

# **Gravity's Rainbow Study Guide**

## **Gravity's Rainbow by Thomas Pynchon**

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# Introduction

Thomas Pynchon's 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow* is one of the landmarks of American fiction. Set in the final months and aftermath of World War II, it focuses on a search for German V-2 rockets, which were the world's first guided missiles, as well as the wartime atmosphere in London and the postwar atmosphere in Germany and France. Particularly important to this narrative are American Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop and his quest to find one particular, mysterious rocket called 00000, as well as Slothrop's search for his identity and the conspiracy surrounding his childhood and military career. The novel includes such a great number of characters, subplots, historical flashbacks, and governmental-corporate conspiracies, however, that it resists an accurate summary and relentlessly poses questions about the nature of history, Western culture, and reality itself. These questions apply not just to World War II history but to the Vietnam War, the American civil rights movement, and other events that occurred while Pynchon was writing the novel in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Because of its immense and complex scope, *Gravity's Rainbow* is recognized to be an extremely difficult novel to read and understand. In fact, some readers and critics have claimed that it is utterly incomprehensible and unreadable. Important characters and storylines often diverge, disappear entirely, or turn out to be merely fictional, and many readers have found it necessary to use companion literature or reread the eight-hundred-page novel multiple times. As one is reading the novel, however, it is important to remember that its difficulty and obscurity are critical aspects of its meaning: Pynchon is invested in a thorough critique of post-World-War-II society. To Pynchon, the complexity and obscurity of *Gravity's Rainbow* highlights the confusion, dismay, purposelessness, and overwhelming technological escalation of the contemporary world.



# Author Biography

**Nationality 1:** American

**Birthdate:** 1937

Little is known of Pynchon's personal life because of his deliberate reclusion. He refuses to participate in interviews with the media, and only his closest and most trusted friends know where he lives. In fact, more is known about Pynchon's ancestors than Pynchon himself. His ancestor William Pynchon was a Puritan writer who arrived in America in 1630 but returned to England after a tract he wrote was declared heretical. Pynchon also had a prominent ancestor and namesake who was a reverend and scholar in nineteenth-century New England, and another branch of his family contained prominent stock brokers before the market crash of 1929.

What is known about Pynchon is that he was born in Glen Cove, Long Island, New York on May 8, 1937, son of an industrial surveyor and Republican politician. In 1953, Pynchon entered Cornell University to study in its engineering physics department, but he changed to the college of arts and sciences during his second year and then dropped out of college to serve in the Navy. Pynchon returned to Cornell in 1957 to complete a degree in English, and he became friends with the writer Richard Fariña, who died in a tragic accident in 1966. While at Cornell, Pynchon may have been influenced by the famous Russian American novelist Vladimir Nabokov, who was an English professor there. In any case, Pynchon wrote his first short stories while studying there.

In 1960, Pynchon went to work as a technical writer for Boeing Aircraft in Seattle, Washington, and remained there for two and a half years. He published his first stories in 1960, and his first novel *V.* was published in 1963 to considerable critical acclaim. Complex and erudite, *V.* focuses on Herbert Stencil's obsessive quest to discover the person or thing his father's diary refers to simply as "V." Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1967) uses the second law of thermodynamics (regarding entropy) as a metaphor for social decline. *Gravity's Rainbow* was published in 1973, and Pynchon's next novel, *Vineland*, which did not appear until seventeen years later, was generally considered a disappointment. *Mason and Dixon* (1997) is a fantasy about the formative years of the United States, and like Pynchon's other novels it fascinates some critics and frustrates others.



# Plot Summary

## Part 1: Beyond the Zero

*Gravity's Rainbow* has traditionally been broken into numbered episodes based on the novel's unnamed sections that are divided by lines of seven squares. Episode 1 of part 1 takes place on December 18, 1944, with Pirate Prentice watching a German V-2 rocket approach London. Pirate makes a "Banana Breakfast" for his troops and goes to receive a message from his superiors in Greenwich. In episode 3, Teddy Bloat photographs the desk of American Tyrone Slothrop in ACHTUNG headquarters (a special operations unit of the British military), interested in a map of London with stars marking Slothrop's sexual escapades. Episode 4 describes Slothrop's girl-chasing in London, his childhood, and his Puritan ancestry.

Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake reveal their love and attend a séance in episode 5. The perspective then shifts to describe Pirate's memories of his service in the Persian Gulf and of a woman he loved and lost. Episode 6 describes Roger and Jessica's relationship, and the pair drive to meet Dr. Pointsman. Pointsman's foot gets stuck in a toilet bowl as he and Roger try to capture a dog on the site of a bombed-out house. In episode 8, Pointsman talks about Pavlovian psychology with Kevin Spectro, and they discuss what Slothrop's map has to do with the German rockets. The rockets seem to be distributing in a random sequence as Roger predicts, but Slothrop's map suggests that each of his sexual adventures occurs on the site of a rocket blasts, some time before it hits. As a child, Slothrop was conditioned and later de-conditioned by Dr. Laszlo Jamf to become sexually excited at loud noises, and Pointsman comes to believe this is why he can anticipate the rocket strikes.

In episode 9, Roger and Jessica sleep in their house that has been ordered abandoned, and a voice from Jessica's perspective describes conversations between Roger and Pointsman about statistical versus deterministic views of the rocket strikes. Episode 10 describes Slothrop's hypnotic vision in a London hospital in which he is chased by African Americans down a toilet and then enters a cowboy story. Pirate decodes a message in episode 11 that, it later becomes clear, means that the British government has taken Katje Borgesius out of Holland. Episodes 12 and 13 describe Pointsman, Brigadier General Pudding, and other staff at the mysterious government project called "The White Visitation," which will be involved in manipulating and controlling Slothrop.

In episode 14, Katje is filmed in order to condition Pointsman's octopus, Grigori. The episode flashes back to Katje's period with Captain Blicero and his sexual slave Gottfried and tells the story of Katje's colonial ancestor Frans van der Groov. In episode 15, Slothrop is released from the hospital (which will later be hit by a V-2 rocket) and goes to have sex with a girl named Darlene in an East London flat. Episode 16 contains vignettes about Roger and Jessica, and episode 17 journeys through Pointsman's beliefs and fantasies about his psychological discoveries through Slothrop.



Episode 18 introduces Carroll Eventyr and his supernatural connection to a man killed during a 1930 Berlin street riot. The next episode continues a discussion of Berliners in the years before Hitler, such as Leni Pökler and her frustration with her husband Franz's devotion to science. Episode 20 describes the Christmas Eve party at The White Visitation. Slothrop is at a casino on the French Riviera, being watched by Pointsman's operatives. Episode 21 is a Boxing Day (the day after Christmas) scene with Roger and Jessica visiting Jessica's sister and her family.

## Part 2: Un Perm' au Casino Hermann Goering

In the first episode of part 2, whose French title means "A Furlough at the Hermann Goering Casino," Slothrop saves Katje from Octopus Grigori and begins to have paranoid suspicions. Slothrop spends the night with Katje, and the next morning she arranges for all of his clothes and papers (his identity) to be stolen. In episode 3, Slothrop begins studying rocket science, and Katje gives him a subtle warning before she departs for England. In England, Katje is ordered to keep the director of The White Visitation, Brigadier Pudding, under Pointsman's control by acting as his sexual dominatrix.

Slothrop discovers evidence of a corporate conspiracy in episode 5, as well as elements connecting his childhood conditioning to a mysterious rocket project (Rocket 00000). At a party he meets a profiteer named Blodgett Waxwing who confirms his suspicions about the octopus episode, and he decides to escape and meet Waxwing in Nice. Slothrop learns of his friend Tantavity's death in episode 7, and he flees for Nice, becomes involved with a group of Argentine anarchists, ditches the Secret Service agents who are following him, and assumes the identity of English war correspondent Ian Scuffling. In episode 8, the Nazis have surrendered and Pointsman, Roger, Jessica, and Katje meet at a seaside resort to discuss their plans for Slothrop.

## Part 3: In the Zone

Slothrop has traveled from Switzerland to Nordhausen, Germany, and continues to investigate connections between his childhood conditioning by Laszlo Jamf, a plastic called Imipolex G, and Rocket 00000. He also meets a new lover, Geli Tripping, who is the girlfriend of the Russian operative Tchitcherine. In episode 2 Slothrop investigates the rocket factory "Mittelwerke" but is chased and nearly caught by Major Duane Marvy. Episode 3 discusses Enzian, the leader of a Black rocket team called the Schwarzkommando, and Herero culture. In episode 4, Slothrop escapes to Berlin in a hot-air balloon, and episode 5 discusses Tchitcherine's background.

In episode 6, Slothrop has been in occupied Berlin for several weeks and has taken up with Margherita (or Greta) Erdmann. He assumes a new identity, "Rocketman," and raids the house occupied by President Harry Truman, recovering six kilograms of hashish before Tchitcherine captures him. The series of episodes that follow provide background information about Tchitcherine's interest in Slothrop, Slothrop's relationship



with Greta, Greta's marriage and her daughter Bianca, and the firing of Rocket 00000. In episode 12, Slothrop delivers the hashish to the underworld character Säure and continues his sexual relationship with Greta.

In episode 13, Horst Achtfaden is interrogated by Enzian and the Hereros about the Schwarzgerät (or S-Gerät), which will turn out to be a compartment inside Rocket 00000 made of the plastic Imipolex G (which was invented by Dr. Jamf) and intended to hold a person. In episode 14, Slothrop and Greta travel to a resort town and get on a ship called the *Anubis* where Greta meets her daughter Bianca. Slothrop has violent sex with Bianca and, in episode 16, a story about Japanese Ensign Morituri reveals that Greta has child-murdering tendencies. Episode 17 delves further into Greta's history and adds to Slothrop's knowledge of Rocket 00000. Slothrop falls off the ship in a storm and is picked up by Frau Gnahn, who brings him to □Springer,□ or Gerhart von Göll. Springer agrees to obtain the Schwarzgerät for Slothrop, but Springer is abducted by Tchitcherine.

In episode 20, Klaus Närrisch leads a raid to free Springer and is captured during the escape. Episode 21 describes Enzian's plans to launch Rocket 00001 in order to stop the tribal Hereros from committing suicide. In episode 22 Slothrop boards the *Anubis*, where he discovers Bianca's dead body, and he disembarks to travel through the Zone towards the location of □Operation Backfire,□ the British rocket research center. Katje watches a film in episode 23 that contains an implanted message suggesting that she leave The White Visitation. In episode 24, Katje and Pirate tour a version of hell.

Slothrop treks across Germany in episode 25 until he meets a young boy searching for a lemming. He encounters Major Marvy but escapes him because he is disguised as a Russian officer. Slothrop warns the Hereros that Marvy plans to raid the Schwarzkommando, and Marvy waits with Tchitcherine before the attack. In episode 28, Slothrop assumes the role of □Plechazunga□ (a pig-hero), escapes a raid, and meets Franz Pökler. Pökler tells him about Laszlo Jamf, and episode 30 discusses Slothrop's uncle Lyle Bland, who participated in the scheme to sell Slothrop to Jamf.

In episode 31, Slothrop is at Operation Backfire, where two British medical officers are preparing to castrate him. Meanwhile, a plane is on its way to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Slothrop escapes and has sex with Leni Pökler, and because Major Marvy has put on the Plechazunga suit, he is mistaken for Slothrop and castrated. In episode 32, Tchitcherine worries that his government will destroy him, and two rich Londoners discuss Pointsman's failure with Slothrop, the Conservative plan to destroy blacks, and their own homosexuality.

## Part 4: The Counterforce

In episode 1, Slothrop finds the long-lost kazoo of his childhood and Pirate Prentice flies to Germany. Roger Mexico discovers in episode 2 that Jessica has left him for her husband Jeremy, and he joins the □Counterforce□ of Pirate, Katje, and other discontented characters who want to find Slothrop and dismantle the □Man,□ a



corporate-governmental conspiracy. Episode 3 is a paranoid vision about a colonel and a conspiracy in the power and light industry. In episode 4, Katje meets Enzian, and they discuss Blicero and the launch of Rocket 00000. Episode 5 notes what happened to Miklos Thanatz after he was thrown off the *Anubis*; by the end of it, Thanatz has told the Schwarzkommando what he knows about Rocket 00000.

Amidst the myriad of events in episode 6, Slothrop discovers that the United States had dropped the atomic bomb. Episode 7 reveals that the Soviets have allowed Tchitcherine to track his half-brother Enzian in order to find the Schwarzkommando themselves. In episode 8, Jessica tells Roger that she is planning a family with Jeremy, and the Counterforce (now joined by Brigadier Pudding's spirit) comes to believe that Rocket 00000 was fired due north. Episode 9 discusses Geli Tripping's continued search for Tchitcherine and then reveals Gottfried kneeling before Blicero in the days before the launch of Rocket 00000. In episode 10, Enzian and the Schwarzkommando, having avoided a number of attacks, prepare to launch Rocket 00001. Geli finds Tchitcherine in episode 11, and her magic blinds Tchitcherine just as he is about to confront Enzian. The final episode fragments into sixteen scenes, including Gottfried's ascent inside the Schwarzgerät compartment of Rocket 00000, and the novel concludes in a 1970 Los Angeles theater that is about to be destroyed by a missile.





# Characters

## Horst Achtfaden

Achtfaden is an aerodynamics man who worked on the Schwarzgerät. Enzian and the Schwarzkommando capture him and interrogate him in part 3, episode 13.

## Beaver

See Jeremy Swanlake

## Lyle Bland

Slothrop's uncle Bland participated in the scheme to sell Slothrop for use in Laszlo Jamf's experiments.

## Captain Dominus Blicero

Dominus Blicero is the code name of Lieutenant Weissmann, the controller of Rocket 00000 and a Nazi arch-villain. He is a sadomasochist who keeps a boy named Gottfried along with Katje Borgesius as sexual slaves, and by the end of the novel the reader learns that Blicero has launched Gottfried in the Schwarzgerät section of Rocket 00000. Blicero thinks of this grand plan as a form of sexual sacrifice by which he is able to transcend his existence and become a true lord of death.

Critics have argued that Blicero is meant to represent a spirit of death, and he seeks to dominate and destroy people as a force that is somewhat like death itself. This interpretation explains perhaps why Slothrop, who is obsessed with and possibly in love with death, spends the entire novel searching for Blicero (and Gottfried). Blicero also represents a number of political ideas, however; for example, his sexual domination and destruction of Gottfried is connected to the Nazi Holocaust. Blicero (or Weissmann, which means "white man" in German) is also responsible for bringing Enzian to Germany and is representative of white supremacist ideology. Katje describes his appearance as dominated by his yellow teeth: "long, terrible, veined with bright brown rot."

## Teddy Bloat

Bloat is a British soldier and a participant in Pointsman's conspiracy against Slothrop. He is a friend of Tantavivy's and Slothrop's until Slothrop discovers that Bloat is spying on him at the Hermann Goering Casino. Bloat is promoted to major upon his return, and he may have had something to do with Tantavivy's death.



## Seaman Bodine

Seaman Bodine is □an American sailor [of the U.S. destroyer *John E. Badass*] with an orangutan look to him.□ He convinces Slothrop (as Rocketman) to recover his six kilograms of hashish without telling him that it is outside President Truman's house, and he appears in part 3 to help Slothrop escape in a Red Cross van from Pointsman's operatives.

## Katje Borgesius

Katje is a spy and lover who takes on a variety of complex roles in the novel. She is Blicero's slave, along with Gottfried, until she departs and meets with Pirate Prentice, who tells her she can work at The White Visitation. Pointsman then assigns her to seduce Slothrop, which she does and then arranges for his identity to be stolen, but before she returns to England Katje subtly warns Slothrop of the conspiracy against him. Back at The White Visitation, Pointsman assigns Katje to act as Domina Noctura, the dominatrix of Brigadier Pudding in order to keep him in line. Finally, Katje joins the Counterforce to find Slothrop and discover what happened to Rocket 00000.

Katje is a mysterious character in the sense that her motivations and employer are never entirely clear. Some evidence suggests that she may be involved with Enzian in some way, for example, although this is never fully explained. Katje is from Holland and has Dutch colonial ancestors. She is very attractive and blonde, but she knows that □inside herself ... she is corruption and ashes,□ and she is connected in some way to the Holocaust. Nevertheless, Katje appears to have genuinely warm feelings towards Slothrop and some of her other lovers.

## Hilary Bounce

A rocket scientist from Shell International Petroleum, Bounce teaches Slothrop about aerodynamics and raises Slothrop's suspicions about an international corporate conspiracy.

## Emil Bummer

□Once the Weimar Republic's most notorious cat burglar and dooper,□ Bummer (known as Säure) is an underworld figure involved in Slothrop's adventures in the Zone. Säure is responsible for putting Slothrop in touch with Springer.

## Ronald Cherrycoke

Cherrycoke is a □noted psychometrist□ for Psi Section (a special operations unit of the British military focusing on paranormal psychology).



## Clayton Chiclitz

Chiclitz is a sidekick of Major Marvy and a character from Pynchon's earlier novel *V*.

## Christian

Christian is a companion of Enzian. He is extremely angry at Enzian and Josef Ombindi for their treatment of his sister Maria and her husband Pavel, but he follows Enzian after they find Pavel.

## Darlene

Darlene is one of Slothrop's lovers in London.

## Reverend Paul de la Nuit

De la Nuit is a □chaplain and staff automatist□ for the British.

## Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck

Dodson-Truck is a Pointsman operative with a pompous Oxford accent.

## Oberst Enzian

Enzian is the half-brother of Tchitcherine and the leader of the Schwarzkommando. Half European and half Herero (a tribe from a former German colony in Africa), Enzian joins the ranks of the Otukungurua in order to carry out the quest of the Herero □Revolutionaries of the Zero.□ He comes to lead the Black rocket task force of the Schwarzkommando, whose goal is to launch Rocket 00001. Enzian is brought to Germany and trained by Blicero, but at some point he seems to stop carrying out Blicero's orders. Enzian is consumed with his feud with Tchitcherine as well as his own interests, and by the end of the novel he has apparently launched himself in a replica of Rocket 00000 as a kind of sacrificial ritual to avoid tribal suicide among the Herero.

## Bianca Erdmann

Bianca is Greta's young daughter who is tortured and raped by many men. Slothrop has sex with her and, in a way, falls in love with her before he falls out of the *Anubis*. She dies a gruesome death on the ship after this, and Slothrop later finds her body.



## Greta Erdmann

Also known as Margherita or Gretel, Greta is one of Slothrop's more maniacal lovers. She was a star in German horror/pornographies, she is into sadomasochism, and she has a tendency towards violence against children. She is searching for her daughter Bianca while she is with Slothrop, and she is married to Miklos Thanatz.

## Carroll Eventyr

Eventyr is a psychic and The White Visitation's □resident medium,□ and he later joins the Counterforce in search of Rocket 00000.

## Osbie Feel

Osbie is a secret cameraman for ACHTUNG (he tapes Katje and possibly has a relationship with her) and later a member of the Counterforce to find Slothrop. He cuts a somewhat comical figure, becomes a heavy drug user, and gets a tattoo of Porky Pig.

## Milton Gloaming

Gloaming is a member of Psi Section who is involved in a word-counting project.

## Frau Gnahb

Frau Gnahb is the □apple-cheeked lady□ who picks up Slothrop after he falls off the *Anubis*. She calls herself the □queen of the coastal trade□ (Slothrop calls her □unbalanced□), and she helps Slothrop by taking him to Springer.

## Otto Gnahb

Frau Gnahb's son, Otto helps Slothrop rescue Springer from the Tchitcherine.

## Gottfried

Gottfried is Blicero's passive slave who is launched in the Schwarzgerät of Rocket 00000. He succumbs to Blicero's incessant sexual domination of him, and Blicero sacrifices Gottfried in a kind of magic ritual in which he destroys his sacred sexual object.



## Rollo Groast

Groast works in various capacities for the British.

## Myron Grunton

Grunton worked for the BBC, helped to form the Schwarzkommando, and worked for The White Visitation.

## Dr. Laszlo Jamf

Dr. Jamf is the scientist who conditioned Slothrop when he was young and invented the plastic Imipolex G (used to make the Schwarzgerät). Although he never appears in the novel, Dr. Jamf is one of the key characters to understanding the plot, particularly as it relates to Slothrop and his paranoia. Jamf conditioned Slothrop to get an erection at any loud noise, then de-conditioned him, and Pointsman believes that this de-conditioning is responsible for Slothrop's anticipation of the striking point of V-2 rockets. Despite his importance, however, there is some suggestion in the novel that Dr. Jamf is simply a figment of Slothrop's imagination.

## Ludwig

Ludwig is a □surprisingly fat kid of eight or nine□ who is searching for his lost lemming when he meets Slothrop.

## Maria

Maria is Christian's sister who has been mistreated by Josef Ombindi's Empty Ones.

## Major Duane Marvy

A fat, racist American major, Marvy leads a technical intelligence team that hunts Slothrop throughout the Zone. Slothrop narrowly escapes from him (in a hot air balloon) after encountering him at an occupied German rocket factory and escapes him again while disguised as a Russian officer. Later, Marvy is caught in a British raid of a brothel, mistaken for Slothrop, and castrated by Pointsman's operatives.

## Roger Mexico

Mexico is a statistician at Psi Section and the lover of Jessica Swanlake. Mexico endures a conflict between his work and his lover throughout part 1, wishing with Jessica that the war would end, and he is something of an anti-Pointsman figure



because he believes strongly in the randomness of statistics. In part 4, he realizes that Jessica is working for Pointsman, devotes himself to the Counterforce, and plays a prominent role in the effort to find Slothrop.

## **Kurt Mondaugen**

Mondaugen is an electrical engineer who works with Pökler, for Blicero.

## **Ensign Morituri**

Morituri is an ensign in the Japanese Imperial Navy who alerts Slothrop to Greta's capacity for violence. He was in kamikaze training, but he could not stomach it and came to Germany as a Japanese liaison.

## **Clive Mossmoon**

Mossmoon is a plastics expert who is probably gay.

## **Scorpia Mossmoon**

Scorpia is a racist Briton who has an affair with Pirate.

## **Lieutenant Oliver Muffler-Mafflick**

Tantavity, as he is called, is Slothrop's good friend until he dies mysteriously. He shares an office with Slothrop and travels with him to the Hermann Goering Casino, and he has a tendency to get drunk and be mischievous. After Slothrop returns to England he discovers that Muffler-Mafflic has died, and this information drives Slothrop to flee to Nice.

## **Klaus Närrisch**

Närrisch is a slightly crazy rocket guidance expert who worked with Achtfaden on the Schwarzgerät. He has a □lumpy nose, stoop, week's growth of orange and gray whiskers, and oversize leather trenchcoat with no trousers on underneath.□ Närrisch meets Slothrop on Frau Gnabh's ship and leads a raid to free Springer, but Tchitcherine captures him.

## **Domina Noctura**

See Katje Borgesius



## Josef Ombindi

Ombindi is the leader of the "Empty Ones," which is another name for the Herero of Enzian's Otukungurua.

## Andreas Orukambe

Andreas is a Schwarzkommando cohort of Enzian.

## Dr. Edward W. A. Pointsman

Ned Pointsman is a Pavlovian doctor at The White Visitation who forms plans to manipulate Slothrop's life. At first he believes Slothrop can be used to predict V-2 rocket strikes, and, more importantly for him, he thinks he will win the Nobel Prize based on his discovery of Slothrop's psychological condition. Most of Pointsman's attempts are botched or go awry, however; he begins to lose touch with reality, and he ends up in disgrace. Part of his problem is that he believes there is a conspiracy against him and the seven other Pavlovian doctors who are in possession of a book about behaviorism, all of whom seem to be dying.

## Franz Pökler

Pökler is a German chemical engineer whom Blicero (as Lieutenant Weissmann) blackmails into working on the Schwarzgerät by holding his daughter Ilse in a concentration camp. Pökler is allowed to see Ilse (or a different girl pretending to be Ilse) once a year, and this begins to drive him insane. He finally quits the "game" of continuing to work efficiently, visits the concentration camp where his wife and daughter were kept, and tells his story to Slothrop.

## Ilse Pökler

The daughter of Franz and Leni Pökler, Ilse is an innocent child who is put into a concentration camp and probably abused in order to keep her father under control. Towards the end of the novel, however, there is the suggestion that Ilse survives and is not used as a sex object. Ilse is mysteriously connected to Bianca Erdmann, and Slothrop wonders whether they are the same child.

## Leni Pökler

Lena is Franz Pökler's wife, the lover of Peter Sacha, and a Nazi sex slave. She is involved with anti-Nazi intellectuals before the war, she is held in a concentration camp, and after the war she is a prostitute who has sex with Slothrop under the name "Solange."



## Dr. Porkyevitch

Porkyevitch is a scientist in charge of conditioning an octopus named Grigori in order to manipulate Slothrop into loving Katje.

## Graciela Imago Portales

□International eccentric□ Graciela is one of the Argentine anarchists.

## Captain Geoffrey Prentice

Known as □Pirate,□ Prentice is a British intelligence officer who later joins the Counterforce. He stars in the opening scenes of the novel, but he turns out to be important mainly because of his mysterious working relationship with Katje. Pirate is the one to sign Katje on at The White Visitation, and later they work together in the Counterforce.

## Brigadier Ernest Pudding

An eighty-year-old veteran of World War I, Pudding is in charge of The White Visitation. He has delusions about his own importance, he has an intense desire for sadomasochism, and he disapproves of Pointsman's plans for Slothrop. Pointsman keeps him under control, however, by sending Katje to be his dominatrix, and Pudding dies of an infection after eating Katje's feces. Pudding later appears as a spiritual member of the Counterforce.

## Walter Rathenau

A German foreign minister who was assassinated in 1922, Rathenau was an architect of conspiratorial government control policies. The Psi Section attempts to communicate with him in a séance.

## Géza Rózsavölgyi

Rózsavölgyi is a Hungarian scientist who works with Pointsman at The White Visitation.

## Peter Sachsa

□Habitually cool and sarcastic,□ Sachsa works at The White Visitation and is Leni Pökler's lover.





## Säure

See Emil Bummer

## Gustav Schlabone

Gustav is a composer, instrumentalist, and □Säure Bummer's frequent unwelcome doping partner.□ He is involved in the postwar underworld scene.

## Max Schlepzig

Schlepzig is a former German film star and an alternate identity of Slothrop.

## Ian Scuffling

See Tyrone Slothrop

## Webley Silvernail

Silvernail is an audiovisual expert at The White Visitation.

## Broderick Slothrop

Slothrop's father, Broderick sold his son to Dr. Jamf's experiments in exchange for Harvard tuition.

## Tyrone Slothrop

Slothrop is, as far as there is one, the main character of the novel. He is a lieutenant in the United States Army on assignment in London during World War II, and the bulk of his efforts are spent trying to find the Schwarzgerät and uncover its connection to his childhood trauma. Slothrop's goals and desires change greatly in the course of the novel, however. When Franz Pökler asks him whether the Schwarzgerät is □really all you're after?□ Slothrop replies, □Don't know.□ He is extremely promiscuous and a classic sufferer from paranoia, seeing connections in everything. Indeed, he comes to believe that the war and his entire life are run by a group of conspirators. The novel provides much evidence to support this paranoia, although sometimes Pynchon casts doubt about whether various key events, such as Slothrop's romantic encounters or various military operations and conspiracies in which he is involved, are real or imagined.



Slothrop is descended from a long line of Puritan American ancestors, about whom he frequently muses. When he was young, his father and uncle sold him for use in Dr. Laszlo Jamf's scientific experiments, which condition him and then de-condition him to have an erection when he hears a loud noise. Slothrop's involvement with Jamf is perhaps the key reason why he is such a valuable commodity to British, American, and Russian forces. Special forces units search for him throughout the novel, but he narrowly avoids them and their plans for him by employing a series of disguises and alternate identities. After losing his identity at the Hermann Goering Casino, Slothrop takes on the identities of the film star Max Schlepzig, the war correspondent Ian Scuffling, the superhero Rocketman, and the German pig-hero Plechazunga. By the end of the novel, Slothrop's identity seems to have disintegrated altogether, and it is unclear what becomes of him.

## **Solange**

See Leni Pökler

## **Dr. Kevin Spectro**

A neurologist and one of Pointsman's cohorts, Spectro is killed by a V-2 rocket strike.

## **Der Springer**

See Gerhart von Göll

## **Francisco Squalidozzi**

Squalidozzi is the leader of a group of Argentine anarchists seeking refuge in postwar Germany.

## **Jeremy Swanlake**

Jessica's husband, Jeremy, also called "Beaver," is a British officer working at Operation Backfire.

## **Jessica Swanlake**

Jessica is Roger Mexico's passionate lover until she leaves him permanently for her husband. She turns out to be working for Pointsman, and her betrayal of Mexico sends him over the edge.



## Tantavity

See Lieutenant Oliver Muffler-Mafflick

## Vaslav Tchitcherine

Tchitcherine is Enzian's half-brother, who is obsessed with finding Rocket 00000 and destroying Enzian and the Schwarzkommando. Although he has drifted into this rather personal mission, he is a Soviet intelligence officer, and Russian intelligence officers are tracking him in order to locate Enzian themselves. Tchitcherine □comes from Nihilist stock,□ had a dour boyhood, and is characterized as a □mad scavenger.□ Although there is a dramatic build-up to his confrontation with Enzian, Tchitcherine is bewitched by Geli Tripping's magic and passes right by Enzian without recognizing him.

## Miklos Thanatz

Thanatz is Greta Erdmann's husband and Bianca's father. He is involved in sexual practices, including incest with his daughter; was involved in the firing of Rocket 00000; and is captured by the Schwarzkommando in part 4.

## Geli Tripping

Geli is Tchitcherine's lover, but she has an affair with Slothrop as well. She believes she is a witch and seems to possess some sort of magic which she uses to distract Tchitcherine from his mission to confront his half-brother.

## Trudi

Trudi is the blonde lover of Gustav who is involved in Säure's orgies.

## Franz van der Groov

Van der Groov is Katje's ancestor who is involved in the destruction of the dodo bird on the Dutch colonial island of Mauritius.

## Gerhart von Göll

Von Göll, or □Der Springer,□ is a German □film director turned marketeer□ who helps Slothrop locate the Schwarzgerät. Säure puts them in touch by giving Slothrop Springer's symbol, a white chess knight, and Klaus Närrisch leads Slothrop on a mission to rescue Springer from Tchitcherine.



## **Blodgett Waxwing**

Waxwing is a phony identity specialist who provides Slothrop with the documents for his disguise as Ian Scuffling.

## **Verbindungsmann Wimpe**

Wimpe is a German spy as well as a chemist and drug manufacturer. He comes into contact with Tchitcherine and travels to the United States after the war.

# Themes

## Death, Paranoia, and Metaphysics

Pynchon addresses a kaleidoscope of themes in *Gravity's Rainbow*, but he continually returns to ideas related to metaphysics, a branch of philosophy that studies fundamental questions of reality and existence. The novel questions what is real, how one is able to discern reality, and whether there actually is any reality at all. Its complex plot can be seen as a search for causes of death and a quest to discover who or what it is (if anything) that controls the world.

The search for death and its causes is a key theme in the novel, and it is focused on the myriad of efforts to discover and understand German V-2 rockets. In charge of the ultimate V-2 rocket is □Dominus Blicero,□ whose name is intended to mean, lord of death. Blicero fires Rocket 00000 from the region of northern Germany where, according to the African special forces team building it, death resides. The main character involved in the search for the rocket is Slothrop, who is characterized by his obsession with death and his tendency to be drawn to it. Like his search for the rocket, Slothrop's search to understand and possibly reach death becomes hopelessly confused. Nevertheless, Pynchon uses Slothrop to suggest that Western civilization is obsessed with death and seems to focus all of its efforts on destroying life in massive quantities as well as, in a sense, discovering the true nature of death.

Slothrop is not concerned simply with discovering the nature of death, however; he is a victim of paranoia obsessed with finding the nature of the beings that control everything in his life and in the world. Given that the novel suggests that multinational companies such as Shell and General Electric ran both sides of World War II, Pynchon seems to be sympathetic to this view. The paranoid view of the world that maintains there is a malevolent plan deliberately being acted out contrasts with the anti-paranoid view of the world that maintains events are caused by a series of coincidences and there is no conspiracy.

The opposing views of paranoia and anti-paranoia are important to Pynchon's views on metaphysics because this opposition seems to be a metaphor concerning whether any common forces (good or evil) hold the world together or whether the world is a collection of random and meaningless events. By the end of the novel, however, Pynchon's views on paranoia remain unclear. He suggests that humans are constantly trying to determine the nature of reality, death, and existence, but never necessarily coming to any conclusions. He may also be suggesting that corporate and government conspiracies actually exist and are involved in efforts, coordinated or uncoordinated, to wipe out individuality and control the world.



## War and Technology in the Late-Twentieth Century

*Gravity's Rainbow* examines themes of war and technological advances from the beginning of World War II through the Vietnam War. Pynchon is concerned about the enormous and complex technologies for destroying human life that have proliferated since World War II. His novel seems to point out that late-twentieth-century mechanisms of destruction threaten not just life but identity and selfhood because they alienate people from their uniqueness and their concepts of who they are. Nearly every character in the novel is drawn from his/her true life and identity (Roger from Jessica, Brigadier Pudding from his sexual fulfillment, Slothrop from his literal identity and his home) because of war and technology. Pynchon may be suggesting that the effects of war and conflict are disastrous, violent, and far-reaching due to late-twentieth century technological advances.

## Race, the Holocaust, and the Civil Rights Movement

Racism is a common element in many of Pynchon's key storylines, and Pynchon considers the theme of race within the setting of World War II as well as the 1960s U.S. civil rights movement. The quest to find Enzian's African Schwarzkommando is perhaps the most prominent of the plotlines in which Pynchon explores race relations. Characters such as Slothrop and Tchitcherine are obsessed with racial difference, and their obsessions trace back to childhood traumas involving racist conditioning. Blicero and others are also prejudiced against Jews, and Pynchon writes openly about the horrors of the Holocaust. Much of Pynchon's black and white symbolism and allusion (Geli Tripping's white magic or the imagery surrounding Domina Noctura, for example) emphasizes that racism is widespread, formidable, and dominant in postwar Western culture. Pynchon also connects racist ideology to capitalist and governmental conspiracies such as that of the German company IG Farben, which used concentration camp labor to produce chemicals, one of which was the Zyklon-B rat poison used in the gas chambers to exterminate Nazi prisoners.

## Globalization and Empire

*Gravity's Rainbow* analyzes globalization and empire both in their political dimensions and in their tendencies to destroy individual identity. Politically, Pynchon examines and critiques empires ranging from the Germans and their dealings with the African Hereros, to Dutch colonial Mauritius, to British, Russian, and American plans for world domination. As depicted in the novel, empire building is a means of subjugating another culture and controlling the lives of everyone living in it. Additionally, Pynchon outlines a widespread conspiracy in the non-governmental arena of capitalist globalization. The novel suggests that war is a means for companies such as Shell and General Electric to continue the business of buying and selling, with no regard for human life and little tolerance for individuals who want to control their own destinies.

# Style

## Fact and Fiction

Pynchon's novel is full of historical and cultural allusions from all over the world, and many of them are historically accurate details. Characters such as Walter Rathenau, numerous World War II episodes, corporate references to Shell, General Electric, and the German chemical company IG Farben, and stories from colonial Germany, Holland, and Russia are all based on thorough historical research. However, Pynchon often mixes these elements of historical fact with fiction, so it is difficult to tell what has been invented and what has been taken from factual historical accounts.

Pynchon's allusions to history provide an interpretation of the events themselves, and they place his thematic and philosophical ideas into historical context. His ambitious claims about the nature of reality and the important questions he raises about postwar culture are grounded in multi-layered references to historical realities, some of which are anachronistic and some of which are subtly altered. Pynchon uses the blend of the historically accurate world and his fictional world that operates within and around it to challenge the reader's beliefs about history, reality, and Western culture. The result is a pastiche of interminable references and implications that make *Gravity's Rainbow* both a convincing and challenging historical and cultural document.

## Fragmentation

*Gravity's Rainbow* is famous for its almost impenetrable difficulty. Plot lines are extremely difficult to follow, important characters disappear for five hundred pages at a time, and the novel does not have any sustained character studies (even Slothrop disappears toward the end). The narrative perspective is often extremely unclear, and the characters (including Slothrop) seem able to discover their true roles in the complex postwar world. Perhaps most importantly, the reader is never sure what is real and what is imagined: evidence at various points suggests that even central events, such as Slothrop's romantic encounters, Dr. Laszlo Jamf, and the Schwarzkommando's quest to build Rocket 00001 are simply imagined fantasies. The pervasive confusion and fragmentation are key parts of the stylistic method by which Pynchon creates an overwhelming and challenging world where certainties do not exist.



# Historical Context

## The United States in the 1960s and Early 1970s

Life in the United States during the time in which Pynchon wrote and published *Gravity's Rainbow* was marked by dramatic social change and turbulent conflict. The civil rights movement, a term which normally refers to the effort to end discrimination and segregation against African Americans, reached a climax in the 1960s. In the South, sit-in campaigns at segregated businesses, the integration of black students into segregated schools and colleges, and demonstrations against discrimination were met with extraordinary violence. Police tactics such as releasing dogs and spraying high-powered fire hoses on groups of high school students focused national attention on leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-68). One year after King's "I Have a Dream" speech at the 1963 March on Washington, D.C., President Lyndon B. Johnson (1908-73) signed the Civil Rights Act, but race relations continued to be strained and black rights organizations diverged in their missions and beliefs.

In addition to the turbulence surrounding the civil rights movement, the United States was shaken in the 1960s by a series of high-profile assassinations as well as the country's increased involvement in Vietnam, that extended from 1957 to 1975. President John F. Kennedy (1917-63) was murdered in 1963, and Dr. King and presidential candidate Robert Kennedy were killed in 1968. Some theorists have alleged that the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy were conspiracies. Meanwhile, the United States escalated its military involvement in Vietnam, having instigated a draft and committed to a full-scale war by the mid-1960s. The war was an extension of the cold war (a competition in stockpiling arms engaged in principally by the United States and the U.S.S.R.), and many of its horrors were brought home to televisions in the United States.

The dramatic developments of this period shocked many Americans and contributed to a rise in social activism. There was a massive opposition campaign against the Vietnam War that continued into Richard Nixon's presidency and contributed to the U.S. withdrawal in defeat from the country. At the time *Gravity's Rainbow* was published, Nixon was involved in the Watergate scandal (1972-75) that led to the surfacing of cover-ups, corruption, criminal acts, and conspiracy on the part of the president and his administration.

## World War II

World War II, which began in the late 1930s and continued until 1945, was the largest and most devastating conflict in human history. Its causes included the economic desperation in Germany following World War I and the rise of ambitious military governments in Germany, Italy, and Japan. The principal parties of the war were the Allied Powers (including Britain, the Soviet Union, and later the United States) and the





Axis Powers (principally Germany, Japan, and Italy), and the war was fought on two fronts: in Europe and in Asia and the South Pacific. In the late 1930s, Japan invaded China, and later it fought the United States and the Soviet Union. Adolf Hitler's fascist government invaded Poland in 1939, and the German army made rapid advances in Europe until it controlled France, Norway, and much of Eastern Europe and the Balkan region. Hitler attempted to invade Britain in 1940, and when this failed the Nazis began an extended bombing campaign of London, called the Blitz. Meanwhile the Soviet Union took control of countries, including Finland and Romania, and Hitler staged a surprise attack on Soviet armies in 1941, breaking a non-aggression pact.

The United States entered the war in 1941 and sent reinforcements to Europe while Nazi armies were preoccupied on the eastern front. Britain continued to endure severe bombing campaigns, but the Allied invasion of Normandy in 1944 helped turn the tide of the war. From this point until Germany's surrender, Allied armies remained on the offensive, and Soviet soldiers invaded Berlin in April of 1945. When the Allies liberated continental Europe, they found evidence of the Nazi Holocaust in which millions of Jews, Catholics, homosexuals, and others had been murdered in concentration camps. In August 1945, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan, and Japan soon surrendered. The climate in postwar Europe was characterized by increasing tensions between capitalist and communist victors. Areas occupied by the Soviets became communist countries while Allied-occupied countries became capitalist, Germany was divided into eastern (pro-Soviet) and western (pro-Allied) countries, and Berlin, which is wholly located in the eastern sector, was itself divided into capitalist and communist sections that were later separated by a massive concrete wall.

## Critical Overview

*Gravity's Rainbow* received very positive reviews in the press and among academic critics, although some critics have maintained that the novel is incomprehensible. Edward Mendelson (quoted in John Stark's *Dictionary of Literary Biography* entry on Pynchon) writes, "few books in this century have achieved the range and depth of this one. . . . This is certainly the most important novel to be published in English in the past thirty years." In his influential 1973 essay "Rocket Power," Richard Poirier stresses Pynchon's historical importance and argues that the book is "a profound (and profoundly funny) historical meditation on the humanity sacrificed to a grotesque delusion—the Faustian illusion of the inequality of lives and the inequality of the nature of signs." The novel was disqualified from winning the Pulitzer Prize because the advisory board deemed it unreadable and obscene, but it won the National Book Award in 1974.

Subsequent criticism has dealt with various issues, including the novel's significance to postmodern theory and its historical and political analysis of the late-twentieth-century Western world. In his 1982 essay, Tony Tanner discusses the experience of reading the novel and how Pynchon fits into American literary history: "[Pynchon] is a key contemporary figure in the great tradition of those who extend the possibilities of fiction-making in arresting and enriching ways—not in this or that 'Great Tradition,' but in the great tradition of the novel itself." Dwight Eddins, meanwhile, explores the religious aspects of the novel: "The basic conflict of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the dialectic that finally structures the novel, is a religious one. It is marked by mystical and supernatural manifestations on both sides, by the presence of fanatical devotees, and by a drive for nothing less than metaphysical dominance." Margaret Lynd's 2004 essay, by contrast, emphasizes the novel's scientific issues: "The power that science has acquired over the past four centuries to determine the scope and parameters of human possibility dominates the multiple themes of *Gravity's Rainbow*." These critical perspectives are examples of the wide variety of critical approaches to the novel.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1



# Critical Essay #1

*Trudell is a doctoral student of English literature at Rutgers University. In the following essay, Trudell argues that sexuality and illicit sexual affairs are key topics by which Pynchon develops his critique of postwar culture in Gravity's Rainbow.*

A common motif in the diverse and complex array of events in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the affair, or the brief sexual relationship, that is usually extramarital or illicit in some way. Characters are constantly having sex, running off together, cheating on their partners, and becoming carried away by their forbidden fantasies. Frequently, they engage in violent, sadomasochistic acts that include rape and pedophilia—acts that led the Pulitzer Prize advisory board to deem the novel obscene. Affairs often involve spying on the part of one or even both parties, and lovers have a tendency to leave or betray each other based on their roles in one of the novel's many plots and conspiracies. From Mexico's affair with Jessica to Katje's sadomasochistic control of Brigadier Pudding to Blicero's sexual domination of Gottfried to Slothrop's pedophilic sex with Bianca, illicit relationships are among Pynchon's most frequent devices.

Pynchon uses sexual affairs in his thematic agenda for a variety of reasons, including as a twist on the conventional tool of the romantic encounter as a way to drive the plot (this allows Pynchon to build up and then betray his readers' expectations). Sexuality, particularly illicit or deviant sexuality, is especially important in the characterization of Slothrop, whose identity is based on his frequent sexual acts as well as his sexual desire for death itself. Perhaps the most important role sexuality plays in the novel, however, is to develop and underscore Pynchon's central message that late-twentieth-century humanity is obsessed with securing its own violent destruction, both literally and in terms of its metaphysical identity.

The novel's numerous sexual affairs are, among other things, authorial tricks that involve the reader in a straightforward, coherent, and traditional narrative which Pynchon then completely undercuts or eliminates, forcing the confused reader to speed off on a completely different storyline. Affairs perform this function well because they immediately create a series of traditional expectations for a reader: the common convention of the love story in which two characters meet and fall in love, often working together to solve a mystery or achieve a positive resolution to the crux of the plot. This sort of love story was particularly common in American films of Pynchon's era, a medium to which the novel refers frequently. Unlike a formulaic film or a predictable love story, however, Pynchon first complicates the affair by rendering it forbidden or illicit, then overturns readers' expectations about how it fits into the greater plot and finally abandons the relationship entirely.

Brief, illicit sexual encounters are particularly common to Slothrop, Pynchon's main character. Slothrop's promiscuity is perhaps his defining personality characteristic, and it is one of Pynchon's favorite tools to rapidly jolt the reader into a new narrative mode and move the plot forward. In a sense, Slothrop's affairs are connected to the V-2 rocket strikes on London not because they anticipate them according to any scientific rules of



behaviorism, but because the rockets metaphorically represent the incessant shocks to identity and purpose that occur because of technological and cultural modernity. In Pynchon's worldview, rapid escalations in technologies of mass destruction have changed the way people live and conduct relationships. By disorienting the reader and transferring the action to a string of distinct affairs, Pynchon underscores the lack of purpose in postwar life and the deep confusion that characterizes late-twentieth-century Western culture.

Slothrop is an appropriate character to demonstrate Pynchon's vision of modern life because he is an anti-hero, someone whose identity has been stolen, who is hopelessly separated from his home, and who has very little knowledge or understanding of his goal and purpose in the postwar world. His past affairs completely disappear from his life (another reason that the image of V-2 rockets destroying their locations is an apt metaphor) with no possibility of lingering attachment or comfort. Perhaps his most heartfelt or loving attachment is, perversely, to the young girl Bianca, and she dies a gruesome death on the ship where they met and had sex. Taken as a whole, Slothrop's hopeless and isolating affairs define his identity as an absence of identity because they contain no possibility for sustained human contact. This is particularly true because they are generally sadomasochistic, violent, or socially unacceptable.

Pynchon also uses Slothrop's sexual affairs as a technique to prepare the reader for Slothrop's disappearance in part 4 of the novel; the fragmentation of Slothrop's character is the natural result and unavoidable outcome of his incoherent, unstable identity. Readers are surprised by Slothrop's disappearance because Pynchon sets up the novel as a mystery and readers expect mysteries to be solved, but irresolution and dismay are the only possible results of Slothrop's problematic sexuality. His love life is as unsolvable as the corporate-governmental mystery/conspiracy working against him; neither has any hope of being exposed, uncovered, or resolved.

Nevertheless, Pynchon teases the reader by tracing this conspiracy back to Slothrop's childhood conditioning by Laszlo Jamf, explaining Slothrop's importance to the many corporate and governmental agents searching for him on the basis of his unique, manipulated sexuality. Insofar as there is a root solution to the mysteries of the novel, it is connected to Slothrop's childhood and his sexual conditioning. In fact, all of Slothrop's military and conspiratorial adventures are related to his sexuality. His sexual adventures precede the rocket strikes, his erections are related to the rockets, his searches and missions always involve the objects of his lust, his lovers are frequently also the lovers of key governmental agents (including Tchitcherine, Blicero and Pökler), and he is betrayed and manipulated by lover-spies such as Katje. Slothrop's promiscuous sexual identity becomes increasingly violent, obscene, and illicit until he is having sex with little girls and literally turning into the pig Plechazunga, and eventually it is utterly fragmented and destroyed.

In his entry on Pynchon for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* John Stark argues that *Gravity's Rainbow* is preoccupied with developing a "culture of death," and he points towards a comment in the final episode of the novel that Slothrop "might be in love, in sexual love, with his, and his race's, death." This sexual connection to Pynchon's



central theme of death is shared (among other characters) by Dominus Blicero, whose represents the spirit of death in the novel (even his name is a conflagration of German and Latin that means "Lord of Death"). Blicero's obsessive sadomasochistic domination of Gottfried and his ultimate murder of Gottfried by placing him inside Rocket 00000, are extreme examples of the desire to explore and control death—a desire that Slothrop also feels.

The sexual obsession with death in *Gravity's Rainbow* is, in part, a reference to Sigmund Freud's theory of the "death drive." Freud believed that there is an unconscious desire to die in human psychology which, like Buddhist philosophy, seeks to reach a void or a state of non-existence. Although Pynchon suggests that this desire exists and is an extremely important force, he frames it as a socio-cultural phenomenon as opposed to the kind of innate desire described by Freud. In fact, the novel's entire structure is designed to emphasize that modern, post-World-War-II Western culture is obsessively dedicated to the sexual violation and destruction of the human race. This nihilistic desire to rape or sexually dominate humankind extends to humanity's conception of itself and its metaphysical convictions about its purpose. Pynchon argues that postwar culture is like Slothrop or Dominus Blicero in the sense that it sacrifices what is most private and most sacred to it in a kind of self-obliterating ritual that destroys all forms of identity and purpose.

An alternative example of Pynchon's suggestion that the death drive is a cultural phenomenon of the postwar world is the illicit relationship of Roger and Jessica. These two characters (not Slothrop) are the protagonists of part 1, and the reader is invested in the success of their relationship, which is one of true love according to the conventional rules of romance. Their relationship is a sanctuary from the war, and it is the opposite of the trend towards death, nihilism, and the destruction of humanity that the war represents. They are, in a sense, the great hope of the novel, and their relationship signifies a trend away from death. According to the narrator's dramatic claim in part 1, episode 6, "They are in love. F— the war."

It is no coincidence, therefore, that Roger and Jessica disappear for five hundred pages around the time that the war ends, and, when they finally reappear, they separate permanently and bitterly. Roger discovers that Jessica was, in fact, working on behalf of Pointsman, and he goes slightly crazy, urinating on Pointsman's desk before dedicating himself (like Slothrop) to finding Rocket 00000. The fact that Roger and Jessica's relationship ends in this way suggests that the culture of destruction has become permanent, the "war" (in the conspiratorial sense of a mechanism for buying, selling, and destruction) is interminable, and humanity is actively seeking to destroy itself.

Slothrop's experience parallels Roger and Jessica's. As the novel progresses and humanity moves closer to the cataclysmic event of the atomic bomb, Slothrop gets further and further away from his home and from any sense of self-understanding. He seems to be discovering some kind of truth about himself and his childhood, but in fact the solution to the mystery of Slothrop's sexuality (and the mystery of the corporate-governmental conspiracies of the novel) is ironic. Laszlo Jamf turns out to have been quite probably nothing more than a figment of Slothrop's imagination, and the deviant



string of sexual affairs slowly end as they become increasingly obscene. Slothrop's journey of self-discovery, as far as it is one, leaves him with no identity at all; it only leads him to a nihilistic vision of purposelessness and despair. Sexuality, particularly illicit sexuality, is the key to understanding the vast and mysterious conspiracy of the novel, but this key does not actually uncover or solve the mystery; it simply reinforces Pynchon's message that the postwar world is an immense mechanism for self-obliteration and death.

**Source:** Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on *Gravity's Rainbow*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

## Topics for Further Study

Some of *Gravity's Rainbow* is historically factual and some is not. Research an important aspect of the plot such as the German rocket program, and write an essay that discusses what is historically accurate and what is fictional about the event or series of events in question. Also discuss Pynchon's efforts at satire and supposition about history, including what poses as history but is not necessarily factual.

Give a class presentation about the history of conspiracy theory during the 1960s and early 1970s, when Pynchon was writing *Gravity's Rainbow*. While you are doing your research, keep in mind the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, the scandals and cover-ups of the Nixon administration, hostility towards the U.S. civil rights movement, and theories about United States involvement in the Vietnam War.

Write an essay about the scientific advances of the World War II era and their long-term effects. Include applications of mathematics in breaking or forming codes, advances in aerodynamics, the race to create an atomic bomb, machine technology, radar, and other innovations to which *Gravity's Rainbow* refers.

Lead a class discussion about postmodernism and post-World-War II American literature. Prepare yourself by reading about postmodern theory and acquainting yourself with the most influential American writers of the late-twentieth century. How did literature change in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s? What were some of the most important foreign influences on the American literary scene? How does Pynchon fit into the various movements, texts, and ideas of his era?





## Compare and Contrast

**1940s:** The United States sends great numbers of soldiers to fight in World War II on the side of the Allies.

**1970s:** The United States fights the Vietnam War, an escalation of cold war tensions with the Soviet Union.

**Today:** As of 2005, the United States Army continues to fight in Iraq after having invaded the country based on the false claim that it was stockpiling weapons of mass destruction.

**1940s:** World War II finally lifts the United States out of the Great Depression (1929-39), and soldiers return home to start families in great numbers.

**1970s:** The Vietnam War ends, Richard Nixon resigns, the postwar economic prosperity in the United States dwindles due to energy crises and industrial competition from Asia.

**Today:** The United States economy remains strong despite the downturns following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

**1940s:** Tensions begin to show between Western capitalist countries, including Britain, France, and the United States, and communist countries, including the Soviet Union and China.

**1970s:** The cold war is at its height, with very poor Soviet and U.S. relations, although Richard Nixon fosters diplomatic relations with Communist China.

**Today:** The cold war ends, Russia is a capitalist country, and the United States is the world's only superpower.

## What Do I Read Next?

Pynchon's short novel *The Crying Lot of 49* (1967) is more direct and readable than *Gravity's Rainbow*. Its southern California detective story progresses, though, from clarity to disorder.

Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel *Lolita* is the shocking and enthralling story of a professor's illicit relationship with a pre-pubescent girl.

John Keegan's *The Second World War* (1989) is an authoritative single-volume resource about World War II.

*Catch 22* (1961) by Joseph Heller tells the story of a World War II bombardier named Yossarian who struggles to ensure his own survival in a world in which bureaucracies utterly control people's destiny.



## Further Study

Hawthorne, Mark D., "Pynchon's Early Labyrinths," in *Critique*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Spring 1998, pp. 78-93.

Hawthorne's essay discusses labyrinths as they are constructed and presented in Pynchon's fiction, focusing particularly on *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Hume, Katherine, *Pynchon's Mythography: An Approach to Gravity's Rainbow*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.

Hume tracks Pynchon's use of the myth of Orpheus in *Gravity's Rainbow*. A prodigious musician, Orpheus is granted the right to bring his wife back from the dead but breaks the agreement by looking back for her, thus losing her forever.

Newman, Robert D., *Understanding Thomas Pynchon*, University of South Carolina Press, 1986.

This broad discussion of Pynchon and his works is basic, readable, and accessible.

Weisenburger, Steven, *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel*, University of Georgia Press, 1988.

Weisenburger's guide to Pynchon's novel is an indispensable resource for first-time and repeat readers. It includes plot summary information and thoroughly researched notes about important or confusing details and references.



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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of *Novels for Students (NfS)* is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's "For Students" Literature line, *NfS* is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently



studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

### Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

### How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).





- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

### Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

### Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

### We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: [ForStudentsEditors@gale.com](mailto:ForStudentsEditors@gale.com). Or write to the editor at:

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