and an appearance by three black-garbed Trystero assassins. Oedipa later finds a number of contradictory textual versions of the play.

## Yoyodyne, Inc.

A mammoth corporation, whose Galactronics Branch Inverarity was instrumental in bringing to San Narciso. Disgruntled employees, inane stockholder's meetings, and an entry gate flanked by rockets parody the military-industrial complex whose growth President Eisenhower warned of in the 1950's.

## **The Nefastis Machine**

This invention of John Nefastis purports to prove the existence of Maxwell's Demon, a hypothetical construct which can sort molecules according to temperature and thus defeat the Second Law of Thermodynamics. It can only be worked by Sensitives, people with extraordinary perceptual abilities.

## **The Greek Way**

A gay bar in San Francisco where Oedipa meets a member of Inamorati Anonymous, a parallel secret organization which also uses the muted post horn symbol. IA supports members in their efforts to avoid falling in love.



## Social Sensitivity

In this short novel, Pynchon continues his concern with conspiracy and technological control of the society and adds a satiric dimension by setting the story in modern California. The main character yo-yos from the Bay Area to San Narciso, a stand-in for Los Angeles, where the street layout suggests to the main character the printed circuits of a transistor radio and the name suggests a city of the self-absorbed or unconscious. The California backdrop gives Pynchon the opportunity to comment on various substitutes for a spiritual center in modern life, from drugs to popular music.



## Techniques

Although *The Crying of Lot 49* is filled with Pynchon's usual mindnumbing accumulation of details, apparent digressions, and zany characters, it is also the most conventionally organized of Pynchon's novels, since everything is seen from the third person limited viewpoint of Oedipa Maas, unlike the other novels, in which it is often difficult to determine who is telling the story and in which one often must assume that Pynchon himself is addressing the reader directly. Perhaps this traditional form is a result of Pynchon's originally having conceived of this book as a long story, because his short stories are tighter in form and easier to comprehend than his novels.



# Themes

## Themes

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon combines the themes of decay and conspiracy developed in *V.* with observations on communication theory. The main character, Oedipa Maas, has been given the job of administering the estate of her deceased lover, Pierce Inverarity, who in addition to being a real estate tycoon, was also a stamp collector. In the course of investigating Inverarity's holdings, Oedipa uncovers a conspiracy in opposition to the postal system which dates back to the sixteenth century. The conspiracy, called Tristero, manifests itself in certain small ways such as counterfeit stamps in which the designs of official stamps are subtly changed. Members of the conspiracy deposit messages in trashcans marked "Waste," which, Oedipa discovers, stands for "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire." In a night journey through San Francisco, Oedipa discovers frightening signs of the existence of Tristero everywhere. She also watches a performance of an Elizabethan play, *The Courier's Tragedy* (Pynchon's hilarious parody of revenge tragedy), the director of which drowns under mysterious circumstances, an incident which suggests that Tristero, although invisible, is as alert and alive as that other invisible conspiracy which is reputed not to exist, the Mafia.

There are other references to communication in the novel, such as Oedipa's husband's job as a radio disc jockey, which eventually drives him to drugs. In *V.*, the world is going to pieces, but the novel itself is complex but intact. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, although the story is shorter and tighter than that of *V.*, the overall impression is much more unsettling; no communications can be trusted, and language itself offers not clarity but confusion.

The title refers to the auction ("crying") of part of Inverarity's stamp collection ("lot 49") which Oedipa attends, fearful that Tristero agents are present but determined to find out if the conspiracy really exists. Significantly, from the standpoint of the theme of failure of communication, and ominously in terms of the plot, the novel ends just as the auctioneer is about to speak.

## The Oedipus Myth

With a protagonist named Oedipa, this novel clearly presents itself as a modern retelling of the Oedipus myth from Ancient Greece, now set in 1950's California. The story of Oedipus explored the power of fate, wielded by gods, to determine people's lives. Freud used this myth as a metaphoric explanation of identity development among boys. Pynchon's novel explores a female character's search for identity, and substitutes modern social forces for fate; in particular, the power of economic and technological development.



## The Oedipus Complex

Virtually all male characters in the novel are impotent in some way. None are capable of loving the female protagonist, Oedipa. According to Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex, development of a viable sexual identity requires that the boy renounce desire for his mother in order to gain phallic potency and the social power that accompanies it in a male-dominated society. Thus, these men are portrayed as boys who are unable to resolve their own identity crises in a world where women can now be protagonists, and where channels for individual expression have been lost.

## The Military-Industrial Complex

The novel critiques many aspects of modern life, such as suburban sprawl, capitalist profiteering, military research and development, and industrial pollution. The source of these evils is traced to processes of capital accumulation and the unjust social system which results. Yoyodyne, Inc. provides an example of the absurdity and banality of the modern corporate environment, which crushes individual invention, and camouflages the destructive nature of its activities. Military research and development powers this modern expansion of capitalism.

## Psychoanalysis

As the character of Dr. Hilarius suggests, the novel treats psychoanalysis as laughable. Freud's belief that exploration of the unconscious would allow individuals to adjust to life within necessarily oppressive social structures is revealed as wrong. The novel's treatment of psychoanalysis suggests that the dark side of the unconscious, that is, bestial or violent instincts, cannot be tamed and turned to constructive ends. Thus, psychoanalysis cannot solve the dilemma of the individual in modern mass society.

## The Simulacrum

This term refers to the virtual worlds created by the various media of representation. This novel illustrates the degree to which media, such as movies and television, permeate modern life. Characters such as Metzger, the actor turned lawyer, and Di Presso, the lawyer turned actor, suggests that other sectors of society have taken on the hallucinatory quality of a mere representation. Therefore, the distinction between what is real and what is represented no longer functions. Everything is a simulation.

## Language

Pynchon explores the various ways in which language supposedly tells the truth. He criticizes texts as 'dead,' meaning that they, like bones, only convey a residue of past truth. Spoken language is not equivalent to reality, yet some social groups, such as



fundamentalists, ignorantly cling to the idea that truth can be expressed directly through language. Furthermore, language has been corrupted by economic growth, making an alternative postal system necessary for those who try to tell the truth about contemporary realities.

## **Paranoia**

The novel explores the idea that paranoia is, in fact, a rational response to the insanity of modern life. Oedipa continually detects meaning in meaningless configurations such as the shape of streets in a suburban development. She also questions whether what she perceives are signs of an elaborate hoax, or figments of her own imagination. In Pynchon's view, the individual's search for meaning is frustrated by modern society's secular patterns of growth. Thus, fantasies, such as paranoid delusions, constitute a realm where individualism and meaningfulness have not yet been eradicated.

## **Anarchism**

The novel explores the potential of anarchism to create both order and freedom in mass society. Examples such as deaf people dancing in a ballroom, or a clever demon who organizes hot and cold molecules, test the possibility of whether order can be instilled without oppressive social structures that limit individual freedom. The secret postal system, called Tristero, seeks an alternative to the control of information flow in modern society. However, Tristero's potential for evil, and the failure of Mexican anarchism, illustrate the novel's pessimistic evaluation of anarchism's potential for creating a free society.



# Style

## Point of view

*The Crying of Lot 49* is written primarily in limited omniscient third person. This means that events are viewed objectively, yet what is viewed is confined to what the protagonist could perceive. Use of this point of view is crucial to one of the novel's objectives, since the narrative aspires to create doubt in the reader's mind as to whether the protagonist's experiences are real or delusions. Staying within the confines of one person's subjective perspective also mimics the claustrophobic isolation of someone who has retreated into paranoid delusion. In this way, the novel's point of view is appropriate for exploration of one of the novel's main themes, i.e. paranoia.

There is no explicit reference to the narrator, although a narrator's presence is hinted at by explicit instances of foreshadowing, and other literary devices. Pynchon's prose is so lush and poetic that attention is drawn to the narrative voice.

## Setting

The novel is set in California during the early years of the countercultural revolution of the 60s. California was on the cutting edge of cultural experimentation, and was also a forerunner in economic trends such as suburban development and sprawl, which have since come to dominate the American landscape. Thus, California constitutes the perfect setting for an exploration of the emerging paradoxes of modern high-tech society. Particular destinations are described as scattered along freeways, showing the central role freeways play in the material environment and the way people experience that environment. At the same time, the author never precisely describes actual locations, so that Oedipa's wanderings seem to take place in a foggy fantasy landscape. This leaves open the possibility that the reality she perceives is simply a delusion.

Locations such as Echo Courts Motel or Fangoso Lagoons are parodies, both in their names and in their construction. They satirize the commercialism and excess of real estate development. They also show how fantasy is exploited by capitalist profiteering in order to sell a product. Throughout the novel, the author uses exaggeration for comic effect. Rockets flanking the entry gate to Yoyodyne, Inc., and a labyrinth of office cubicles in the interior of the building, exaggerate and parody characteristics of typical corporate offices. Particular locations also contain allusions to historical and classical themes. For example, Echo Courts Motel refers to the myth of Narcissus, while Fangoso Lagoons contains a mock European pleasure casino.

## Language and Meaning

Pynchon uses very complex sentence structures somewhat in the style of stream of consciousness, popularized by such authors as Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner.



The denseness of allusion and the enigmatic nature of description have led to comparisons between Pynchon and James Joyce. Pynchon's language is full of slang, idiomatic expressions, and colloquial speech. His style thus resembles that of other Beat writers such as William Burroughs. Their style sought to bring life to more overtly correct writing which was perceived as staid and dull, reflecting a staid and dull social world. In this way, Pynchon's language seeks to be more alive than the dead texts which he criticizes in the narrative.

The use of common speech in the context of rich meandering prose imitates the genre of the picaresque, which the novel evokes. Picaresque narratives often concern the travels of a bumbling hero through grotesque, sordid, and absurd social landscapes. In the same way, Pynchon's writing wanders through long, complicated sentences containing vulgar and colloquial expressions. He often couches complex ideas drawn from science and literary theory in this rich, multifaceted, colorful language. His sentence structures imitate the speech patterns of spoken rather than written language, the way that people may drag out or cut short sentences as they think, not necessarily observing formal rules of grammar. Thus, while the novel doubts the ability of language to convey truth in the novel, the writer's own use of language demonstrates the ability of language to convey multiple and paradoxical social realities.

## Structure

*The Crying of Lot 49* consists of six long chapters. The narrative bears some resemblance to a detective story, as Oedipa finds clues which she attempts to use to unravel a mystery. However, unlike a classic detective story, the mystery is never solved. The plot follows the experiences of its protagonist in a relatively linear fashion, like an odyssey. But the narrative of Oedipa's travels is continually interspersed with information and episodes from other times and sources. Characters provide information about historical events which appears to be nonfictional. This mixing of apparently nonfictional passages into a fictional narrative was famously explored in Melville's *Moby Dick*, and was widely explored by many writers of the 50s, 60s and 70s.

The author includes songs written in verse and attributed to various characters. This mimics earlier genres from the history of English literature. The text also quotes directly from the play, *The Courier's Tragedy*, humorously imitating the florid complex language of Elizabethan drama. Pynchon includes a tremendous amount of dialogue. He also lapses into rhapsodic lyrical passages with highly poetic images. The title of the novel is not explained until the very last line of the narrative. Thus the title itself constitutes a sort of mystery which is finally solved.





## Quotes

"Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate." Chapter 1, p. 24.

"Things did not then delay in turning curious. If one object behind her discovery of what she was to label the Tristero System or often only The Tristero (as if it might be something's secret title) were to bring to an end her encapsulation in her tower, then that night's infidelity with Metzger would logically be the starting point for it; logically. That's what would come to haunt her most, perhaps: the way it fitted, logically, together. As if (as she'd guessed that first minute in San Narciso) there were revelation in progress all around her. Chapter 3, p. 44.

"But that was the very first military confrontation between Russia and America. Attack, retaliation, both projectiles deep-sixed forever and the Pacific rolls on. But the ripples from those two splashes spread, and grew, and today engulf us all." Chapter 3, p. 50.

"No hallowed skein of stars can ward, I trow,

Who's once been set his tryst with Tristero."

Chapter 3, p. 75.

"That's what I'm for. To give the spirit flesh. The words, who cares?" Chapter 3, p. 79.

"If it was really Pierce's attempt to leave an organized something behind after his own annihilation, then it was part of her duty, wasn't it, to bestow life on what had persisted, to try to be what Driblette was, the dark machine in the centre of the planetarium, to bring the estate into pulsing stelliferous Meaning, all in a soaring dome around her? Chapter 4, p. 82.

"As if their home cemetery in some way still did exist, in a land where you could somehow walk, and not need the East San Narciso Freeway, and bones still could rest in peace, nourishing ghosts of dandelions, no one to plow them up. As if the dead really do persist, even in a bottle of wine." Chapter 4, p. 99.

"Entropy is a figure of speech, then," sighed Nefastis, "a metaphor." Chapter 5, p. 106.

"If I'd been a real Nazi I'd have chosen Jung, nicht wahr? But I chose Freud instead, the Jew. Freud's vision of the world had no Buchenwalds in it. Buchenwald, according to Freud, once the light was let in, would become a soccer field, fat children would learn flower-arranging and solfeggio in the strangling rooms." Chapter 5, p. 138.

"Everybody who says the same words is the same person if the spectra are the same only they happen differently in time, you dig? But the time is arbitrary. You pick your zero point anywhere you want, that way you can shuffle each person's time line sideways till



they all coincide. Then you'd have this big, God, maybe a couple hundred million chorus saying 'rich, chocolaty goodness' together, and it would all be the same voice." Chapter 5, p. 142.

"Perhaps - she felt briefly penetrated, as if the bright winged thing had actually made it to the sanctuary of her heart - perhaps, springing from the same slick labyrinth, adding those two lines had even, in a way never to be explained, served him as a rehearsal for his night's walk away into that vast sink of the primal blood of the Pacific." Chapter 6, p. 162.

"That night she sat for hours, too numb even to drink, teaching herself to breathe in a vacuum. For this, oh God, was the void. There was nobody who could help her. Nobody in the world. They were all on something, mad, possible enemies, dead." Chapter 6, p. 171.

"What was left to inherit? That America coded in Inverarity's testament, whose was that?" Chapter 6, p. 180.

"She had heard all about excluded middles; they were bad shit, to be avoided; and how had it ever happened here with the chances once so good for diversity?" Chapter 6, p. 181.

"Passerine spread his arms in a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture; perhaps to a descending angel. The auctioneer cleared his throat. Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49." Chapter 6, p. 183.



## Key Questions

Pynchon's novels are so packed with details and references that there is no lack of things to talk about. It may be that younger students, raised on the cascade of associations poured out by such popular entertainers as Jonathan Winters, Robin Williams, and Dennis Miller, will be better able to understand Pynchon's approach to his subject and his technique than their teachers. But the teachers will be better able to identify and explain Pynchon's historical and literary allusions. Thus the best kind of discussion may take place, one in which everyone learns from everyone else.

1. What is Maxwell's Demon? Review Maxwell's hypothesis about this creature in the context of *The Crying of Lot 49*.
2. Why is Oedipa Maas considered to be Pynchon's most sympathetic character? Do you find that she engages your sympathy? Why or why not?
3. Identify the various forms of communication referred to in the novel. Which ones actually promote human understanding?
4. Treat the novel as a roman a clef and identify as many of the real models for such elements as the Peter Pinguid Society, and Yoyodyne Corporation, as you can.
5. Compare the novel to fairy tales such as "Rapunzel" or Elizabethan revenge tragedies such as *Hamlet*.
6. Is it particularly significant that the novel is set in a fictitious city in California? Could it have been set anywhere in the United States? In the world?
7. Compare Tristero to the conspiracies in Pynchon's other novels, notably *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). Is Tristero more or less successful than the others?
8. Explain the role of such popular culture elements as radio, television, motion pictures, and rock music in *The Crying of Lot 49*. What does the novel tell us about the way these elements work in modern life?
9. Do you feel cheated that the novel ends just as Oedipa is about to find out something about the existence of Tristero? Why does *The Crying of Lot 49* end this way?
10. Compare the characters who are obsessed with control (like Stanley Koteks) with those who are out of control (Mucho Maas, Dr. Hilarius).  
  
Why does modern society produce these extremes? Is a middle ground possible?
11. Do you agree that *The Crying of Lot 49* is more accessible and understandable than Pynchon's other novels?

12. Lamont Cranston, Pierce Inverarity's last disguise, said, "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?" Is the world of *The Crying of Lot 49* confused, chaotic, or evil?



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the vision of California which Pynchon evokes. Is this an accurate description of modern America?

Does Oedipa discover her fate, and come to terms with it in any sense?

Why is Oedipa having an identity crisis, and what has caused it?

Is modern life truly secular? Does spiritual or religious meaning exist in any unexpected places in the modern landscape?

Has psychoanalysis, or its successors in the various branches of psychotherapy, been proven useless, as Pynchon suggests?

Is the unconscious a force of nature which can only be controlled and made sociable through repression? Or is there a way to integrate instinctual nature into peaceful society without unduly limiting individual freedom?

Is it possible to conceive of a successful anarchic society? What anarchic elements are present in the world Pynchon describes?

Did Oedipa make any mistakes? In Oedipa's place, would you have acted differently?

What do the male characters in this novel need in order to become capable of truly loving?

What is Tristero? Is fate operative in modern life?

## Literary Precedents

Besides the kinds of mystery and detective story parallels noted under V. above, *The Crying of Lot 49* also shares points of contact with the revenge tragedy form so beloved of Elizabethan dramatists, but with an interesting twist; in the novel, the machinations of the revengers are vaguely glimpsed by the victim, unlike the point of view of the original dramas, in which the audience was allowed to see the plotters plan their attacks. The two poles of the revenge tragedy come together when Oedipa views *The Courier's Tragedy*, Pynchon's parody on the revenge form, so that the effect on the reader of the novel is both laugh-provoking and chilling.

Two other parallels are not strictly literary: one is artistic and literary, the other scientific. Oedipa remembers seeing a painting (which actually exists) by the Spanish artist Remedios Varo of girls imprisoned in towers letting down their long golden hair like Rapunzel of the fairy tale. This image suggests the position of Oedipa herself, trapped and trying to understand the meaning of a creepy, *marchen*-like world. The other parallel is a scientific hypothesis which Stanley Kowalevich explains to Oedipa about Maxwell's Demon (the idea was posited first by nineteenth-century Scotch physicist James Clerk Maxwell) who sits and sorts randomly moving molecules into slower and faster groups, thus defeating entropy without doing work. Critics with a scientific bent have pointed to the elaborate discussion of this idea and its application to communication theory in *The Crying of Lot 49* as an indication that Pynchon may not be as pessimistic as is generally assumed.



## Related Titles

Drafts of sections of this novel appeared as the stories "The World (This One), The Flesh (Mrs. Oedipa Maas), and The Testament of Pierce Inverarity" (1965) and "The Shrink Flips" (1966). There are also parallel themes in Pynchon's novel *V.*, which is analyzed in this series.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994