Mason & Dixon Short Guide

Mason & Dixon by Thomas Pynchon

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Characters

Pynchon characterizes Mason and Dixon by their actions and reactions to people and problems that they encounter on three continents. Never compatible, they bicker constantly. Mason considers his observations with the telescope as most important, but Dixon reminds him that without the transit and chain, they could not survey the line. They have contrasting personalities. Mason is a moody loner, while Dixon is gregarious and hyperactive. Mason wears a powdered wig, and Dixon wears a red jacket with silver buttons and a three-cornered hat. Mason speaks in British vernacular.

Dixon has distinctive Quaker speech patterns, using pronouns thee, tha, and huz. Mason is a Deist with spiritual conflicts, and Dixon is an expelled Quaker.

During their early association, Dixon encourages friendship, which Mason rejects. Dixon is an alcoholic who cannot endure solitude. In coffeehouses, taverns, and chicken fights, he mingles with gamblers, fortunetellers, sailors, slaves, and prostitutes. Mason broods about alienation from his family, his wife Rebekah's death, rejection by the Royal Society. He escapes his misery by observing the stars.

Pynchon uses stories with action and dialogue to sketch secondary characters.

Some of these imaginative digressions resemble tall tales that people tell around a campfire or recount in taverns after many drinks. Rev'd Cherrycoke in his role as a third-person omniscient observer relates such stories to the LeSpark family: Captain Zhang, the former Jesuit and Feng Shui master; the Wear River Worm; Voam and his traveling sideshow which features an electric eel; Swede, the axeman, whose Viking ancestors have prior claim to America; Armand, the French chef, and his robotic duck; Luise Redzinger and her affair with Armand; and Dixon's dream about going to the center of the earth.

Social Concerns

Property rights and control of commerce were contentious concerns between nations, charter companies, and individuals during the eighteenth century, the setting of Mason & Dixon. England and France are engaged in a power struggle for colonies in North America and in India. The British East India Company has a monopoly to control trade routes and commodities at Tenerife, St. Helena, and Capetown, South Africa. In America, heirs of William Penn and Lord Baltimore argue over property boundaries between Pennsylvania and Maryland, and in 1763, Charles Mason, an astronomer, and Jeremiah Dixon, a surveyor, arrive in Philadelphia to settle this eighty-year-old dispute. The struggle for power and control over land and commerce provides the motivation and framework for this encompassing, complicated vision of social values and practices that became the founding principles of America.

Neither Mason nor Dixon has aristocratic ties. Mason is the son of a miller.

His dead wife Rebekah is from a family of weavers. Although brilliant and well trained as an astronomer at Greenwich by James Bradley, Mason is denied recognition in the Royal Society because of political intrigue and his humble background.

Dixon's family are Quakers, persecuted in England as dissenters. Intelligent and personable, he is trained as a surveyor by William Emerson. Dixon's casual, smiling demeanor masks hatred for the British authorities who persecuted his family.

Prior to his contract with Mason and the Royal Society, he has surveyed property lines in Durham, England, where large estates are being broken up.

In America, social ranks have broken down. Except for families with large land grants, most of the colonists are former peasants and craftsmen dispossessed of property and family ties in Europe. Without an aristocratic class to oppress them, people with talent, superior intellect, and audacity find success in colonial America.

Freed from European aristocracy, the diverse colonists are unified by a rebellious spirit: They pledge no allegiance to the British crown or its representatives.

King George refuses to address their complaints: no representation in Parliament, high taxes, an inefficient legal system, and the presence of red-coated British soldiers.

West of the Allegheny Mountains, relations between Europeans and Native Americans are hostile. Law enforcement on the frontier is nonexistent, and many settlers revert to savagery. Indian tribes forbid white settlers to cross the northsouth Warrior Path west of the Allegheny Mountains.

To impress upon Mason and Dixon that they should survey the Visto, the dividing line between Pennsylvania and Maryland, no farther west, a Delaware chief shows them a

bloody scalp with long blonde hair attached. Mason and Dixon end their survey at the Warrior Path and return to Philadelphia.

Along the Atlantic coast, cities and towns are booming. Jobs are plentiful in trade and construction. Wealth and opportunity offer social advancement to a rising middle class. As the country opens up along the Visto, taverns and inns appear at every crossroads. Unfortunately, the Mason and Dixon line creates property disputes, even as they survey it, and eventually it becomes a division marker between free states and slave states.

The ancient institution of slavery is another recurring social concern of Mason & Dixon. Mason and Dixon first encounter the evils of slavery in South Africa and later in America. They observe men and charter companies accumulating fortunes on the backs of slaves, with governments and religious sects tolerating it. When Mason and Dixon arrive in Capetown to record observations of the Transit of Venus for the Royal Society, they board in the home of Dutch settlers, Herr and Frau Vroom, where the house slaves are light-skinned Malaysians. Gregarious Dixon mingles with the Capetown natives and sailors whose ships come into port for fresh water. He partakes of their conversation, games, food, and drink. He discovers ketjap, a spicy native sauce, and learns more about the many cultures that converge in the ever-changing Capetown population. Dixon observes the degrading effects that ownership of another human has on both owner and slave.

Many slaves commit suicide.

Being one of the few white men of equal social rank to the Vrooms in Capetown, Mason is the object of the seductive charms of three Vroom daughters and Frau Vroom. To his amazement, their Malaysian slave Austra asks him to impregnate her because Frau Vroom wants a light-skinned slave baby to sell.

Meanwhile, Herr Vroom, a Calvinist on Sunday, leads a dissolute private life, gambling and whoring with slaves in the native ghetto. He is unaware that his Dutch women and slave are all trying to seduce Mason. Mason and Dixon are disgusted by the Vroom family's hypocrisy and attribute it to their isolation at the ends of the earth.

To their disappointment, Mason and Dixon find that slavery also exists in the American colonies. George Washington's butler Gershom, tells master-slave joaks, like an interlocutor in a minstrel show. In winter when surveying the line is impossible, Dixon travels in the South, but because plantations are off the main roads and harvest is over, he sees few slaves. In Baltimore, Dixon seizes the lash of a slave driver and forces him to free his slaves.

Another social concern of the novel began with Isaac Newton's scientific discoveries in 1666 that set off a wave of questions about the nature of the universe, especially those regarding measurements of time and distance. Scientists postulate that whoever can understand the relationship between time and space can measure the universe. In the past, sailors have relied on luck and the stars to guide them. Maps are inaccurate. Because of competition for world trade, French scientists compete with the British for

navigational technology. In 1736, John Harrison invents the chronometer, which revolutionizes navigation. Astronomers John Bradley, Nevil Maskelyne, and Charles Mason work on lunar observations to establish Greenwich time and to make longitude on maps accurate. In 1752, the Royal Society recommends the adoption of the Gregorian calendar, which cuts eleven days from the Julian calendar and causes riots in London.

People think it is a "popish" plot to steal their time and money.

Also competing in the race to measure time and distance are the Jesuits, a powerful religious order of Catholic priests who have telescopes, timepieces, hot air balloons, and other communication technology to aid them in their search for technological dominance. This militaristic order of priests aggressively pursues scientific knowledge in the name of Jesus and sends spies to observe research in progress. In 1762, because of their interest in international trade, science, and industry and their meddling in politics, the Jesuits are expelled from France, so they establish a new headquarters in Quebec, Canada. A former Jesuit, Chinese Captain Zhang, joins the survey party and warns Mason and Dixon that their Visto is like sha, a conduit for evil spirits that brings failure, poverty, disgrace, and betrayal.

Religious conflict is another social concern. Pynchon includes characters who have ties to nine religious sects: Deists, Quakers, Anglicans, Calvinists, Catholics, Presbyterians, German Pietests, Jews, and Naturalists. Isaac Newton, Mason's hero, and other scientists of the eighteenth-century adhered to the belief that God created the universe like a perfect clock that ticks away into infinity and operates according to natural laws: time and space can be measured, and one can know the creator's mind and predict the nature of the universe by means of mathematical equations.

Like Newton, Mason has faith in a Deistic creator, but as he stargazes, he senses a spiritual presence in the heavens that initiates constant movement and change. He senses an awesome presence in nature as he and Dixon stand on the mountain ridge overlooking the Ohio Valley. Far from European civilization at the end of the Visto, spirits of the Earth and heavens seem sentient.

Religion splits colonial society into factions: the Calvinists in Capetown and New England, the Quakers and German Pietists in Pennsylvania, the Scots Presbyterians, the Anglicans, the Catholics in Maryland, the Deists, and the Buddhists and Native American nature worshipers. Pynchon portrays traditional Christian religious groups of the eighteenth century as hypocritical and silent about slavery, genocide, colonialism, and sexual immorality.

Techniques

Pynchon's postmodern style blends tragedy and satire, fiction and nonfiction, fantasy and realism, historical characters and hundreds of secondary characters, unresolved conflicts, lengthy sentences, archaic language and spelling, dialogue without tag lines, stream-of-consciousness flashbacks, poems and songs, and anachronisms.

First-person narrator, Rev'd Wicks Cherrycoke shifts to a third-person omniscient point of view. He claims that his omniscience is the result of close association with Mason and Dixon in Capetown and on the Visto. However, his twin nephews Pitt and Pliny protest when his tales become too fantastic. "How could you possibly know that?" they ask.

The plot moves as slowly as a sailboat held back by unfavorable winds and ocean currents. The stream-of-consciousness technique reveals Mason's and Dixon's thoughts, emotions, adolescent experiences and family conflicts, and their past experiences as astronomer and surveyor.

Pynchon's introduction of new secondary characters in every chapter also slows the plot. They interact with the protagonists briefly and then sink beneath the surface: James Bradley, Rebekah, the Vrooms and Austra in Capetown, Maskelyne in St. Helena, Benjamin Franklin, George and Martha Washington in Philadelphia, Pitt and Pliny, Tenebrae, Ethelmer, Armand the French chef, Swede the axeman, Zhang the Feng Shui master, the Wolf of the Jesuits, Captain Shelby, the frontier soldier, and hundreds of others.

Pynchon employs archaic spelling and vocabulary, typical of novels in the 1700s and used by Henry Fielding and Oliver Goldsmith, for instance, Phiz for "face," Lanthorn for "lantern," and Smoak for "smoke." He also capitalizes common nouns and personal pronouns but is not consistent in this practice.

Dialogue mimics regional speech patterns: the Dutch Vroom family, the angry captain of the Seahorse, the Ulster Scots Presbyterians. Most noticeable is Dixon's Quaker speech. He tells Mason, "Why aye . . . I see You've a brisk Brain in Your gourd there, and I'm pleas'd to be working with such as it be . . . ?" Too few tag lines often make the speaker obscure.

Pynchon uses unforgettable metaphors and analogies to explain life and the universe. In a headnote from one of his sermons, Cherrycoke compares God to the sun, humans to a planet, and gravity to God's love. Mason's father, the baker, compares the elements of human life to a loaf of bread. Yeast is the spirit, the crust, our skin, and the smooth dough, our body, full of many tiny bubbles that allow us to grow in body and in spirit.

Anachronisms abound, such as pizza made of anchovies and ketjap, hero sandwiches, a president who smokes marijuana and does not inhale, sunglasses, G. Rex (King

George), Benjamin Franklin's advice in his cut-rate apothecary, "Never pay retail price," and others.

Pynchon mixes humorous and bitter satire with tragedy. He satirizes famous colonial leaders. He portrays Benjamin Franklin and George Washington as modern politicians. Franklin, wearing orchid-tinted sunglasses, is an inventor, journalist, philosopher, ambassador, leader of the people, cut-rate druggist, nightclub entertainer, and ladies' man.

George and Martha Washington entertain Mason and Dixon at Mount Vernon.

After a tour of the farm and refreshments, George and Martha sing "The Transit of Venus," a close harmony duet, and Gershom, their Jewish black slave, tells Joaks, a la Sammy Davis, Jr. Before they leave, Washington encourages them to become land speculators on the Visto and invites them to smoke leaves of his recent hemp crop (marijuana) but urges them not to inhale.

Cherrycoke often quotes Timothy Tox, a journalist and poet who writes satire about colonial society. Tox with his Pennsylvaniad is a type of Alexander Pope with his Dunciad. Tox may possibly be the pen name of Cherrycoke, who has been exiled from England for publishing names of greedy, unprincipled aristocrats; or perhaps the pen name for Benjamin Franklin, famous for his satirical editorial profiles.

In his recitation, Cherrycoke also includes sea chanteys, drinking songs, worker's songs, and a story or two from The Ghastly Fop, a pornographic novel. In digressions, he tells the tale of the French chef Armand and his robotic duck, a slapstick satire of technology and satellites. Another story is about Zepho Beck's kastoranthropy, a condition that turns him into a beaver during full moon, instead of lycanthropy, or the condition of becoming a werewolf.

Pynchon employs bitter sarcasm in his portrayal of religious sects, especially Calvinists and Jesuits. In Capetown, the Vroom family's slaves and sexual depravity contrasts with the strict doctrine of Calvinism which they profess.

With the belief that knowledge is power, the Jesuits in Canada, led by the Wolf of Jesus, have a worldwide communications system to ferret out scientific discoveries. Instead of religious and spiritual fervor, power and perversity motivate zealous Jesuit leaders. For instance, they sponsor the Widows of Christ, a cult of heretical prostitutes.

Colonists came to America for freedom to worship and to escape persecution and poverty in Europe. Ironically, in America, these same colonists condone slavery and confiscate Indian lands. With the line they survey, Mason and Dixon, who deplore slavery, contribute to its perpetuation.

Themes

The theme of isolation and alienation is a thread running throughout the book.

Isolation in Capetown drives the Vroom family to religious hypocrisy and sexual immorality. Isolation on St. Helena drives Nevil Maskelyne to eccentricity and paranoia. Isolation on the frontier drives settlers like the Paxton brothers to violence and depravity.

Journeys are also a major theme. During the course of their journeys to three continents, Mason and Dixon encounter different cultures, new foods, poems, and music sung by sailors, workers, and famous people. It is "like a stew being stirred around," says Dixon. They encounter many political, scientific, and religious arguments. However, none of these journeys resolve personal conflicts that confound Mason or Dixon.

Another theme is that of boundaries.

The Visto, or Mason Dixon line, between Pennsylvania and Maryland creates an unnatural boundary, as opposed to the natural boundaries of mountains and rivers. Even as the loggers fell trees along the Visto, the line creates property disputes. Later, it contributes to separation of Americans into political, religious, cultural, and racial groups.

An environmentalist theme that contrasts the natural and unnatural is pervasive throughout Pynchon's novel. Feng Shui, which literally means "wind and water" is an ancient Chinese belief that positive and negative energy in the environment is in constant flux. Individuals sense by instinct the "rightness" or "wrongness" of something manmade in a natural setting, like the Visto. Pynchon does not identify the theme of Feng Shui until he introduces the character Captain Zhang. On the Seahorse, Mason and Dixon sense impending disaster before the sea battle. Mason senses that Capetown is not as good a location to observe the Transit of Venus as Bencoolen.

Strong winds on St. Helena negatively affect astronomers who go there. As axemen cut the Visto across America, Mason and Dixon experience uneasiness and guilt. Indians tell them the Visto is not a natural boundary like rivers and mountains. The Mason Dixon Line illustrates the truth of Feng Shui because it later separates America into free states and slave states.

Key Questions

Reading Pynchon's voluminous 773 page picaresque novel is like stargazing on a cloudy night. Events of the eighteenth century grow hazy behind clouds of antiquated language and a blend of historical and fictional characters.

Mason & Dixon is a challenging book, requiring knowledge of world geography and historical events that occurred during the Age of Reason. For instance, a reader will benefit by having background information of how and why the original colonies were settled; religious history and beliefs of Deists, Quakers, Jesuits, and Scots Presbyterians; Chinese Feng Shui; famous men of science, like Isaac Newton and James Harrison and the effects their discoveries had on the world; the French and Indian War; colonists' 6043 westward migration across the Allegheny Mountains; and causes leading up to the American Revolution and later to the War Between the States. In order to bring Pynchon's stars, Mason and Dixon, and a galaxy of secondary characters into focus, the average reader will benefit by use of a world map, an astronomy chart, and a reference guide to events during the Age of Reason.

In addition, readers must be able to recognize satire. Otherwise, Pynchon's Joaks, songs, poems, and antics of his secondary characters will be confusing, rather than providing comic relief from the long and tragic story of Mason and Dixon in their journeys over three continents.

1. Mason and Dixon never become close comrades during their association in Capetown or in America. Discuss their personalities and backgrounds. Why are they incompatible?

2. One of Shakespeare's dramatic techniques provides audiences with emotional catharsis: A comic scene immediately follows a tragic one. For example, in Macbeth, the comic scene with the drunken porter follows the horrifying murder of King Duncan. Discuss an example of this same technique in Pynchon's book.

3. Compare and contrast Pynchon's portrayal of the Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, with information from traditional biographies.

4. Research and discuss Feng Shui. Relate it to modern uses of the natural environment, national and state boundaries, dams, buildings, shopping malls, homes, and furniture arrangements.

5. Read Robert Frost's poems "The Mending Wall" and "Take Something Like a Star." How does the first poem relate to the visto? How does the second relate to Charles Mason and his career as an astronomer?

6. Research Royal Society members James Bradley and Nevil Maskelyne who contributed to lunar research and accurate mapping of longitude. Compare Pynchon's portrayal of these men to historical records.

7. Discuss Pynchon's use of archaic language and anachronisms.

8. Discuss Cherrycoke's effectiveness as narrator. Why does Pynchon include Pitt and Pliny and the rest of the LeSparks family as Cherrycoke's audience?

9. Discuss some of the digressions, like the episode in Canada at the Jesuit monastery or Dixon's dream experience in the center of the earth or Armand's experience with the robotic duck. How do these digressions relate to the Age of Reason?

10. Dixon is outraged by slavery in Capetown and in Baltimore. Discuss Pynchon's portrayal of slaves and their owners.

Literary Precedents

Pynchon's postmodern style of writing allows him use of literary precedents ranging from Boccaccio's fourteenth century Decameron (1353), a collection of tales told by people on a journey, to Umberto Eco's The Island of the Day Before (1995; see separate entry), a novel about Italians who join the international race to calculate accurate longitude.

The novel's archaic spellings and capitalization are reminiscent of Henry Fielding's Tom Jones (1749) and Oliver Goldsmith's The Vicar of Wakefield (1766). Both writers satirize eccentric characters and social problems of the eighteenth century.

Closely related in its postmodern style and content to Mason & Dixon is John Barth's novel, The Sot-Weed Factor (1960; see separate entry). It is a humorous parody of the style and diction of Fielding's TomJones and Captain John Smith's The General History of Virginia (1608).

James Michener has written two lengthy novels about settings similar to those in Mason & Dixon. The Covenant (1980) covers the history of South Africa from 1453 to the present. In it, Michener traces the genealogy of three different families: the Dutch van Dooms, the British Saltwoods, and the African Nxumalos. Michener's Chesapeake (1978) covers the history of the Chesapeake Bay area in America from 1583 to 1978. The saga traces the lives of seven families from the original Indian inhabitants, led by Pentaquod, to British, Irish and German colonists and their descendants. He includes the Catholic-Anglican religious conflict and shows how characters are persecuted for their Quaker faith. The saga continues through the Revolutionary period and events leading to the Civil War. Later chapters deal with characters involved in pollution of the bay and endangered species, the civil rights movement, Watergate and Vietnam.

Two recent scientific books written about the eighteenth century search for an accurate method to determine longitude are The Quest for Longitude (1996) by William J. H. Andrews and Longitude (1996) by Dava Sobel. Andrews's book has illustrations and a history of events leading from Isaac Newton's inaccurate "lunar-distance" method of measuring time and distance on the ocean to John Harrison's invention of the chronometer.

Sobel's small book reads like a historical novel. It traces the development of Harrison's chronometer and tells about his struggle with other astronomers and the Board of Longitude who tried to withhold his prize money.

In addition to these literary precedents, many other writer's themes and styles are echoed in Pynchon's book. Dixon's dream in which he is racing across ice in the Arctic and falls down into the center of the earth is reminiscent of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818; see separate entry) and Jules Verne's Journey to the Center of the Earth (1864). Pynchon's use of sea voyages to Capetown and to America are reminiscent of Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels (1726). Timothy Tox's Pennsylvaniad refers to Alexander

Pope's Dunciad (1728), satirical poetry aimed at writers and critics who Pope said were stupid dunces. Robert Frost's poems, "Mending Wall" and "Take Something Like a Star" relate to themes in Mason & Dixon, as does Walt Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" (1865).

James Fenimore Cooper's portrayal of Europeans and Native Americans in conflict on the American frontier, Rudyard Kipling's stories and poems about British colonialism, Herman Melville's South Pacific and Joseph Conrad's Africa stories and novels about the experiences of Europeans isolated in foreign cultures are relevant to Mason & Dixon. Each shows a clash of cultures, morals, and taboos challenged. Primitive cultures influence frontier settlers to abandon religious, and legal restraints. Readers with a broad literary background will recognize echoes of classical works in Mason & Dixon, including character types, themes, and plot digressions: Boccaccio, Shakespeare, Fielding, Sterne, Verne, Mary Shelley, Swift, Dickens, Cooper, Melville, and Whitman; and modern writers: Frost, Barth, Coover, Doctorow, and Eco.

Related Titles

Pynchon's other novels that incorporate his postmodern style are V. (1963; see separate entry), The Crying of Lot 49 (1966; see separate entry), Gravity's Rainbow (1973; see separate entry), and Vineland (1990; see separate entry). Although settings and protagonists differ in each novel, many similar elements appear in all five novels: a narrator that shifts back and forth from first person to third person, humorous and bitter satire, digressions that include many eccentric characters, lengthy descriptions, historical, literary, and comical allusions, jokes, and songs.

Pynchon displays accurate knowledge of several branches of science and predicts the impact scientific discovery will have on the moral degradation of society and its exploitation of the natural world.

Underlying all books are themes of conspiracy, persecution, and religious and political hypocrisy.

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