The Crying of Lot 49

Study Guide by Course Hero

What's Inside

Book Basics

AUTHOR
Thomas Pynchon

YEAR PUBLISHED
1965

GENRE
Satire

PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR
The Crying of Lot 49 is told in third-person limited narration.

TENSE
The Crying of Lot 49 is written in the past tense.

ABOUT THE TITLE
Lot 49 is a number of "Tristero forgeries" in stamp collector Pierce Inverarity's collection. At the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*, the protagonist Oedipa Maas learns an auctioneer will "cry" out the various lots during the auction of Pierce's estate.

In Context

Historical and Cultural Allusions

Pynchon alludes to many people and organizations from history and culture, either to encode the narrative with meaning or to provide the reader with red herrings that only seem to symbolize something deeper. He also has fun mixing the real with the fictional, making the reader question reality and sort through a great number of inputs to try to arrive at essential truth.

- **Humbert Humbert:** The main character in American Russian novelist Vladimir Nakobov's novel *Lolita* (1955), he is an older man pursuing a teenager, and Pynchon alludes to him in Serge's song in Chapter 6 with the line "these Humbert Humbert cats." Serge is upset that Metzger, an older man, has run off with his 15-year-old girlfriend. In the 1960s sexual morals were loosening. Pynchon parodies *Lolita* by having his characters show a creepy sexual interest in young girls—not only Metzger but also Mucho Maas and John Nefastis.
- **Jay Gould** (1836–92): An American financier, he was one of the most notorious "robber barons." The late 19th-century robber barons acquired wealth through exploitative and manipulative tactics. The fact that stamp collector Pierce Inverarity kept Gould's bust over his bed as an "ikon" speaks to his cutthroat capitalist ways of doing business.

- **John Birch Society:** An American right-wing organization founded in 1958 to combat communism, its name honors John Birch, a U.S. Army officer killed by Chinese communists in 1945 and considered by the society to be a hero. Pynchon parodies the society by creating the imaginary organization Mike Fallopian belongs to called the Peter Pinguid Society.
- **Maxwell's Demon:** Hypothesized by Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell (1831–79), Maxwell's demon is an imaginary being that can sort molecules and not expend any work, which violates the second law of thermodynamics. Pynchon's character John Nefastis builds a machine said to contain an "honest-to-God" Maxwell's demon.
- ***Oedipus Rex*** (c. 430 BC): By Sophocles (c. 496–406 BC), the play is about the king of Thebes, who is caught up in machinations out of his control. Like Oedipa in the novel, Oedipus obsessively investigates what he thinks is a conspiracy, and both end up alienated from their original identities.
- **Remedios Varo** (1908–63): A Spanish Mexican artist, she was known for her surrealist paintings. Oedipa recalls seeing the 1961 painting *Bordando el Manto Terrestre* (Embroidering the Earth's Mantle) and feeling like she is trapped in a tower, like the girls in the painting. The reference to the painting is, in part, a way for Pynchon to signal Oedipa's story will be played out on a surreal landscape.
- **"She Loves You"** (1963): This is an early song by the British band the Beatles. Beatlemania had just begun in America while Pynchon was writing *The Crying of Lot 49*. Mucho says, "When those kids sing about 'She loves you' yeah well, you know, she does" and "the 'you' is everybody." This statement illustrates how Mucho believes LSD, the psychotropic drug he is taking, has expanded his mind. Pynchon also parodies the Beatles with his Paranoids, described as four teens with long hair who sing in British accents.
- **Thurn and Taxis:** The long-lasting official postal service of Europe, Thurn and Taxis began in the Italian city-states in about 1290 under the name Tassis and developed into the imperial carrier under the Holy Roman emperor Maximilian I in 1489. It existed until 1867. Pynchon uses the name to represent official channels, while its shadow (imaginary) opponent, The Tristero, represents the underground. The post horn on the Thurn and Taxis coat of arms is still used as the symbol of many European postal services.

The Satirical Novel

A satirical novel offers social criticism, often couched in humor, to address perceived shortcomings. While it may point out problems, its function is to promote dialogue rather than to suggest solutions. *The Crying of Lot 49* is considered a political or topical satire because it ridicules systems of power within culture. Pynchon employs the following satirical techniques in *The Crying of Lot 49:*

- **Exaggeration:** Pynchon pushes settings and characters beyond the bounds of normalcy. In this way, they come off as ridiculous and their faults are more readily identifiable. During the fifth act of *The Courier's Tragedy*, the play Driblette directs, "every mode of violent death available to Renaissance man … is employed." These include "a lye pit, land mines, a trained falcon with envenom'd talons." The ridiculous nature of the "tragedy" is clear even to the characters. Metzger remarks that "it plays … like a Road Runner cartoon in blank verse" (that cartoon itself being an example of exaggerated violence). Many of the characters, too, are exaggerated caricatures of their professions. Dr. Hilarius is a psychiatrist who is clearly unhinged himself: he once claimed he "cured a case of hysterical blindness with his number 37" Rorschach inkblot test. Roseman is a lawyer so obsessed with besting fictional television lawyer Perry Mason that he is not-so-secretly writing a "Not-so-hypothetical Indictment" on him. Outlandish character names such as Mike Fallopian are also exaggerations.
- **Incongruity:** To orchestrate his atmosphere of absurdity, Pynchon juxtaposes unrelated things or places things in environments where they do not belong. For example, the language used to describe the plot of *The Courier's Tragedy* is a curious mix of highbrow literary and modern slang. One of the characters is "hanging around the court" and "masquerading as a special courier."
- **Parody:** Pynchon parodies many aspects of the culture of the 1960s, including British Invasion bands like the Beatles, which he parodies with his Paranoids. A good example is how he imitates much of the form of the detective novel, especially by having the intrepid Oedipa tirelessly track down leads and ask questions. But where a detective novel is meant to build up to a final reveal, *The Crying of Lot 49* ends in ambiguity with Oedipa having solved nothing. Neither Oedipa nor the reader can properly process the information given about the mystery because it is intentionally overloaded with parodic humor to obstruct

revelation.
- **Reversal:** By bestowing main character status in a centuries-long global conspiracy mystery on a suburban housewife, Pynchon is subverting expectations of literary fiction in the 1960s.

Pynchon's Influences

No author writes in a cultural vacuum. Though Pynchon has developed a style recognizably his own, his novels take cues from the Beat poets and the postmodernists of mid-20th-century America. Several core values of the Beat movement, for example, are evident in his fiction.

- **Exploration of Transcendence:** There is the sensibility that transcendence can be attained by escaping normal routine and consorting with exiles, as Oedipa does in *The Crying of Lot 49* and Sal Paradise does in American novelist Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957).
- **Exploration of Liminality,** the disorientation one experiences when on the threshold between two states: As Oedipa moves from her stifling beginning state of suburban housewife to the uncertain state of woman in exile, she suffers confusion and feels she is losing her sense of self.
- ***Communitas*,** a situation where communities lack strict hierarchies and everyone is considered equal: This overthrowing of oppressive structures is an aim both in the political ideology of the Beat poets and in The Tristero's centuries-long campaign within *The Crying of Lot 49* to interfere with the government-sanctioned Thurn and Taxis monopoly (and later, the U.S. Postal Service).

Some early postmodern works that may have influenced Pynchon are *Waiting for Godot* (1953) by Irish writer Samuel Beckett, *Howl* (1956) by American writer Allen Ginsberg, and *Naked Lunch* (1959) by American writer William S. Burroughs. Pynchon is often classified as a postmodern author because his work has many of the formal and stylistic characteristics of postmodernism, including:

- **Intertextuality,** or the referencing of other fictional works within one's own: Pynchon does this often in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Examples include his allusions to Vladimir Nakobov's novel *Lolita* (1955) and his parody of the detective novel.
- **Ambiguous Ending:** The expectation of a detective novel is that the main character will solve the mystery. Instead, the novel ends before Oedipa can get real answers.
- **Pastiche,** the combining and juxtaposing of genres into something unique: Pynchon combines elements of the detective novel with literary fiction.
- **Paranoia and Hyperreality:** Oedipa is confronted with a situation that could be a plot, a fantasy, or a joke. She is constantly bombarded by cultural "noise."

However, because his work demonstrates a trend toward political activism over insularity (a certain level of detachment from reality that often characterizes postmodernism) some critics argue he is more of a countercultural author. That is, the ideas he explores are culturally progressive and mean to challenge the real-world status quo.

Author Biography

Youth

Thomas Pynchon is an American novelist best known for sprawling absurdist novels critiquing modern society. He was born Thomas Ruggles Pynchon Jr. on May 8, 1937, in Glen Cove, Long Island, New York. He graduated from high school at age 16 and went to Cornell University, where he studied engineering. His studies were interrupted by his two-year stint in the navy, after which he returned to Cornell and obtained a degree in English in 1959.

After graduating from Cornell, Pynchon spent a year in New York, living in the bohemian neighborhood of Greenwich Village and working on short stories and a novel. He then moved to Seattle, Washington, where he spent a few years working as a technical writer for the airplane manufacturer Boeing. In 1963 he quit Boeing and devoted himself to writing.

Literary Career

Pynchon's first short story, "A Small Rain," appeared in 1959 in the college literary magazine *The Cornell Writer*. His Greenwich Village and Boeing years saw the publication of several more short stories. In 1963, the same year he left Boeing, he published his first novel, the enigmatic *V.* One line of this complex novel concerns the search, variously described as a "scholarly quest" and a "simple-minded ... pursuit," for a hidden meaning—perhaps a land, or a woman—behind the initial V. The

William Faulkner Foundation awarded *V.* its prize for best first novel.

V. was followed by another short story and several excerpts of a work in progress. Pynchon published the latter work in 1966 as the short novel *The Crying of Lot 49*. In this second novel, a woman wanders Southern California in an attempt to learn about a mysterious underground organization named Tristero. Neither she nor the reader can tell if she has discovered something real or if she is entangled in a paranoid fantasy.

In 1973 Pynchon published *Gravity's Rainbow*, a sprawling novel set at the end of World War II (1939–45). *Gravity's Rainbow* expands themes and styles of the earlier two novels. Like the heroine of *Lot 49*, its protagonist teeters on a knife-edge between insight and paranoia, and he sometimes seems the pawn of vast, secretive organizations with malign motives. Against this backdrop Pynchon also brought into play his absurdist humor, interrupting the narrative with songs, dreams, and drug-induced visions.

Gravity's Rainbow was hailed as a success. It was one of two novels awarded the National Book Award for fiction in 1974. (It shared the honor with Isaac Bashevis Singer's *A Crown of Feathers*.) The judges of the Pulitzer Prize selected *Gravity's Rainbow* for the 1974 prize in fiction. However, the judges were overruled by the outraged Pulitzer Prize advisory committee, who called the novel "unreadable," "overwritten" and "obscene." In a stalemate, no Pulitzer Prize for Fiction was awarded that year.

Sixteen years passed between *Gravity's Rainbow* and Pynchon's next novel, *Vineland* (1990), set in marijuana-growing country in Northern California. *Vineland*'s critical reception was less enthusiastic than for the earlier novels. It was followed by *Mason & Dixon* (1997), which mimics 18th-century styles as it tells the story of the two famous surveyors Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon. *Against the Day* (2006) follows anarchist and rebellious characters at the turn of the 20th century. With *Inherent Vice* (2009) Pynchon gives his version of a detective novel while returning to the Southern California settings of *The Crying of Lot 49*. In *Bleeding Edge* (2013) Pynchon explores the computer industry, just before the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Reclusiveness

Pynchon has determinedly avoided media appearances. Only a handful of confirmed photographs exist, and he declines to give interviews. Nonetheless, there is no evidence he is a hermit or a misanthrope (someone who despises people). He seems only to avoid publicity, not people in general. He dedicated *Gravity's Rainbow* to his close friend Richard Fariña, a fellow writer he first met while they both studied at Cornell. Later, he was the best man at Fariña's wedding (to the sister of folk singer Joan Baez). Pynchon's media avoidance is often playful rather than tormented. In 1974 he sent comedian Irwin Corey in his place to accept the National Book Award. He has "appeared" on several episodes of the animated series *The Simpsons*, represented by a character wearing a bag over his head. Away from publicity Pynchon is a family man. In the 1990s he married his literary agent, Melanie Jackson, and they have a son.

Legacy

Pynchon's best-known novels combine an encyclopedic range of historical and technical knowledge with comic antics and conspiracy plots. *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity's Rainbow* all use paranoia as a lens through which to criticize contemporary society. Authors influenced by Pynchon's novels include postmodernists David Foster Wallace, Don De Lillo, and Richard Powers. *Gravity's Rainbow*, with its emphasis on cybernetics (how control systems, whether neurological or mechanical, affect communications), has been cited as an influence on cyberpunk and on science fiction novelists William Gibson, Neal Stephenson, and Bruce Sterling. Critic Michael Wood has been a dissenting voice, labeling Pynchon the inventor of "hysterical realism," a style Wood believes is too full of puns, absurdities, and lengthy prose. However, Pynchon continues to be admired for his fiction.

Characters

Oedipa Maas

At the start of the novel, Oedipa is the type of suburban housewife who attends Tupperware parties. Once in a relationship with rich real estate mogul Pierce, Oedipa now lives a more modest existence with her disc jockey husband Mucho. Though she is reasonably satisfied with her life, she nevertheless feels like a "captive maiden" in a tower. When she is named an executor of Pierce's will, she perhaps sees the responsibility as a chance to usefully pass her time, although she is skeptical of Pierce's motivations. She settles into a motel in San Narciso and begins an affair with Metzger, the lawyer for Pierce's estate. She then begins to investigate The Tristero and its muted post horn symbol, which suddenly seems to appear everywhere she goes. Following leads to Tristero, resourceful Oedipa comes in contact with many underground groups of disenfranchised people. As she becomes more sensitive to their plights, she becomes alienated from her own identity as a suburban housewife. She loses her shrink (Dr. Hilarius), her husband (Mucho), her lover (Metzger), and her main link to Tristero (Driblette) in quick succession and feels isolated and sucked into the void she has always feared. When she ends up going to the auction of Pierce's estate, perhaps it is a willing surrender to a new identity in the counterculture. Oedipa's name is an allusion to Oedipus of ***Oedipus Rex*** (c. 430 BC), the main character in the play by Sophocles (c. 496–406 BC). Both characters are drawn into complicated plots beyond their control and suffer identity crisis.

Wendell "Mucho" Maas

Oedipa describes Mucho as "too sensitive." Mucho used to work as a used-car salesman, but it made him anxious. Now he works as a disc jockey at a radio station, a profession he does not "believe in." Mucho cannot help Oedipa with her executorship, and while he is sad to see her go to San Narciso, he is not "desperate." Later he participates in Dr. Hilarius's LSD study and believes he can take apart voices. This is how he "knows" about Oedipa's dalliance with Metzger. Mucho Maas is close to the Spanish for "much more." This points to Mucho's delusions of grandeur and how Mucho believes himself to be "an antenna" connected to millions.

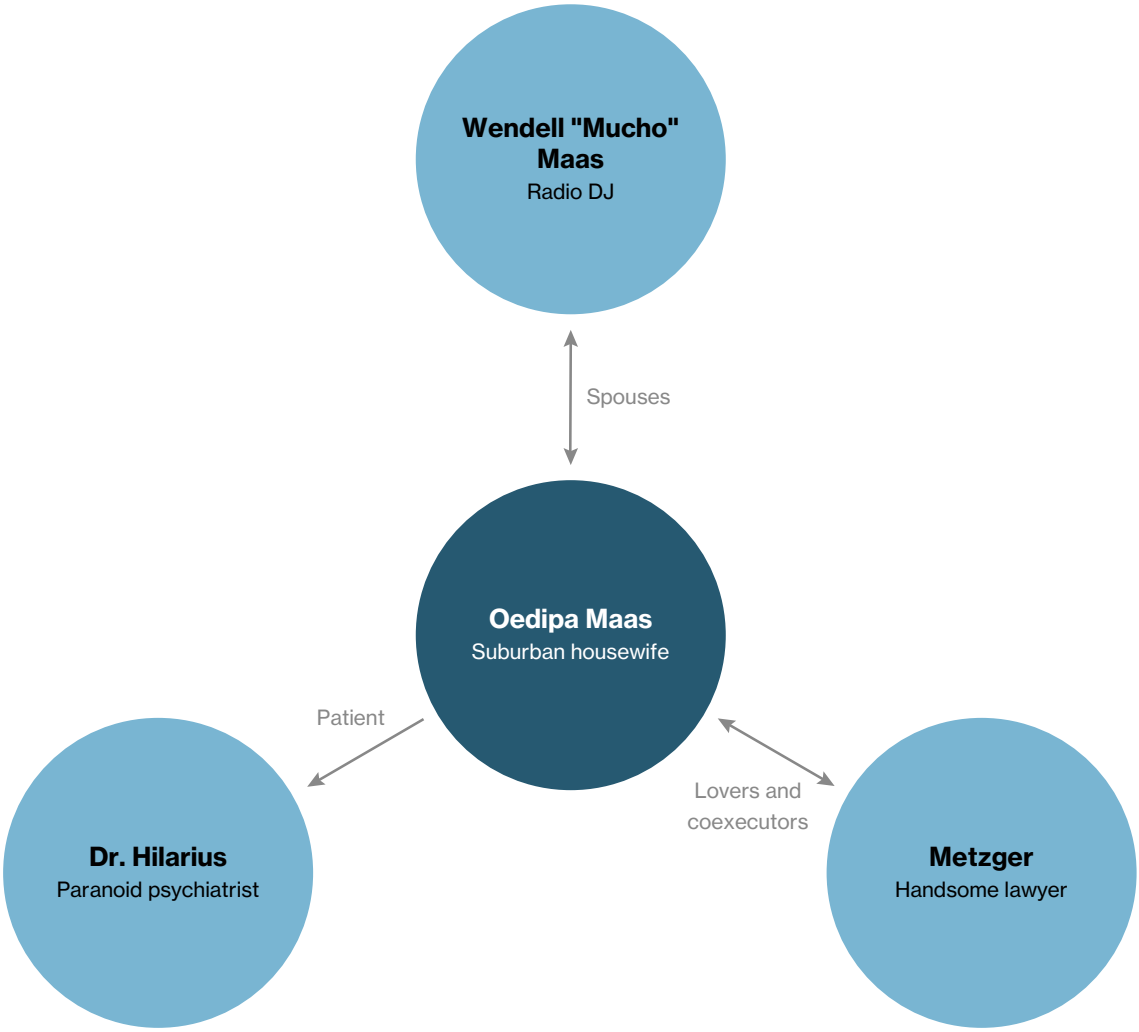
Metzger

Metzger is extremely good-looking. Once a child actor known as "Baby Igor," Metzger now works as a lawyer and is the coexecutor of Pierce's will. He seduces Oedipa using a bet about an old movie of his that happens to be playing on the television. When Oedipa leaves for San Francisco, Metzger is not "desperate" that she leaves him behind. When she returns, she finds out he has run off to elope with the 15-year-old girlfriend of Paranoids band member Serge. Metzger is German for "butcher," which is fitting when one considers Metzger treats women like pieces of meat.

Dr. Hilarius

Dr. Hilarius is Oedipa's psychiatrist, but he seems to need a psychiatrist himself. A former intern at the German concentration camp at Buchenwald during World War II (1939–45), Dr. Hilarius is highly paranoid that Israeli forces are after him and want revenge for his work on "experimentally-induced insanity." He claims he was not a "real Nazi" and he has spent his life attempting to atone for his actions. He locks himself in his office with a gun until he is finally taken into police custody. Oedipa discovers he gave LSD to Mucho while she was in San Narciso.

Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
Oedipa Maas	Oedipa Maas is a 28-year-old suburban housewife. When she is named an executor of her ex-boyfriend's will, she becomes involved in investigating a shadowy organization called Tristero.
Wendell "Mucho" Maas	Wendell Maas is a former used-car salesman turned radio DJ who goes by the nickname "Mucho." He is married to Oedipa.
Metzger	Metzger is a lawyer with the firm that handles Pierce's estate. He becomes Oedipa's lover.
Dr. Hilarius	Dr. Hilarius is Oedipa's psychiatrist. He wants her to join a study on the effects of LSD and other drugs on suburban housewives.
Jesús Arrabal	Jesús Arrabal is a Mexican revolutionary who met Oedipa and Pierce during their vacation to Mexico. Oedipa later meets up with him in a coffee shop and learns he has been exiled.
Grace Bortz	Grace Bortz is Emory's wife. She tends to the children while her husband meets with Oedipa.
Emory Bortz	Emory Bortz is a professor. He once taught at Berkeley, but now he teaches at a college in San Narciso.
Genghis Cohen	Genghis Cohen is an "eminent philatelist," or stamp expert, who has been hired to valuate Pierce's stamp collection. He comes to the auction to bid on some items.
Manny Di Presso	Manny Di Presso is a lawyer turned actor. He is working again as a lawyer and plans to bring a case against Pierce's estate on behalf of his client Tony Jaguar.
Randolph Driblette	Randolph Driblette is an actor and director who put on a version of the play *The Courier's Tragedy*. He later ends up walking into the Pacific to his death.
Mike Fallopian	Mike Fallopian is a member of the Peter Pinguid Society, an extreme right-wing underground group whose main rival is the Birch Society. Fallopian hangs out at The Scope.
Caesar Funch	Caesar Funch is the program director at KCUF, the radio station where Mucho works.
Hernando Joaquín	Hernando Joaquín de Tristero y Calavera is said to be the founder of The Tristero.
IA member	Oedipa meets a man at a bar called The Greek Way who claims to be a member of Inamorati Anonymous, an underground group of people who shun romance. He calls Oedipa by the name "Arnold Snarb."
Pierce Inverarity	Though Pierce never appears in the story, his shadow looms over it. He named Oedipa as executor of his will, and he may have engineered the Tristero investigation as a hoax.
Tony Jaguar	Tony Jaguar is the alias of Anthony Giunghierrace. He is "very big" in the Mafia, or Cosa Nostra.
Stanley Koteks	Stanley Koteks is a frustrated inventor at the Yoyodyne Corporation. He might be a member of Tristero.
Miles	Miles works at the front desk of Echo Courts, Oedipa's motel. He is also in the band the Paranoids.
John Nefastis	John Nefastis is the inventor of the Nefastis Machine, which contains a Maxwell's demon. Nefastis tests Oedipa to see if she is a "sensitive," and when she is not, he offers sex as a consolation prize.
Loren Passerine	Loren Passerine is the auctioneer for the auction of Pierce's estate.

Roseman	Roseman is the Maas couple's lawyer. He wishes he could be a successful trial lawyer.
Serge	Serge is a member of the band the Paranoids. His girlfriend leaves him and elopes with Metzger.
Mr. Thoth	Mr. Thoth is an elderly man at Vesperhaven House, a home for senior citizens. He tells Oedipa about his grandfather riding for the Pony Express.

Plot Summary

Oedipa's Life Before Tristero

Oedipa Maas, a housewife in the suburban hamlet of Kinneret in Southern California, receives a letter one summer day in the 1960s naming her an executor of the will of her ex-boyfriend, real estate mogul Pierce Inverarity. Pierce had called her for the last time the year before, perhaps to tell her about the executorship, but her husband Wendell "Mucho" Maas had told her to hang up on him. When Mucho gets home from his job at the radio station, Oedipa tells him about the letter. Mucho advises her to contact their lawyer, Roseman, to sort it out. Before she goes to see Roseman, her psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarius, calls with an offer to join a drug study. Roseman merely flirts with her and suggests sorting out the will herself. Perhaps because Oedipa feels an "absence of intensity" in her life, she decides to set herself up in San Narciso to investigate Pierce's holdings. Mucho is sad to see her leave, "but not desperate."

At the hotel in San Narciso, Oedipa is shown to her room by Miles, a teenage boy and member of the band the Paranoids. When Pierce's lawyer Metzger shows up, he is so good-looking Oedipa thinks someone is playing a joke on her. While a movie he made as a child actor plays on the television set, Metzger gets Oedipa drunk and seduces her. They make love and when they climax, the lights go out. The Paranoids, playing a song outside, have blown a fuse. This "infidelity" is the "starting point" for her revelations about Tristero. Oedipa and Metzger go to The Scope bar and meet Mike Fallopian. They witness a mail drop Fallopian says they were not supposed to see. Oedipa also sees the muted post horn symbol and the acronym WASTE for the first time in the bathroom, but she does not yet know what they mean. Later, an adventure out on Lake Inverarity leads to the Paranoids telling Oedipa about a Jacobean revenge play called *The Courier's Tragedy*. When Oedipa goes to see the play, she hears the word *Trystero* for the first time. She goes backstage to speak with the director, Randolph Driblette, about it. Driblette warns her away from "wasting her life" seeking the truth of Trystero.

Oedipa Follows Tristero into the Darkness

Despite Driblette's warning, Oedipa soon becomes so enmeshed in following her leads that "everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero." (Pynchon uses the spelling Trystero and Tristero interchangeably.) She gets lost at a Yoyodyne stockholders' meeting and runs into Stanley Koteks doodling the muted post horn. Koteks suggests visiting the inventor John Nefastis to see if she is a "sensitive" who can communicate with the "honest-to-God Maxwell's Demon" inside Nefastis's machine. At Zapf's Used Books, Oedipa buys a copy of Driblette's paperback. At a home for senior citizens, she talks to Mr. Thoth about his grandfather who rode for the Pony Express and was once attacked by "false Indians" in black feathers. Genghis Cohen, the philatelist (stamp expert) evaluating Pierce's stamp collection, points out forgeries.

Oedipa decides to drive north to Berkeley without Metzger. She tracks down the publisher of the book she bought at Zapf's, but the *Trystero* line from Driblette's play does not appear in the copy they provide her. She notes the author of the preface, Emory Bortz, as a possible expert to consult on the matter. She goes to visit John Nefastis to take the "sensitive" test but fails. She concludes Nefastis is a "nut," and that to be a true sensitive, one must "share in the man's hallucinations." To test if she is merely fantasizing Trystero, Oedipa decides to "drift ... at random" through San Francisco. She sees the muted post horn symbol wherever she goes. She sees it on the lapel of a man in a bar, The Greek Way, who claims to be an IA member (Inamorati Anonymous). She finds it on a sidewalk and discusses it with a group of children in Golden Gate Park. She talks to Jesús Arrabal, a man from her past, who is now in exile because of his involvement with a Mexican revolutionary group. She realizes there are many

underground groups using WASTE as an alternative to the U.S. mail. She trails a WASTE letter carrier all over Oakland as he drops off letters.

The next day, she goes to see Dr. Hilarius, hoping he will convince her she is fantasizing everything to do with Trystero. However, Dr. Hilarius himself has gone crazy. Paranoid that Israeli soldiers are hunting him down for revenge, Dr. Hilarius has locked himself in his office with a rifle. Before the cops take him down, he advises her to "cherish" her fantasies or she may "begin to cease to be." Afterward, Mucho's boss informs Oedipa that Mucho is "losing his identity." Oedipa confirms this when Mucho reveals he can "listen to anything and take it apart again," and he tells her this is how he knows of her affair with Metzger. Oedipa realizes she has lost Mucho to the drug LSD, prescribed by Dr. Hilarius.

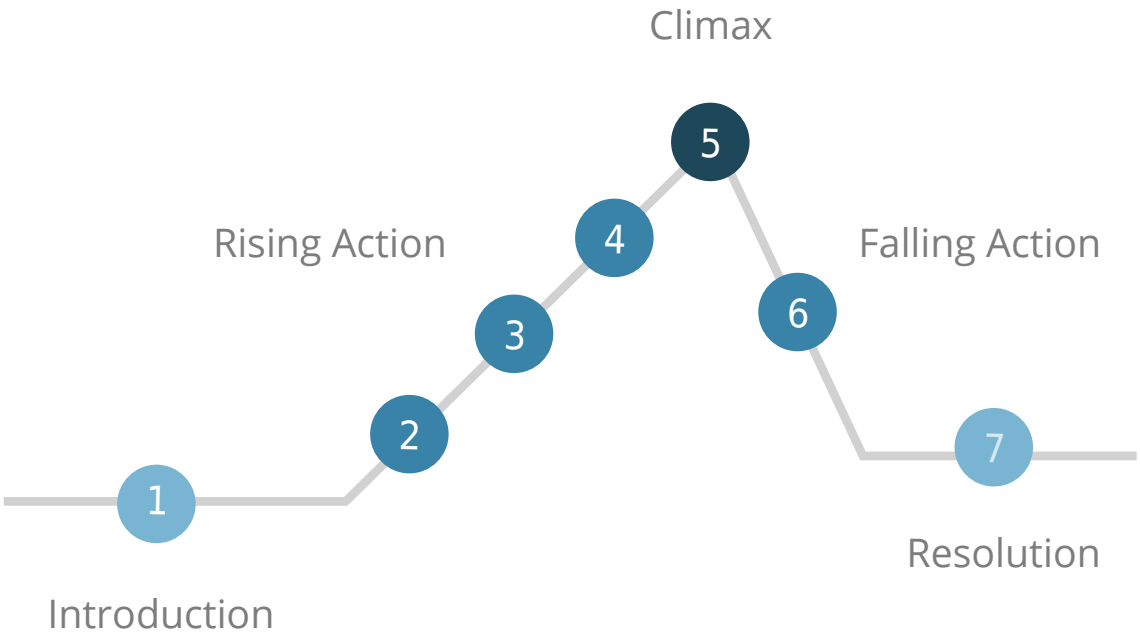
Oedipa Faces the Consequences of Her Tristero Quest

Back at her hotel in San Narciso, Oedipa continues to lose the men in her life. Metzger has run off and eloped with the girlfriend of one of the Paranoids. Driblette has committed suicide by walking into the ocean. Even Zapf's Used Books has burned down. She visits Professor Emory Bortz to ask about the discrepancies between editions of *The Courier's Tragedy* regarding the Trystero line, and Bortz tells her what he knows. In addition, Oedipa learns other purported historical facts about Trystero over the next few days. She learns Hernando Joaquín de Tristero y Calavera set up Tristero as a rebel system to undermine the official mail carrier Thurn and Taxis. However, after all her losses, Oedipa is now less enthusiastic about following up on Tristero leads.

Fallopian suggests Pierce might have set her up and Tristero is "all a hoax." Genghis Cohen finds a stamp that gives the meaning of WASTE as "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire." This stamp is not listed anywhere except in an addendum to a catalog from Zapf's, which Pierce owned. Oedipa realizes "every access route to the Tristero" has something to do with Pierce. She ponders the four alternative truths of her situation. Maybe she has stumbled upon an actual worldwide conspiracy against official mail systems called the Tristero, or maybe she is hallucinating everything. It's possible an expensive, elaborate plot has been mounted against her, and it's also possible she is imagining "some such plot," which means she is crazy. Genghis Cohen informs her the Tristero "forgeries" are to be sold at auction as lot 49. A secret bidder has shown interest.

Oedipa thinks about the state of America and the importance of the undergrounds she seems to have stumbled upon. "How many shared Tristero's secret, as well as its exile?" she wonders. Oedipa attends the auction along with Genghis Cohen and the secret bidder, who could be anyone in attendance. Oedipa contemplates making a scene to expose him. When the door to the room closes, she sits back "to await the crying of lot 49."

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Oedipa is named an executor of Pierce's estate.

Rising Action

2. Watching a play, Oedipa first hears the word *Trystero*.

3. Oedipa investigates leads relating to The Tristero.

4. Deep in the mystery, Oedipa feels she is going crazy.

Climax

5. Oedipa loses all the men in her life.

Falling Action

6. Pierce's estate goes up for auction.

Resolution

7. The auctioneer gets ready to cry out lot 49.

Timeline of Events

A summer day in the 1960s

Oedipa Maas receives a letter naming her executor of Pierce Inverarity's estate.

The next day

Oedipa goes to San Narciso to research Pierce's assets and engages in an affair with Metzger.

Sometime later

Oedipa and Metzger see *The Courier's Tragedy*, and Oedipa first hears the word *Trystero.*

Sometime later

Oedipa follows leads about The Tristero and ends up scrutinizing Pierce's stamp collection.

Shortly after

Oedipa spends a hallucinogenic day and night following the muted post horn through San Francisco.

The next day

One by one, Oedipa loses all the important men in her life.

Several days later

Oedipa attends the auction of Pierce's estate.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1

Summary

Arriving at her Southern California home, Oedipa Maas learns she has been chosen as the executor of her ex-boyfriend's will. Pierce Inverarity was a businessman with "assets numerous and tangled enough to make ... sorting it all out more than honorary." Oedipa remembers her last call with Pierce the year before, in which he had done so many impressions and accents that her husband Wendell "Mucho" Maas had told her to hang up on him. Pierce had then suggested Mucho would be visited by "The Shadow" and had fallen silent. Oedipa now wonders if he had called to tell her about naming her executor.

She and Mucho talk about their day, discussing the letter from the lawyers and his workday at the radio station where he works as a disc jockey. Mucho prefers the station to his previous job at the used car lot, where the detritus of people's lives left behind in their cars could look like a "salad of despair." Mucho tells Oedipa to contact their lawyer, Roseman, because he cannot help her with the will.

Late that night her psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarius, calls. He tries to convince her to join a drug study on suburban housewives. She refuses. At lunch the next day, Roseman flirts with her. She asks Roseman if he can sort out Pierce's will, but he suggests she might be interested in what she finds out. Oedipa feels an "absence of an intensity" in her life. She reflects on the time Pierce took her to Mexico City and she viewed a painting in the museum that made her cry. The girls in the painting are prisoners in a tower, and this is how Oedipa feels. For her, "the tower is everywhere" and "the knight of deliverance" could not save her. She also realizes what keeps her in her tower might be "magic, anonymous and malignant."

Analysis

One of Pynchon's main objectives in this novel is to explore the nature of reality, and the feel of his prose evokes a hallucinogenic trip. Pynchon uses long sentences with multiple clauses that build upon each other to produce a sort of ordered chaos. The first paragraph of the novel contains six sentences, and in these, Pynchon manages to reference things as diverse as Tupperware parties, a hotel room in Mazatlán, the fourth movement of a concerto, and a "whitewashed bust of Jay Gould." This illustrates how scattered and shallow Oedipa's mind is, jumping from one idea to the next without exploring anything in depth. Pynchon means to show how Oedipa is a product of the chaotic culture of Southern California in the 1960s and how that culture lacks the focus to participate in true communication that leads to deeper understanding. Oedipa hovers at the edge of this insight at the end of the chapter, when she reflects she is like a prisoner in a tower that is everywhere. The tower is a symbol of the degraded society she lives in. It keeps her occupied with banalities so that her life feels unreal. This unreality manifests itself in a "sense of buffering" and "the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus." Her decision to accept the executorship is the first step in her search for meaning beyond her role as a suburban housewife.

Oedipa surrounds herself with "knights of deliverance" in the hopes they might offer some clarity, but each fails spectacularly. Back when they were dating, "Pierce had taken her away from nothing" because "there'd been no escape." Her husband, Mucho, refuses to get involved with her executor crisis. He has trouble dealing with the chaos in his own life, a chaos that may well be the "salad of despair" he recognized in other people's lives. Her shrink, Dr. Hilarius, seems more intent on driving her even crazier than curing her, and her lawyer, Roseman, flirts with her instead of taking her seriously. By the end of the novel, all the men in her life will have left her, died, or gone insane.

When Pierce refers to "The Shadow" during his phone call, it is possible he is referencing The Tristero, the shadowy organization Oedipa ends up entangled with while researching Pierce's assets. This reference to a "Shadow" could be proof Pierce set the whole Tristero plot up as a hoax, as Oedipa later suspects he might have, or it might have no meaning at all.

Chapter 2

Summary

Oedipa drives down to San Narciso, a place "less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts," to look into Pierce's affairs. As she arrives in the "vast sprawl," she thinks the buildings might be forming patterns of "concealed meaning" and "intent to communicate." She feels a "revelation" trembling "just past the threshold of her understanding," as if she were "at the center of an odd, religious instant." Unnerved, Oedipa checks into the next motel. The manager, a 16-year-old member of a band called the Paranoids named Miles, sings a song as he guides Oedipa to her room. When she tells him her husband might play his band's song on the radio, he accuses her of trying to sleep with him in a payola ("pay for play") arrangement.

Pierce's lawyer Metzger shows up later. He is so good-looking Oedipa thinks someone must be playing a joke on her. Metzger and Oedipa get drunk while a movie he starred in as a child, *Cashiered*, plays on the television. This coincidence makes Oedipa believe Metzger has concocted a plot to seduce her. They make a bet on whether Metzger's child self, Baby Igor, will survive the movie. Oedipa bets he will not. Meanwhile, commercials for Pierce's companies keep interrupting the movie. Metzger proposes a game of "Strip Botticelli," and Oedipa decides to put on all the clothing she brought with her until she is a giant ball of clothes. She knocks over a can of hair spray, sending it careening through the room and shattering the bathroom mirror. The commotion brings Miles and his friends to the room, and they begin to serenade Oedipa and Metzger from outside.

Things become "less and less clear" for Oedipa as the night goes on. She and Metzger make love, and the Paranoids blow a fuse. Baby Igor dies in the movie, and Oedipa realizes she did not need to give into Metzger's seduction because she won the bet. Metzger reveals the one thing Pierce had told him about Oedipa: she "wouldn't be easy." She begins to cry.

Analysis

At the beginning of Chapter 2, Oedipa comes close to experiencing a "religious" revelation, but it remains just out of her reach. The mode of communication of this revelation seems to be a paradox—a pattern of "hieroglyphic" buildings in an "ordered swirl" that hides meaning at the same time that it holds "intent to communicate." Pynchon seems to suggest here a failure of communication because of overcomplication and the assigning of importance to symbols that are essentially meaningless. To be effective, communication must be clear. Time and time again, Oedipa will be stymied by information overload and the circularity of conversations that skim the surface but never lead to any essential truths.

Paranoia and distrust complicate interactions between Oedipa and the other characters. Her good-natured offer to help Miles and his band, aptly named the Paranoids, is misconstrued as a bid for sex. Oedipa is initially so resistant to Metzger's seduction that she tries to guard against it by dressing up in her entire wardrobe. Extensive alcohol use wears down her resistance. She is so lost in a fog that she no longer has a hold on reality and things become "less and less clear." She is terrified when she cannot see herself in the mirror and muses Metzger might well disappear, too. Oedipa's chaotic shattering of the mirror with a flying hair spray bottle during her paranoid episode figuratively mirrors Oedipa's shattering of her former life. Giving into Metzger's seduction alienates her from her husband Mucho, and she can no longer "see" herself. In Chapter 3, Oedipa will muse that this encounter with Metzger set the stage for all that follows.

Oedipa also suspects someone is playing an elaborate joke on her, her first clue being how improbably good-looking Metzger is. Indeed, Metzger's seduction of Oedipa hinges on an absurd coincidence: when she turns on the television to shut Metzger down, one of his Baby Igor films is playing. She wonders if "he bribed the engineer over at the local station" as part of a plot. Oedipa's suspicions could be moments of insight—or they could be paranoid delusions.

Chapter 3

Summary

The narrator mentions "The Tristero" for the first time, saying Oedipa's "infidelity with Metzger" was the "starting point" for her revelations about them. Key to the revelation is Pierce's stamp collection, but chronologically, the next two significant events are Oedipa getting a letter from Mucho, and Oedipa and Metzger meeting Mike Fallopian at a bar called The Scope. Mucho's letter has a blurb from the post office that reads:

"Report all obscene mail to your potsmaster." Mike Fallopian introduces himself as being from the Peter Pinguid Society, named after a commodore for the Confederate army during the American Civil War (1861–65) who fought the Russians off the California coast. Fallopian criticizes industrialism, but he admits Pinguid later made a fortune speculating in real estate.

Metzger and Oedipa witness a strange mail delivery in the bar, and Oedipa sees a note and the "hieroglyphic" symbol of the muted post horn in the ladies' bathroom. She copies down the address: "WASTE, Box 7391." Fallopian reveals they "weren't supposed to see" the mail drop. The Peter Pinguid Society uses the Yoyodyne Corporation's interoffice delivery system to write letters to one another, and members are fined if they do not "send at least one letter a week." It turns out Fallopian is writing a book on the "history of private mail delivery in the U.S."

Later, out on Lake Inverarity, Oedipa is with Metzger and the Paranoids and their girlfriends when they run into Manny Di Presso. He is on the run from a man named Tony Jaguar. He informs Metzger he is suing Pierce's estate on behalf of Tony, who claims Pierce never paid him for bone charcoal used in Beaconsfield cigarette filters. It turns out Tony sourced the bones from dead American soldiers at the bottom of a lake in Italy. The Paranoids mention all of this bears resemblance to a "Jacobean revenge play" (a tragedy set in the English Jacobean period, 1603–25) called *The Courier's Tragedy*, but their drug-addled attempt to relay the plot to Oedipa is so unintelligible, she decides to see it herself.

The "peculiar" play consists of five long acts. The fourth act is especially ambiguous and shows "a kind of ritual reluctance" to speak plainly, instead relying on the exchange of "Significant Looks." The word *Trystero* is spoken at the end of Act 4, and it lingers "in the dark to puzzle Oedipa." Oedipa goes backstage to speak with the director, Randolph Driblette. He tells her the script is copied from a paperback book he found at a used bookstore called Zapf's. When Oedipa asks about the "Significant Looks" in Act 4, he criticizes her for being "so hung up with words." He claims he's the "projector at the planetarium" and "the reality is in [his] head." He tells her no matter how deeply she commits, she could never find the truth of Trystero. She gets in the car with Metzger, who is listening to Mucho's radio station.

Analysis

Oedipa begins her descent into the underworld of Tristero in this chapter. What begins as a word that "puzzles" her starts to "exert power over her" by the time she leaves the theater after her conversation with Driblette. She is so shaken by the coincidences going on around her that she does not even realize her husband Mucho is speaking on the car radio until two miles down the road.

When Oedipa and Metzger witness the mail drop, Fallopian is her first link to Tristero. The letter Fallopian receives consists of bland pleasantries, and Fallopian suggests it's the frequency of the correspondence rather than the content that matters. This is Pynchon's way of criticizing shallow communication—and the types of people who talk a lot but say very little. Fallopian himself is the rather self-important author of a book on private mail delivery and a member of the Peter Pinguid Society, a fictional group possibly based on a real incident during the American Civil War (1861–65). Pynchon often uses a blend of historical fact and fiction to create a level of ambiguity and to add to the hallucinogenic effect of the narrative. Here, this works on two levels: it makes Oedipa begin to question her understanding of reality, and it makes the reader do so as well.

Much of Oedipa's fascination with Tristero springs from the chaos of her day at the lake with Metzger and the Paranoids. The teenagers' attempt to relate the plot of *The Courier's Tragedy* is "near to unintelligible" from the "eight memories unlooping ... as strange to map as their rising coils ... of pot smoke." The coils and loops are symbolic of the circular, chaotic, and ultimately meaningless type of communication Pynchon loathes.

When Oedipa attends a performance herself, the play is overstuffed with mysterious happenings, "lies" and "Significant Looks" given without illumination of meaning. It fails to bring Oedipa the clarity she seeks. The single thread she can hold on to is the word *Trystero*. Oedipa will come to wonder if this is by accident or design, but Driblette's warning to her seems to point to design. He tells her if he were to "dissolve" in the shower and "be washed down the drain into the Pacific," then what Oedipa saw of the play would vanish. All that would exist would be "traces, fossils ... without value." This foreshadows Driblette's death in the Pacific in Chapter 6. It also reveals the play to be a rather pompous "in-joke" that mirrors the farce Oedipa herself will go through researching Tristero. All her

leads end up taking her nowhere. As Driblette says, Oedipa could "waste [her] life" putting together clues "and never touch the truth." This is also a possible joke on the reader, as Pynchon is essentially wasting his readers' time as they try to make sense of the plot, only to arrive at the end to realize the surface story has no resolution.

Chapter 4

Summary

Oedipa becomes so enmeshed in following her leads that "everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero." She decides to take her task as executor more seriously and attends a Yoyodyne stockholders' meeting. The meeting breaks into a songfest, and Oedipa gets lost during a tour of the plant. She comes across Stanley Koteks, who happens to be doodling the muted post horn. Koteks tells her about the inventor John Nefastis, who created a machine containing "an honest-to-God Maxwell's Demon," a "tiny intelligence" that sorts molecules. The machine can only be controlled by "sensitives." Koteks suggests Nefastis might let her try out to be a sensitive. When she pronounces WASTE like a word instead of spelling it out, though, Koteks ignores her further inquiries.

Oedipa returns to The Scope with Metzger, and they talk to Fallopian again. Fallopian muses Koteks must be a part of some underground group of disgruntled inventors. Metzger accuses Fallopian of sounding like a left-leaning "Marxist" and their "typical Southern California dialogue" continues to "degenerate." Oedipa goes to Zapf's, the used bookstore, for Driblette's paperback and buys a copy. She goes to a retirement home, Vesperhaven House, and meets Mr. Thoth. He tells her about his grandfather who rode for the Pony Express and was once attacked by "false Indians" in black feathers. She goes to see Genghis Cohen, the "eminent philatelist," or stamp expert, who is valuating Pierce's stamp collection. He points out some stamps that are forgeries, symbols of how Tristero's aim is "to mute the Thurn and Taxis post horn."

Analysis

One of Pynchon's central theses on communication can be found in Metzger's conversation with Fallopian at the bar. Pynchon presents a "typical Southern California dialogue"—that is, a conversation that alludes to big ideas but never explores them in any real depth. Metzger asks Fallopian how he can "be against a corporation that wants a worker to waive his patent rights." In a conversation that seeks depth, this statement might suggest Metzger believes strongly in capitalism and is condemning Fallopian's supposed Marxist, or socialist, rhetoric. However, Pynchon points out Metzger merely "wanted to argue" and that the dialogue "degenerates further." The use of the word "degenerates" clues the reader in that Pynchon is critical of such "dialogue." Such conversations are a staple of *The Crying of Lot 49*, essentially making the novel itself a long, drawn-out example of seemingly significant dialogue that never leads to any essential truths.

Koteks brings up the idea of Maxwell's demon and suggests Oedipa might try out to be a "sensitive," that is, someone who can order the chaos and control the temperature in the box. As John Nefastis explains in Chapter 5, the entropy of heat-engines can be compared to the entropy of communication theory in the one overlapping point that Maxwell's demon occupies. This makes Maxwell's demon an important metaphor for the entire plot of the novel and what Pynchon is trying to convey with it. Entropy is defined as the universe's tendency toward disorder and degradation. By encoding his story with so many irrelevant, ambiguous, and superfluous details, Pynchon is purposely degrading his information. Neither Oedipa nor the reader can possibly sort the important details from unimportant ones, nor do they have a basis to even begin to do so. When she attempts to control the demon in Chapter 5, she becomes frustrated because she cannot communicate with it. She is unable to "receive that staggering set" of input and discern truth from it.

By pursuing information about Tristero, Oedipa is attempting to escape the tower of entropy she feels encapsulated by that was mentioned in Chapter 1. She exerts a lot of energy in following leads all over Southern California, but the quality of information she learns does not measure up to this amount of exertion. She is essentially wasting her time, as Driblette predicted in Chapter 3. In fact, the more information she learns about Tristero, the more confused Oedipa becomes. This is exemplified in Chapter 5, when she can no longer distinguish

reality from fantasy. Instead of helping her escape entropy, the process of investigating Tristero only hastens her descent into it.

Chapter 5

Summary

Oedipa leaves Metzger behind and drives north to Berkeley. She stays at a hotel hosting a deaf-mute conference. She has a "nightmare about something in the mirror." When she tracks down the publisher of the book she bought at Zapf's, they send her to their warehouse to get it. The *Trystero* line from Driblette's play does not appear in this version and a preface by Emory Bortz does nothing to clarify the issue. When she goes to find Bortz, she discovers he now teaches in San Narciso. She feels out of place and "unsure" among the university students. She goes to visit John Nefastis, who invites her to test if she's a "sensitive" with Maxwell's demon. While she stares at Maxwell's picture, Nefastis watches cartoons. Try as she might, she cannot communicate with the demon. She merely sees "a retinal twitch, a misfired nerve cell." She muses that Nefastis must be a "nut," and that to be a true sensitive, one must "share in the man's hallucinations." When she admits to Nefastis she cannot communicate, he offers to have sex with her, and she flees.

Maybe Trystero exists, or maybe it is only "presumed, perhaps fantasied by Oedipa." She decides to "drift … at random, and watch nothing happen" to convince herself it is "purely [a] nervous" problem of her own. However, after "no more than an hour" she sees another muted post horn. A man puts a name badge on her that reads "Hi! My name is Arnold Snarb," and she is herded into a bar called The Greek Way with a group of tourists. Inside, she collides with a man wearing a lapel pin in the shape of the muted post horn. She tells him what she knows of Trystero, and he tells her he is an IA member: part of an underground group called Inamorati Anonymous, people addicted to love. IA was founded by a Yoyodyne executive, and members keep in touch using Trystero's WASTE system. Oedipa drifts out of the bar and into the night, finding the Trystero muted post horn everywhere. She finds it on a sidewalk and discusses it with a group of children in Golden Gate Park who insist they are dreaming the gathering. She meets a man from her past with Pierce, Jesús Arrabal, who is now in exile because of his involvement with a Mexican revolutionary group. Pierce represented "too exactly and without flaw the thing" his revolution fights, and therefore Arrabal considers him a "miracle." She sees the symbol all night, everywhere, and in the morning, she gives "herself up to a fatalism rare for her." She had once believed she merely needed "grit … to solve any great mystery," but this is not the case. She realizes there are too many underground groups using WASTE as an alternative to the U.S. mail, "a calculated withdrawal."

Oedipa is given a letter to mail by WASTE, "under the freeway." The letter has a stamp depicting a "figure in deep black, with its arms outstretched" on top of the Capitol dome. She goes to the underpass and sees a "young wino" taking letters out of a can marked W.A.S.T.E. She trails him all over Oakland as he drops off letters. The next day, she decides to see Dr. Hilarius. She wants him to tell her she is fantasizing everything to do with Trystero. When she goes for an appointment, however, she is informed he has gone crazy with paranoia that someone is after him. He has locked himself in his office with a rifle. Oedipa goes in to talk to him and becomes his hostage. Dr. Hilarius admits he worked on "experimentally-induced insanity" during his time as an intern at the concentration camp Buchenwald in Germany during World War II (1939–45). When she asks him to talk her out of her fantasy, he tells her to "cherish it," for if she does not, she may "begin to cease to be." The cops peaceably take Dr. Hilarius, and Oedipa encounters Mucho outside in his mobile radio van. He interviews her. Later they go to the station and Mucho's boss, Caesar Funch, tells Oedipa (while mistakenly calling her Edna) that Mucho is "losing his identity." Oedipa sees this for herself when she talks to Mucho. He tells her he knows about her affair with Metzger because of how her voice sounds. He claims to be able to "listen to anything and take it apart again" as a side effect of the LSD he had begun taking for Dr. Hilarius's study. She realizes she had "seen Mucho for the last time" when she left him at home on the day she set off for San Narciso.

Analysis

As Oedipa explores more deeply into the matter of Trystero, Pynchon's writing becomes even more hallucinogenic. In Oedipa's fevered night in San Francisco, she weaves in and out of bars, buses, and alleyways, encountering strange undergrounds of all types, all displaying the muted post horn symbol. Oedipa can no longer distinguish between what is real

and what is imagined. Pynchon makes this abundantly clear in this chapter, especially when Oedipa questions the nature of reality in relation to the children she comes across in Golden Gate Park. The children tell her they are not really physically there and are merely "dreaming the gathering." When their jump rope song corrupts "Thurn and Taxis" into "turning taxi," Oedipa becomes upset and "stop[s] believing in them."

Arrabal defines what a miracle is to Oedipa: "another world's intrusion into this one." Pierce was the miracle "to reassure him" of the justness of his revolution, and without Pierce, Oedipa wonders if Arrabal might not now be in exile. Pierce is Oedipa's "miracle" as well. Without Pierce naming her executor of his will, she never would have investigated the "intrusion" of Trystero's world in hers and she would not end up in exile from her own life at the end of the novel. Oedipa recognizes this chance encounter with Arrabal for "a coded warning," but she fails to grasp the magnitude of the effect Trystero is already having on her and those around her.

The first major casualty is Dr. Hilarius. Oedipa relies on him as a man of science to convince her she must be delusional when it comes to seeing Trystero everywhere. But in his complete mental breakdown, he only advises her to "hold" on to her fantasy, or else she might "go over by that much to the others" and "begin to cease to be." In an example of situational irony, she soon finds out Dr. Hilarius gave her husband LSD and, because of this, Mucho's sense of self has lost its "sharp edges." Mucho has delusions of grandeur, believing himself to be "an antenna" connected to "a million lives a night" that are his lives, too. He is no longer the Mucho she knows and can depend on. In a sense, both men have become literal embodiments of their jobs. Dr. Hilarius has gone from studying hysteria to becoming hysterical himself. Mucho's transformation into "an antenna" is an extreme progression of his radio personality. Oedipa has lost both men, and these are giant blows to her.

Perhaps Oedipa can already sense how she is losing herself, too. When Mucho and Funch call her "Edna," this is the second time in the chapter she has been called by a different name. The first is at the bar The Greek Way when the IA member calls her "Arnold Snarb." It is significant that she does not protest to either case of incorrect address. It is as if she is subconsciously accepting the gradual dissipation of her identity. This dissipation is also foreshadowed by her encounters with mirrors, first in Chapter 2 and then again at the start of this chapter. As a mirror is a symbol of identity, it is telling that Oedipa destroys one immediately prior to her infidelity with Metzger in Chapter 2. And in this chapter, she fears the mirror across from her hotel bed holds "something," but she can't see what it is. When she finally wakes, she stares "into the mirror at her own exhausted face." Her quest to understand Trystero will break her down. In fact, in Chapter 6, she advises her "reflection" in the mirror to take on a new identity, understanding the Oedipa she knew is gone.

Chapter 6

Summary

Back at her hotel in San Narciso, Oedipa finds out Metzger has run off to elope with the girlfriend of Paranoids band member Serge. Serge first tries to tell Oedipa in song, but when she does not get it, the band gives it to her "in prose." She calls Driblette, but only hears that a statement about him will be made the next day. She then calls Bortz and gets an invitation to visit. On her way over, she passes Zapf's Used Books, which is now "a pile of charred rubble." At Bortz's house, his wife, Grace Bortz, takes care of the kids while Bortz holds court with three grad students, and all are "sodden with drink." Oedipa asks about the discrepancies between editions of *The Courier's Tragedy* regarding the Trystero line, and Bortz reveals there is a pornographic version stored at the Vatican. A grad student also reveals Driblette "walked into the Pacific" and their gathering is "a wake." Bortz takes Oedipa to his study and has her read an account of a man who traveled the Thurn and Taxis route and was attacked by "black-cloaked riders." The riders killed everyone except the author of the account, who was told to go back to England and tell the king about "the wrath of Trystero."

In the next several days, Oedipa learns a few purported historical facts about Trystero. The founder is said to be Hernando Joaquín de Tristero y Calavera, who fought a rebel war against his cousin, the executor of Thurn and Taxis. He set up the Tristero System as a "campaign of obstruction, terror and depredation along the Thurn and Taxis mail route." Tristero followers wore black. But beyond these early beginnings, Oedipa has to look for "period[s] of instability for Thurn and Taxis" to find Tristero in its shadow, according to Bortz's "mirror-image theory." Oedipa starts "to feel reluctant about following up on anything." She is "anxious that her

revelation not expand beyond a certain point." She does, however, go back to The Scope to see Fallopian. He suggests Pierce might have set up the Tristero quest before he died and it's "all a hoax." He recommends she write down her hard facts and "verify sources." She accuses him of being "different" now and "hating" her. Genghis Cohen shows her a stamp that gives the meaning of WASTE as "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire." The stamp is not listed anywhere except in an addendum to a catalog. Oedipa then realizes "every access route to the Tristero" has something to do with Pierce. In the mirror, she advises "her reflection" to change her name. She considers four alternatives to what she is experiencing. One: she has stumbled upon a network that underground groups use to communicate away from the shadow of the government. Two: she is hallucinating everything. Three: an expensive, elaborate plot has been mounted against her. Four: she is imagining "some such plot," which means she is crazy. She does not like any of the alternatives, but she hopes she is merely "mentally ill." She spends several days in a terrible state, and meanwhile Genghis Cohen comes up with "new goodies" related to Tristero. He also informs her the Tristero "forgeries" are to be sold in auction as lot 49, and a stranger plans to bid in secret for them.

In a state of desperation, Oedipa calls The Greek Way and speaks to the IA member, identifying herself as Arnold Snarb. She admits Tristero has "saturated" her, and she sets him free from continuing his part in the elaborate practical joke. He says it's too late for him and hangs up. Her isolation is now complete. She ponders the state of America and the importance of the undergrounds she seems to have stumbled upon. "How many shared Tristero's secret, as well as its exile?" she wonders. The day of the auction arrives, and Oedipa attends. Genghis Cohen tells her the secret bidder has decided to show up in person after all. Oedipa contemplates making a scene to expose him. The auctioneer, Loren Passerine, presides over the proceedings "like a puppet-master." Oedipa sits back "to await the crying of lot 49."

Analysis

At this point, Oedipa has received such an influx of information that she is not even attempting to understand coded messages any longer. This is why the message of "Serge's Song" does not reach her. She gets that they are "trying to tell [her] something," but they have to communicate Metzger's elopement plainly, "in prose." Oedipa has reached her breaking point, and Bortz's harried wife Grace recognizes this. Grace tells Oedipa she has a "certain harassed" look about her she thought "only kids caused," but Oedipa is suffering from something else. The children create such an overload of noise that Grace jokes about "infanticide". Similarly, by the end of the novel, Tristero has brought such an overload of noise into Oedipa's life that she considers "causing a scene violent enough to bring the cops into it."

Shocked and unsettled by the loss of the men in her life and those surrounding her investigations into Tristero, Oedipa continues to research Tristero, but not without trepidation. After discovering a few historical facts about them, she is wary of following up on new clues. She is afraid of her "revelation" growing "larger than she" so that it "assume[s] her to itself": that is, she is afraid of it taking over her mind and her identity. When Fallopian insists she consider Pierce might be involving her in a hoax, she knows she has been "steadfastly refusing to look at that possibility directly." However, when all Tristero leads seem to point back to Pierce, she is forced to examine her own precarious situation. Either Tristero exists, she is hallucinating that it exists, Pierce created a hoax, or she is imagining a hoax. This is where the nature of reality comes into question, and Oedipa believes her best-case scenario is that she is mentally ill. Therefore, Oedipa inquires after the mystery bidder interested in lot 49, the "Tristero forgeries," with "the courage you find you have when there is nothing more to lose." The men at the auction wear "black mohair," a material that would look a bit like the feathers the Tristero brigands used to dress in. The auctioneer "spread[s] his arms" like "a descending angel," which mirrors the pose of the "figure in deep black, with its arms outstretched" Oedipa sees on the Tristero stamp in Chapter 5. The novel ends with Oedipa waiting for this auctioneer to cry the lots of Pierce's estate. The ending is purposely ambiguous. Pynchon wants the reader to know the essential truth of the story is not to be found at the surface level, or even in the painstaking research of all the clues given along the way. Whether or not Pierce set Oedipa up is not important. The identity of the mystery bidder is not important. The exact configuration of Tristero is not important. But, all this does not mean Oedipa's journey was pointless.

If Thurn and Taxis represents the government and recognized society, then Tristero represents the disenfranchised and the rebels. As a wealthy capitalist and property owner, Pierce is more aligned with Thurn and Taxis, while someone like the exiled revolutionary Arrabal is more aligned with Tristero. These are two separate worlds, but as Arrabal says in Chapter

5, sometimes there is a "miracle" and the two worlds touch, causing a "cataclysm." At the beginning of the novel, Oedipa is a suburban housewife who attends Tupperware parties. Her world is the Thurn and Taxis world, but at several points in the novel, her world touches the Tristero world, causing cataclysms. These cataclysms are represented by sudden plunges into darkness. The first occurs when the Paranoids blow a fuse at the exact second she climaxes with Metzger while cheating on her husband, an act that alienates her from her housewife role. The second occurs when she is at the theater and hears the word *Trystero* for the first time: "all lights were for a moment cut" and "the word ... hung in the dark." This begins her investigations into Tristero, a journey that ends up alienating her from all the men in her life. The last is at the end, when the "heavy door" of the auction room is closed on "the lobby windows and the sun." This signals her alienation is complete and she has surrendered her suburban housewife identity to the darkness of Tristero. One could argue, however, that Oedipa's alienation is not necessarily a bad thing. Over the course of her journey, Oedipa has been made "sensitive" to the fact that many undergrounds exist away from recognized society. These are the "storm-systems of group suffering" in America, and they are the "true continuity."

“ Quotes

"All the bits and pieces coated uniformly, like a salad of despair."

— Narrator, Chapter 1

Oedipa claims Mucho is "sensitive," a word that takes on a different meaning thanks to John Nefastis and his machine with a Maxwell's demon. Through his work at a used car lot, Mucho was already privy to a look at the lives of the disenfranchised in America. He saw poor people trading in their old cars with debris that created a "salad of despair." Mucho could not handle it, instead retreating into a shallow suburban life.

"There had hung the sense of buffering, insulation, she had noticed the absence of an intensity."

— Narrator, Chapter 1

As Oedipa contemplates what she might discover in the process of executing Pierce's will, she realizes she feels like an observer of her own life, and the view is "out of focus." She is reacting to the shallowness of her existence as a suburban housewife and how little meaning she derives from it.

"What really keeps her where she is is magic ... visited on her from outside."

— Narrator, Chapter 1

Oedipa identifies with the painted women in the tower who create the world while being trapped by it. Pynchon argues here that people are both products and captives of their society.

"Good guys and bad guys. You never get to any of the underlying truth."

— Mike Fallopian, Chapter 3

Fallopian criticizes extreme positions. He tells Metzger he "thinks like a Bircher." (The John Birch Society, unlike the Peter Pinguid Society, is actually a real organization.) By thinking in this binary way (good versus bad), a person does not allow for any nuance and therefore never works toward understanding that truth is much more complex and requires real engagement.

"You could waste your life that way and never touch the truth."

— Randolph Driblette, Chapter 3

Driblette is warning Oedipa of the high cost associated with researching Tristero. Even with full engagement, Oedipa will likely never find satisfactory answers. Pynchon seems to insinuate that ultimate truth is unknowable and the dogged pursuit of it should not consume one's life.

"Everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero."

— Narrator, Chapter 4

This quote points to how obsessively Oedipa pursues answers about Tristero, despite ample warnings that to continue in such a fashion would mean "wasting" her life.

"Teamwork is ... a symptom of the gutlessness of the whole society."

— Stanley Koteks, Chapter 4

Koteks is part of a disgruntled underground group of inventors. These inventors believe in the right for private citizens to own their own ideas. They are therefore disenfranchised from a society that allows companies to exploit inventors' ideas for their own profit under the guise of the word "teamwork."

"The central truth itself ... must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold."

— Narrator, Chapter 4

Oedipa's inability to grasp the underlying or central truth is a reoccurring theme. Pynchon reminds the reader of it often to hammer the point home.

"She moved ... wanting to feel relevant but knowing how much ... it would take."

— Narrator, Chapter 5

Pynchon brings up alternate universes here. This perhaps foreshadows Oedipa's meeting with Arrabal, who tells her about the "miracle" of coexisting worlds that touch at certain points. Oedipa does not feel relevant in the student world of Berkeley, nor in the world of suburbia she has recently occupied. Via Tristero, she is searching "alternate" worlds, and maybe ultimately she will find where she belongs.

"With coincidences ... wherever she looked, she had nothing but ... Trystero, to hold them together."

— Narrator, Chapter 5

The sheer number of coincidences Oedipa encounters makes her situation seem like some sort of hallucinogenic trip that cannot be real. The fact that Tristero is the common denominator lends some credence to the possibility her situation is a hoax with intelligent design, perhaps at Pierce's behest.

"Metaphor ... was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were."

— Narrator, Chapter 5

Oedipa muses that one can be inside or outside a metaphor, and she no longer knows where she is. To be inside a metaphor is to be safe; that is, if a person is inside, they know

the meaning of it. Outside the metaphor, a person is lost because they do not know the meaning.

> *"You're an antenna, sending your pattern out across a million lives a night."*

— Wendell "Mucho" Maas, Chapter 5

LSD has expanded Mucho's mind, or at least he believes it has. With his new abilities, he believes he can engage in true communication with the "million lives" he reaches with his radio station every night.

> *"Oedipa sat ... wondering whether ... some version of herself hadn't vanished with him."*

— Narrator, Chapter 6

As Oedipa muses about Driblette's words to her from the shower—that he might "dissolve" down the drain and vanish—she feels lost. This speaks to her alienation from her identity as a suburban housewife. Her investigations into Tristero have made her "sensitive" to the plight of the disenfranchised, and she can never really go back to her shallow life.

> *"For this, oh God, was the void."*

— Narrator, Chapter 6

After losing the men in her life who defined who she was, Oedipa feels completely untethered to her existence as a suburban housewife. She no longer has a sense of self, and this is the void she'd always feared.

> *"Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth."*

— Narrator, Chapter 6

This quote points not only to Oedipa's search for meaning but her need for the world to make sense. If there is no greater meaning, then her search, she fears, has been pointless. However, Pynchon suggests true meaning is not found in the end result, but within the journey itself.

Symbols

Mirrors

A mirror symbolizes identity, and Oedipa has several significant encounters with mirrors over the course of the novel. During Metzger's seduction game in her motel room, Oedipa goes to the bathroom and dresses in so many layers of clothes she looks like a "beach ball with feet." This makes her clumsy enough to shatter the mirror. As the seduction goes on, Oedipa steps again into the bathroom and cannot "find her image" in the broken mirror. This is perhaps a warning that her impending infidelity with Metzger will be the first step in alienating her from her suburban housewife identity.

Later, at a hotel in San Francisco, she fears the mirror across from her bed holds "something" but she can't see what it is. After a turbulent night, she wakes up "staring into the mirror at her own exhausted face." This illustrates how her investigations into The Tristero are breaking down her sense of self. When Oedipa goes over the alternatives of what is going on with The Tristero in Chapter 6, she "advise[s] her reflection in the half-light of that afternoon's vanity mirror" to take on a new identity. She understands the Oedipa she knows is vanishing, or is perhaps already gone.

Darkness

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, darkness represents the underground groups, like The Tristero, that only thrive in secrecy away from official channels. Members of The Tristero wear black to symbolize this darkness. Via her investigations into The Tristero, Oedipa comes into contact with this darkness.

From the first chapter, the reader is aware Oedipa is both fascinated and frightened by the void. She can identify with the "frail girls" in the painting by the exiled Spanish artist Remedios Varo (1908–63). They "embroider" a tapestry, "seeking hopelessly to fill the void." In a sense, this is also what Oedipa does with her investigations into Pierce's assets and The Tristero. She seeks purpose and meaning to replace the dark void inside her. But instead of the void being filled, The Tristero plunges her whole identity into the darkness of the void. The reader can trace this process via the sudden plunges into darkness Oedipa experiences.

The first time this happens is when she and Metzger climax together at the same moment the Paranoids blow a fuse. This act of infidelity alienates her from her housewife role. The second incident is at the theater when she first hears the word *Trystero* spoken: "All lights were for a moment cut" and "the word ... hung in the dark." This jump-starts her investigations into The Tristero, a path that alienates her from all the men in her life. The final occurrence is when the "heavy door" of the auction room closes on "the lobby windows and the sun." Her alienation is complete. She has surrendered her suburban housewife identity to the "darkness" of Tristero.

Muted Post Horn

The muted post horn is symbolic of a "withdrawal" from recognized society, because a mute literally prevents a horn from being heard. The symbol was supposedly created by The Tristero and later adopted by the underground WASTE mail delivery system. Oedipa first encounters the "hieroglyph" in the bathroom of a bar, The Scope, along with a WASTE address, but she does not know what it means until later. The muted post horn is made up of "a loop, triangle and trapezoid." She subsequently sees it on Mr. Thoth's signet ring and catches Stanley Koteks doodling it at Yoyodyne.

As Oedipa learns from Genghis Cohen, the stamp expert, the post horn itself was found in the coat of arms of Thurn and Taxis. Cohen tells her Thurn and Taxis was the official European mail service from 1300 to 1867, and thus the post horn symbolizes official communication. Because Tristero's objective was to disrupt official communication, they added the "extra little doojigger sort of coming out of the bell" to depict a mute. The mute also represents their silence and secrecy.

Once Oedipa is sensitive to the muted post horn symbol, she begins to see it everywhere. In San Francisco it leads her to discover many underground groups, including Inamorati Anonymous, a group for those addicted to love. She begins to understand there are many such disenfranchised groups of people in America, and perhaps The Tristero is a way to give them a voice and feeling of belonging and meaning.

Themes

Communication

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, methods of communication break down or prove meaningless. With such a setup, Pynchon seems to suggest human attempts at communication are essentially pointless if they remain at a surface level. Mike Fallopian is certainly guilty of such shallow communication. He participates in the Peter Pinguid Society mail system, which requires members to write one letter a week or be fined. This results in letters devoid of any real content. Fallopian also has a buzzword-filled conversation with Metzger at The Scope that represents "typical Southern California dialogue," and as the conversation goes on the dialogue "degenerates further."

Pynchon also explores degeneration as it relates to communication using the metaphor of Maxwell's demon. Maxwell's demon is an imaginary being that can theoretically sort molecules and violate the second law of thermodynamics to avoid expending work. In Chapter 5, John Nefastis compares the entropy of heat-engines to the entropy of communication theory by their one overlapping point:

Maxwell's demon. Entropy is a tendency towards disorder and degradation. Characters in the novel communicate so many irrelevant, ambiguous, and superfluous details that their information becomes degraded. Just like how she is unable to sort molecules via Maxwell's demon within Nefastis's machine, Oedipa is unable to sort the important details from unimportant ones in the communications she receives about The Tristero. She cannot discern truth from the "staggering set" of input encoded in the story—and neither can the reader.

Indeed, Pynchon spends so much time encoding information into his story that the reader is led to suppose it must all mean something. But, consider Oedipa's experience driving into San Narciso at the beginning of Chapter 2. She recognizes a pattern of "hieroglyphic" buildings in an "ordered swirl" that hides meaning but at the same time holds "intent to communicate." Therein lies the paradox that ultimately stymies both Oedipa and the reader. Oedipa comes close to experiencing a "religious" revelation, but it is just out of her reach and seems to remain so throughout the novel. The reader assumes Pynchon will provide answers to his mysteries by novel's end, but he does not. The surface mystery is a red herring, designed to force Oedipa and the reader to look beneath this surface, to recognize the disenfranchised groups that make up America. Pynchon seems to suggest something quite progressive for the 1960s: that unless society is willing to give everyone a voice, substantial discussions of real depth are simply not possible.

The Search for Meaning

Pynchon depicts an era of cultural chaos in American life. The 1960s was a decade marked by the Vietnam War (1954–75), recreational drug usage, fights for civil rights, and the British Invasion led by bands like the Beatles. Via Oedipa's journey, Pynchon shows how various countercultures exist in the shadows of mainstream culture and how ordinary people can become alienated from their own lives in their struggle for personal meaning and sense of belonging. Pynchon's choice to place a suburban housewife at the center of his chaotic adventure plot would have seemed subversive back in the 1960s. Women often felt trapped in society's strict gender roles, and Oedipa is no exception. She attends Tupperware parties, mixes drinks for her husband Mucho, and recalls "a fat deckful of days which seemed ... more or less identical." Not only is she bored in her limited role, but she also tends to define herself by the men in her life, looking for her lovers and her psychiatrist to be her "knight[s] of deliverance."

Oedipa may not consciously realize it, but by answering the call to adventure and accepting her executorship, she is taking a step toward claiming her independence. However, while her investigations into Pierce's assets and the conspiracy of The Tristero give her a sense of purpose that was previously missing, she continues to seek belonging and meaning. Midway through the novel, while on the university campus in Berkeley, she muses how she longs "to feel relevant" but she knows "how much of a search among alternative universes it would take." Part of her struggle is that her quest to unravel the mystery of The Tristero is within a world of men who primarily treat her as a curiosity, a sex object, or both. Toward the end of the novel, Oedipa is despondent because she has lost all her men. Dr. Hilarius and Mucho have lost their minds, Driblette has killed himself, and Metzger, her "one extra-marital fella," has run off with a 15-year-old. But, Pynchon seems to suggest it is necessary for Oedipa to lose all these men she has defined herself by so she can begin to redefine herself.

Whether or not she ever uncovers the real story about The Tristero, by the end of the novel, she has found herself at a critical point in her search for meaning. She muses: "Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth." Oedipa would like for things to make sense, because if they do not, perhaps all her efforts have been in vain. But, Pynchon seems to convey that true meaning is not found in the end result but within the journey itself. During her journey she has discovered a multitude of underground groups, full of people who pursue passions that bring them meaning. The Inamorati Anonymous member who helps people burned by love is an example. Pynchon proposes there is hope in alienation—a chance to discover one's true self as well as essential belonging, purpose, and meaning.

The Nature of Reality

Pynchon uses Oedipa's paranoia and tenuous hold on reality to criticize modern society—specifically, that of Southern California in the 1960s. A major part of this culture was drug

culture, and Oedipa and the other characters spend much of their time under the influence of alcohol and drugs. There is no lack of opportunity to blur reality by surrendering to mind-altering substances. Oedipa encounters whiskey sours at home, an offer to participate in a psychotropic drug study, an "enormous Thermos of tequila sours" and pot at Lake Inverarity, and beers in Professor Bortz's backyard. Oedipa is used to this constant barrage. She is able to resist Dr. Hilarius's pills because she's afraid the hallucinations she already has will get worse. Metzger is more successful with alcohol, and her excessive drinking with him wears down her defenses. She becomes so lost in a fog that things grow "less and less clear." Mucho eventually surrenders to Dr. Hilarius, taking so much LSD that his sense of self loses its "sharp edges." He acquires delusions of grandeur, believing himself to be able to "listen to anything and take it apart again."

Pynchon uses his hallucinogenic writing style to support his exploration of one's subjective understanding of reality. His long sentences contain clauses building upon each other to produce a sort of ordered chaos, and he packs them full of references that may or may not be real. His plot is so convoluted, one can easily lose one's bearings inside the novel. And the content of the scenes is often so absurd that the reader often questions the plausibility of the scenarios Oedipa finds herself in. In fact, Oedipa often questions it herself. The probability of one of Metzger's Baby Igor movies being on television while he is trying to seduce her makes her think she is being set up. When all Tristero leads improbably seem to point back to Pierce, she decides her best-case scenario is that she is hallucinating everything. And when the children she talks to in Golden Gate Park insist they are merely dreaming their gathering, Oedipa simply decides to stop believing they even exist.

Pynchon is also making the point that everyone has their own version of reality. Because she is so imaginative, Oedipa is more sensitive to suggestion than some. When Dr. Hilarius tries to recruit her for his drug study by declaring, "We want you," she hallucinates the Uncle Sam poster with the same saying "hanging in the air over her bed." That the poster "appears in front of all our post offices" is a sly nod on Pynchon's part to the post office conspiracy plot to come. And when she stares in Driblette's eyes after watching his play in Chapter 3, she has a vision of a "laboratory maze," a foreshadowing of the figurative maze she will soon find herself in while investigating The Tristero. She is skeptical enough to understand the "true sensitive" is one who can share in Nefastis's delusions about his machine's imaginary power to sort molecules, even though it disappoints her that she is not quite crazy enough to do it.

Suggested Reading

Bloom, Harold, editor. *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Thomas Pynchon*. Chelsea House Publications, 2003.

Dalsgaard, Inger H., et al., editors. *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon.* Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Grant, J. Kerry. *A Companion to* The Crying of Lot 49. University of Georgia Press, 1994.

O'Donnell, Patrick, editor. *New Essays on* The Crying of Lot 49. Cambridge University Press, 1992.