

PYNCHON'S PARABLE: THE AMERICAN DREAM IN *THE CRYING OF LOT 49*

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ABSTRACT

Although the innovative style of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* is both the delight and the despair of its readers, its impact derives from the mythopoetic content and historical context. In this short novel, Pynchon joins the ranks of U.S. writers who explore individual and national identity in terms of social mythology.

The American Dream is an integral component of the history, literature, and lives of the people of the United States. Not only has it greatly influenced the politics, economic and social progress, and cultural values of the country, it has also shaped the spiritual and psychological development of both individuals and the American community as a whole.¹ For over three hundred years, the American Dream has been defined, revised, analyzed, and interpreted in as many ways as the number of people who undertake the task. It has survived political manipulation, historical explanation, and literary interpretation, and remains an essential element of the American mentality and temperament. Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* is a modern reflection on the American Dream, as well as further testimony to its tremendous influence within American society.

Historically the American Dream is rooted in the spirit and mentality of the original English settlers who fled religious persecution in England in search of virgin territory which would allow them the freedom to worship as they chose. They saw the New World as an unblemished Garden of Eden, a land of limitless opportunity which provided the necessary escape from the evil and corruption accumulated through centuries of European civilization. God's munificence in delivering them from further contamination and restoring their innocence led the early settlers to the profound conviction that they were a chosen

people called upon to live in perfect, timeless harmony with God and nature.

The perpetration of this national covenant depended upon their ability to avoid the parasitic complexity of historical institutions, thus giving rise to the insistence upon individual rights and responsibilities which is the basis not only for American democracy, but also for the propagation of the American Dream.

Throughout the following generations, the American people have maintained their self-righteous belief in the uniqueness of their nation and its inhabitants. In the twentieth century, however, the dream has been secularized. The Puritan belief that prosperity is a manifestation of divine favor and due reward for perseverance and hard labor has degenerated into an obsession with material acquisition and social position. The seemingly endless frontier, which constituted the basis for the renewal and dissemination of the covenant, has been replaced by conglomerates of people and their appendages. The American Dream has come to represent the desire for material success, fame, and power, while the nature of modern American society belies the tenacity with which the illusion is maintained.

American literature, as well as history, reflects the gradual transformation of the American Dream.² Cooper, Melville, and Twain all dealt with the subject of the survival of the new Adam, the independent hero in redemptive

contact with nature surpassing the limitations of civilization. Henry James contrasted the innocent simplicity of Americans with the devious nature of sophisticated Europeans. Crane and Dreiser grappled with the imposition of society upon instinctive individual virtue. Hemingway and Fitzgerald bemoaned the futility of the individual both in isolating himself from a corrupt world and in attempting to prevail against it. Each of these authors confronts his readers with his particular version of the American Adam in the New World Garden, for although the American Dream has gradually taken on a new significance, the American myth of uniqueness continues to operate as a fundamental tenet of national and individual vision.

In *The Crying of Lot 49* Pynchon employs historical references to enhance the background of the American national identity. The plot of the Jacobean revenge play both parodies and typifies the intrigue and evil of European civilization from which the pilgrims fled. The historically important Thurn and Taxis postal system represents the ruthless power of established monopolies, while Tristero becomes a metaphor for nonconformity to ruling institutions. The detailed accounts of the Peter Pinguid incident and the Scurvhamite sect of Puritans contribute to the impression of historical reinforcement of the modern American condition. The minutiae of information concerning philatelic and textual renditions, revisions, and authentications also substantiate the sense of historical weight in Pynchon's writing. His ingenious interpolation of fact and fiction as literary technique transmute to a composite metaphor for the American Dream itself. Pynchon's use of historical references serves to reinforce traditional American distrust of historical complexity and its implied tyranny.

Pynchon's choice of setting in *The Crying of Lot 49* is far from arbitrary. Because of its geographical location, California necessarily constitutes the final opportunity for attaining the timeless harmony envisioned by the original settlers. It was the last frontier, the mecca of unsullied promise for those All-American pioneers who fled the growing institutionalization of the East in search of fulfillment of the covenant in the Wild West, where the Rockies guarded against the encroachment of civilization and the fertile land and mild climate provided the means necessary to achieve independence. In the modern

residue of the American Dream, California continues to represent the land of golden opportunity, but the idea reflects a rather desperate attempt to cling to a last resort, an inability to surrender an inherited illusion. In its definitive state, California symbolizes the American Dream turned nightmare rather than apotheosis.

Pynchon's presentation of California encompasses the two basic facets of the American Dream today: the tarnished image of material success and the counterculture unwilling to surrender its vision of individuality. Pierce Inverarity embodies the American success story. At his death, his holdings comprise an enormous variety of interests extending across the nation but centered, naturally, in California. A real estate magnate whose only ikon was a fittingly whitewashed bust of Jay Gould, Inverarity dedicated his life to buying and exploiting the raw material of the national covenant. Among other things, he owned or held shares in housing developments, a Turkish bath, a cigarette filter industry, a home for senior citizens, and the aerospace division of Yoyodyne, Incorporated, where he was considered a "founding father." In ten years of land speculation, Inverarity constructed a veritable empire of acquisitions, and it is this tangle of possessions which Oedipa and the firm of Warp, Wistfull, Kubitschek and McMingus must bring into "pulsing stelliferous Meaning."³ By all material standards, Inverarity was a complete success. As heir to the American covenant, however, he was a direct descendent of the Peter Pinguid who "violated his upbringing and code of honor" (p.33) by exchanging civic duty for personal gain. Inverarity's estate represents further undermining of the traditional values of moral rectitude and respectable self-sufficiency perpetrated by the original "founding fathers."

Yoyodyne, San Narciso's biggest employer and a giant of industry, epitomizes the corporate complexity of modern America and the nonhuman success story. Everything about the corporation is oversized and organized. The parking lot is enormous, the cafeteria is a hundred yards long, filled with long, glittering tables where "gunboats" of food are served at every noontide "invasion" of workers. The offices themselves are one great color-coordinated fluorescent expanse for as far as the eye can see.

Even the stockholders appear to be cast from the same mold. Yoyodyne is the corporate deity, and at the stockholders' meeting due reverence is paid in the form of a ritual business session complete with hymn-singing and a pilgrimage to the plant itself. The vastness of the physical frontier has been replaced by the enormity of the institutions which usurped its sacred space, and the traditional concern with the spiritual has been replaced by engrossment with the material.

Like generations of concerned authors before him, Pynchon explores the ramifications of this national conversion. The most threatening aspect of modern progress is the development of intricate networks or systems to structure the burgeoning society. Rather than a useful aid to organization, formulating systems has become a national obsession, an end in itself rather than a means. San Narciso exemplifies the extreme to which systems have become fundamental in today's America. It is "less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts--census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway" (p.13). Like the printed circuit of a transistor radio, its outward patterns hint at "a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning" (p.13), but remain undecipherable to the uninitiated, just as Fangoso Lagoons emits "some promise of hierophany" which is unredeemable. As its name indicates, San Narciso represents the self-propagating cultural complexity of modern America. Metzger proudly states that "our beauty lies... in this extended capacity for convolutions" which can be "repeated endlessly" (p.20); however, pointless repetition and intricate interrelationships are precisely the signs of cultural and social decadence which the New World Garden was established to prevent.

The Crying of Lot 49 includes many types of systems, covert and overt, open and closed. The effect of the continuous references to clues, webs, mazes, weaving, labyrinths, patterns, networks, and systems is reinforced by the narrative techniques and structure. On its most superficial level, the novel deals with legal and social codes, communication systems, and technological organization. Implicit in the content is the more profound dilemma of sorting through the paraphernalia of life in search of meaningful patterns, or simply in search of meaning. Ironically, the desire for knowledge which

inspired the scientific method of investigation is hindered by the profuse application of that same method and the intricate results. Pynchon ingeniously discloses the intrinsic danger of technological advancement through his presentation of an example of the same: Maxwell's Demon. This invention allegedly defies the laws of thermodynamics by harnessing energy without expending it, thus arresting the natural entropic degeneration of all matter and energy into a final state of inert uniformity. Entropy and Maxwell's Demon also apply to the amount of information which is communicated in a message. By linking science, communication, and the principle of entropy, Pynchon produces a metaphor for his America, an America caught up in perpetual motion, going nowhere fast.

For Pynchon, the most serious consequence of the present state of affairs is the fact that productivity has taken precedence over creativity and even humanity. In a society where human bones are perfunctorily taken advantage of to produce cigarette filters and hair spray containers transform into lethal weapons, the cry in the wilderness of the solitary individual goes undetected or simply unheeded. Corporate employees are required to sign away their patent rights, and with them go their motivation, creativity, and pride. Rather than being rewarded for ingenuity and initiative (essential characteristics of the New World Adam), the modern American is programmed to sublimate these qualities and perform as part of a team for the general or corporate good. Koteks declares that teamwork is really "a way to avoid responsibility... a symptom of the gutlessness of the whole society" (p.61), an assertion which the founder of Inamorati Anonymous exemplifies. This nameless executive of the Yoyodyne Corporation was automated out of his job, upon which his wife left him for the very efficiency expert who had replaced him with a computer. Stripped of his corporate camouflage, the executive is incapacitated:

Having been since age 7 rigidly instructed in an eschatology that pointed nowhere but to a presidency and death, trained to do absolutely nothing but sign his name to specialized memoranda he could not begin to understand and to take blame for the running-amok of specialized programs that failed for specialized reasons he had to have explained to him, the executive's first thoughts were naturally of suicide. But previous training got the better of him; he could not make the decision without first hearing the ideas of a committee. (p.83)

Even after collecting others' opinions as best he could, the executive "found it impossible, in the absence of some trigger, to come to any clear decision" (p.84). When circumstance finally prods him into deciding to form a society of isolates, he is still incapable of accepting responsibility for his action and chooses to remain anonymous in his new position. Unlike Pierce Inverarity, whose resourcefulness at least produces material wealth, the executive fails totally as an individual, himself the product of the mass mediocrity of the hi-tech system.

Throughout *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon laments the loss of individuality and its warped effects on the American people. Miles' band, the Paranoids, is a group of undifferentiated young people who are only able to relate to the rest of the world vicariously or through a protective screen of drugs or music. Roseman, the lawyer, faced with the impossibility of being as successful as Perry Mason, dedicates himself to destroying Mason's image. Metzger, another lawyer unable to surpass infantile fantasies, chooses to indulge them. Dr. Hilarius, unsuccessful in his life-long attempt to forcibly acquire faith, surrenders to madness. Mucho Maas, unable to cope with a defective world, retreats into the soothing self-annihilation of drugs, daily becoming "less himself and more generic" (p. 104). Driblette's solipsism turns to nihilism and he commits suicide. Oedipa's heroic attempt to abandon the safety of her suburban tower and take on the outside world single-handedly drives her to the brink of paranoia. In one way or another, all these people personify the impotence of the individual upon confrontation with a world devoid of spiritual sustenance and indifferent to human potential. The heirs to the national covenant appear to have sacrificed their uniqueness to the comforts of conformity or the idiosyncrasies of narcissism. Their innocence and virtue have been undermined by the evil complexity of progress in the form of corporate and material corruption.

Pynchon's jeremiad is tempered by the permeation of another America, a counterculture of social outcasts and rebels. In a land conditioned to accept "any San Narciso among its most tender flesh without a reflex or a cry" (p. 136), the citizens of the other America exist in a state of "stubborn quiescence," their undeclared goal that of simply surviving outside the Establishment until the "symmetry of choices," all

of which are unacceptable to them, breaks down. The American underground consists of squatters, delinquents, blacks, Latins, winos, rebels, drifters, anarchists -- anyone who is economically, racially, politically, culturally, or psychologically outside the realm of the modern American Dream. Fallopian calls them "an underground of the unbalanced," Mucho sees them as a "salad of despair" of "unvarying gray sickness." Like the dancers at the deaf-mute convention who mysteriously manage to manipulate "some unthinkable order of music" harmoniously, the members of the other America instinctively coordinate their protest; "each alienation, each species of withdrawal" contributes to the subversion of the ruling system. Through cryptic organizations like D.E.A.T.H. and W.A.S.T.E., they tenaciously align themselves with the centuries-old tradition of the Tristero, refusing to submit to imposed authority. In silent protest, they submerge into their own world, "a calculated withdrawal from the life of the Republic, from its machinery" (p.92). Ironically, it is this other America of misfits and malcontents which sustains the national covenant of individuality and tolerant harmony upon which the realization of the New World Garden depends.

Within the dynamic web of intricate illustrations, Pynchon's recycling of the folk tale "Rapunzel" emerges as the metaphoric core. The tower imagery in the novel encapsulates the dilemma of alienation and futility in the age of advanced technology, while Oedipa's predicament serves as a parable for modern U.S. society. Pynchon introduces the tower image a painting entitled "Bordando el Manto Terrestre," which captivates the heroine Oedipa:

... in the central painting... were a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void... and the tapestry was the world. Oedipa, perverse, had stood in front of the painting and cried.

Oedipa identifies with the girls' isolation from the rest of the world. Even as she takes refuge in Tupperware parties, liquor, marriage, and suburbia, she is aware of "the sense of buffering, insulation... the absence of intensity" in her life (p.10). Like the girls in the painting, like Rapunzel of the fairy tale, she is shielded from "the real world ." Unlike the others, however, her

imprisonment is self-imposed. She has consciously opted for non-involvement which, although it precludes excitement, promises security. Oedipa retreats from life's unknowns, not because of having been defeated by them, but out of trepidation and reluctance to confront them.

Oedipa has not totally smothered her spark for adventure and novelty, though. Having "gently conned herself into the curious Rapunzel-like role of a pensive girl" (p.10), she passively awaits the arrival of a saviour with whom to escape, unwilling to take sole responsibility for such a decisive action. Pierce Inverarity appears in the guise of Prince Charming; in retrospect, however, Oedipa realizes their fling "had never really escaped the confinement of that tower" (p.10). On the contrary, her affair with Pierce reaffirms her desire to escape as well as her inability to do so. The tapestry painting catalyzes the comprehension that her self-constructed tower is nothing more than a delusion, an arbitrary defense mechanism against "some sinister sorcery... anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all" (p.11). The illusion that her captivity is self-defined is shattered with the recognition that the sterility of her life, from which she had longed to escape, has become a desirable state to which to return.

Oedipa's realization that "the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic" (p.11) forces her to take account. Her tower is simply a microcosm, a condensed version of the void which is modern life. Her renewed attempt to retreat into herself, after the affair, fails when she receives notice of Pierce's will. She is being called upon to take a secular leap of faith into the void. The alternatives are uniformly unpromising: marriage has not provided the necessary protection, Prince Charming has proved to be a disappointment, and filling her mind and time with a "a useful hobby like embroidery" is a fabricated stopgap measure. She is left with two possibilities: to "fall back on superstition" or "to go mad" (p.11). Oedipa hovers on the brink of the void, finding her former position untenable but terrified of the bleakness of the horizons before her. With only "gut fear and female cunning" at her disposal, she perceives existential options, but no solutions.

Oedipa's acceptance of the execution of Inverarity's will and her one-night stand with Metzger constitute her first hesitant steps out of

her particular tower, as well as the initiation of her "sensitization" to a new awareness of reality. As she gropingly searches for meaningful patterns, she is reluctantly forced to consider the validity of Driblette's conviction that reality is nothing more than what the individual conceives and projects. Increasingly disposed to take the leap, Oedipa contemplates projecting a world of her own, but continues to procrastinate while investigating others' conception of reality; "...attracted, unsure, a stranger, wanting to feel relevant but knowing how much of a search... it would take" (pp. 75-6). Her ambivalence becomes acute: the more persistently and successfully she pursues her quest, the more apprehensive she becomes about the outcome, and the harder she resists "the central truth itself."

In spite of herself, Oedipa senses that having abandoned her tower has not affected her essentially isolated state. She gradually becomes aware that there are many kinds of towers, and "each alienation, each species of withdrawal," is equally ineffective as an escape mechanism. Oedipa's quest has taken her from the "optimistic baby" who left the tower "believing all you needed was grit, resourcefulness, exemption from hidebound cops' rules, to solve any great mystery" (p.91) to a state of paranoid confusion. She longs to follow Dr. Hilarius' advice to cherish her fantasy, even while her anxiety grows that her revelation will absorb her to the point of obliteration. Her new knowledge is both "a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost" (p.95); Oedipa does not know where she is, and no one is able to orient her.

Once again Oedipa reviews the possibilities: either she has somehow truly stumbled onto a "concealed density of dream" or perhaps even "a real alternative to exitlessness," or she is fantasizing either the secret itself or a plot against her sanity (p. 128). The concomitant awareness that "she'd lost her bearings" but could except no help from anyone else brings her to the ineluctable conclusion that existence connotes isolation:

...this, oh God, was the void. There was nobody who could help her. Nobody in the world. They were all on something, mad, possible enemies, dead. (p. 128).

The inhabitants of the void all seem to have surrendered to socially defined options; some

choose to escape into the tower of drugs, others seek oblivion in music or frenetic pursuit of pleasure, while still others funnel themselves into their jobs. Oedipa finds herself surrounded by people who are intent upon escape yet remain prisoners of solitary confinement. All humanity appears to be literally or figuratively insane or dead. Of the two, Oedipa prefers madness.

Oedipa ventures forth from her tower to unravel "what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America" (p. 134). However, the more she untangles of his will, the greater is the ambiguity of the inheritance: "behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth," just as "there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America" (p.136-7). The codicils reveal a vast inheritance of "unheard messages," immobilization, and monotony. Tristero itself is a futile alliance, yet Oedipa prefers its aloof expectancy to the America conditioned to accept every outrage unmoved. In struggling to define the America of today, Oedipa must contend with the America of the past and of the future. She asks herself "how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity?" (p. 136). She is confronted with the inevitable conclusion that "This is America, you live in it, you let it happen" (p. 112). The responsibility for past events culminating in disillusionment falls on each citizen, just as the future rests upon his choices in the present. Thus Oedipa, existential heroine that she is, accepts the futility of the void without surrendering to it.

Pynchon's America is the America of advanced technology, cultural complexity, and misguided or misplaced individuals. The original frontier and the social simplicity it permitted are irrevocably gone. The original American Dream has become the American Myth, an impossible fantasy which frustration and nostalgia cause us to romanticize and cling to in spite of a new reality that renders it obsolete. Pynchon does not censure technology and the changes it has incurred; rather he indicts the American people themselves for their lack of character and imagination in confronting ineluctable progress with creative means of adaptation which would reinforce their individuality and preserve the

uniqueness of the national covenant. For Pynchon, America has not exhausted its potential as a New World Garden, but its ultimate triumph is subject to adherence to traditional values, realistic definition of personal and social goals, and initiative and originality in pursuing those goals.

Notes

1. For the sake of convenience, the word "American" is used in this discussion to refer to the United States, with no slight intended to the other Americans on both continents.
2. For a more complete explanation, refer to David Noble's books, *Historians Against History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965) and *The Eternal Adam and the New World Garden* (New York: George Braziller, 1968).
3. Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Bantam Books, 1966), p. 58. All further references to this work appear in the text indicated by page number only.

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