

Irony of Meaning in The Crying of Lot 49

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Abstract:

"The Crying of Lot 49" by Thomas Pynchon is a postmodern masterpiece that delves into the intricate nature of meaning in a fragmented world. This research paper aims to navigate the enigmatic landscape of the novel, examining its themes of paranoia, conspiracy, feminism and religious symbolism. Drawing upon the concepts of postmodernism and intertextuality, the paper reveals Pynchon's adept use of language games, puns and dark humour to create a framework of ironic distance, challenging the reader's quest for a singular, definitive meaning. The protagonist, Oedipa, emerges as a symbol of societal anxieties, transitioning from a detached housewife to a truth-seeking figure amidst a climate of paranoia. By situating the novel within a frame tale, the reader becomes an active participant in the narrative, blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction. Through this exploration, the paper invites a critical reflection on the obsession with deciphering meaning and highlights the inherent value of art as a vehicle for both entertainment and contemplation.

Keywords —Meaning, Irony, Postmodernism, Thomas Pynchon

INTRODUCTION:

Linda Hutcheon describes irony as a "semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings - and doing so with some evaluative edge"(1994, 89). "The Crying of Lot 49", written by Thomas Pynchon, is a postmodern novel that challenges the traditional ways of reading and understanding literature because the author has used a variety of literary techniques to mock the characters in the novel as well as readers or critics and to devoid them of the satisfaction of finding any coherence in the text. The novel is set in the 1960s and tells the story of Oedipa Maas, a young woman who lives with her husband, is the novel's protagonist. She discovers through a letter that her ex-boyfriend has died, and that before he dies, he appoints her as executrix of his estate. She travels to San Narciso to carry out the wishes of her ex-lover. Metzger, a lawyer, promises to help her. There, she discovers a mysterious symbol of a "muted post horn" and decides to solve the mystery. On her journey, she meets various people and learns about the mysterious courier system. She later learns about her ex's stamp collection and decides to attend the auction. There she waits for Lot 49 to cry. The novel comes to an end there. Pynchon's use of language in the novel is a reflection of the postmodern belief that language is not a transparent medium for communication but rather a tool for manipulation and control. The novel's use of language games and the literary techniques serve to question the notion of a fixed meaning and to challenge the reader's understanding of the text. The prior articles and research have dealt with the meaning of the meaning or tried to find a coherent meaning in Lot 49, but less attention has been given to the irony of meaning in Lot 49 which is quite prevalent if an in-depth analysis is done.

This research paper aims to contribute to the understanding of Pynchon's literary techniques in the novel by using Hutcheon's concept of irony and also to explore the ways in which Pynchon uses language to

subvert the reader's expectations and to question the very nature of meaning and communication in literature. Furthermore, it also aims to find out how the author used to explain the term “meaning” as an ironic device in his novel by analysing the supplement of meanings and interpretations that can be extracted by doing close reading of the text. The supplement of meaning is then further analysed in light of other hints and clues in the novel to further understand how irony plays a part in understanding ‘meaning’ in the novel. This can be achieved by raising three major questions:

How does Pynchon employ irony in *The Crying of Lot 49* to challenge established notions of meaning and subvert fixed interpretations?

To what extent does Pynchon's use of irony in the novel critique traditional hermeneutics, satirize the pursuit of absolute truth, and question singular interpretations?

How does the deployment of irony in the novel reflect postmodern scepticism towards fixed meanings and grand narratives, as elucidated within Linda Hutcheon's theoretical framework?

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The novel is rich with signs that give way to multiple meanings and interpretations. For this reason, a lot has been written about the novel by its critics and admirers. Much research has been done to decipher the meaning of this novel. Some common interpretations are related to the Psychoanalytic interpretation of the novel, especially on the basis of Lacan’s psychoanalysis.

One such interpretation has been done by Lois Tyson in the research article “Existential Subjectivity on Trial: The Crying of Lot 49 and the Politics of Despair.” Which intermingles Lacan’s psychoanalysis and the existential concept of subjectivity as a framework to analyse the novel. The study concludes that Lot 49 poses a threat to existential subjectivity as the protagonist “Oedipa's haunting desire to return to some earlier, more stable order of being underscores her inability to imagine a future in postmodern America” (21). Hence her desire leads her to despair and anxiety.

A lot of research has been done on the protagonist's character specifically on the identity of Oedipa in the context of her gender. Cathy N. Davidson, while discussing the importance of gender in the novel, writes in her research paper “Oedipa as Androgyny in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*.” that “Androgyny, for her (Oedipa), means finally refusing to be fractured by societal definitions of what she, as a woman, should or should not be” (39). Davidson also argues that the social construction of gender roles is shattered in the novel by protagonist Oedipa, however, she does not become a man while doing so as she biologically remains a sexually active woman who is attracted to men and in that way, she interprets her character as an Androgyny.

In her Master's thesis titled "From Postmodernism to Psychoanalysis: Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*" Brittany Adams divides her research into three parts in the first chapter named as 'A Challenge to Postmodernism', she maintains that "Pynchon's novel asserts that there can be no postmodern world without loss" (21). Moreover, Oedipa's exploration leads her through different sections of American society, depicted by Pynchon as postmodern in their rejection of mortality. The post horn, symbolizing "alienation," connects W.A.S.T.E. and represents the generation of narratives akin to loss. In the absence of a grand narrative, the proliferation of these narratives persists without resolution, lacking a sense of finality.

In the second chapter named 'Technologies of Loss', she argues that the characters' pursuit of advanced technologies to control the realm of loss proves futile and paradoxically contributes to the perpetuation of death. The quest for immortality results in the creation of eerie, ghostly machinery, while attempts to establish clear and secure communication only exacerbate misunderstandings.

In the final chapter named as 'The Psychoanalytic Narrative', she concludes that Oedipa's quest for the meaning of Trystero takes her on a convoluted path, continuously fuelling itself with bewildering clues.

This circular narrative structure in the novel sustains its own perpetuation, never arriving at a definitive resolution.

In his research paper "The Crying of Lot 49 and the Parody of Detective Fiction" Borys Róg explores two elements that contribute to the parodic nature of the novel. First, he asserts that the extensive utilization of cultural references to popular culture, history, and American society is often satirized, creating an overall sense of parody. Moreover, he maintains that contrary to the purpose of a detective story, which aims to simplify and resolve a complex situation, Pynchon takes the opposite approach in his novel by gradually introducing. The elements become increasingly intricate and mysterious, eventually culminating in a state of complete disorder or entropy (65). This deliberate use of entropy as a plot device disrupts the traditional structure of detective fiction, distorting the unfolding mystery within the novel. Further he claims that interpreting the novel as a parody based on these characteristics supports its recognition as a postmodern text.

Frank Palmeri in his research article "Neither literally nor as Metaphor: Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and the Structure of Scientific Revolutions" goes deeper than just the character of the protagonist Oedipa and tries to make sense of the entire novel, as a novel standing blurring lines of meaning and as a novel standing between Literal and metaphorical. This happens due to Pynchon's experimentation in the narrative as he wants "To produce a text that signifies neither literally nor metaphorically, Pynchon establishes competing versions of the concept of entropy, the concept of Tristero, the myth of Narcissus, and the myth of Oedipus, to point in each case to another mode of meaning outside these shaping paradigms" (980). Palmeri goes on to argue that puns take place of the metaphors in the novel, creating a different type of narrative that is not metaphorical but filled with puns or as he quotes Kermode "on a slash between meaning and no meaning" (85).

In contrast to Palmeri, Annette Kolodny and Daniel James Peters in their article argue that Lot 49 is a novel that should be understood in the context of its subversive narrative. The novel is a reflection of the incapability of American culture to uphold what it initially stood for, its dreams and ideals. The shattering of the American dreams, ideals, and aspirations, and the inadequacy of the language to reflect those betrayals of American values gives birth to individuals who still cherish the old original 'original dream' but these 'outcasts' of the contemporary society become frustrated. So, they start giving an alternative "an alternative culture within the interstices of the old, at once utilizing and subverting the superstructure which is now understood as the symbol of their betrayal. So, Pynchon moulds for us a renewed vision of America, expressed in a new language with new meanings, within the spaces and out of the disillusionments of the old" (82). This gives birth to a metaphorical alternative narrative that is subversive of the previous superstructure.

The literature review reveals a notable gap in the examination of the profound significance assigned to meaning within the novel, particularly in Oedipa's relentless pursuit of understanding symbols like the 'post horn.' Equally intriguing is the fact that critics and theorists outside the novel have also bestowed significant attention on this aspect. The forthcoming analysis seeks to delve into this intriguing aspect, shedding light on the underlying reasons for such focus.

ANALYSIS:

Renowned American literary critic Harold Bloom has recognized Thomas Pynchon as one of four distinguished contemporary American writers, alongside Don DeLillo, Phillip Roth, and Cormac McCarthy, deserving exceptional acclaim for their literary contributions. He describes Pynchon as the author who "has found ways of representing the impulse to defy the System, even though both impulse and its representations always are defeated" (2003, 2). The novel lacks a tangible deep structure or

inherent meaning, presenting instead an illusion of a deeper meaning that the characters, particularly Oedipa, believe to exist. The purpose is to immerse oneself in the experience of the novel, akin to Heidegger's concept of 'thrownness,' rather than seeking definitive meaning. Otherwise, we are left with confusion, a lack of meaning, and a need for a savior to make sense of it all. It is worth noting that Pynchon gained significant recognition in the literary world as a writer of dark comedy through his subsequent novel, "Gravity's Rainbow," which was published after "The Crying of Lot 49," and this context is important to consider.

Pynchon uses language techniques to make the novel so ambiguous that the reader discovers after reading it that the text has no deeper structure or true meaning that lies beneath the surface. Even if a reader, like Oedipa, is convinced that there must be some meaning hidden in the text, all he has to do is look more closely at the signs and symbols that are planted in the text to create an understanding or make some sense of the text. However, no matter how hard a reader tries to decode the text, it always leaves the reader perplexed and far from reality because these signs or symbols are devoid of any context as Hutcheon claims that "meaning-making is always an activity that goes on in a specific context" (1994, 55). The novel is ironic because of this quest for meaning. Particularly if the reader is also a critic or theorist, the reader becomes a part of the novel. The reader and Oedipa can then be compared in their quest to discover the true meaning of the text. According to 'Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology', Oedipa sees the "muted post horn" symbol everywhere, but no matter how hard she tries, she cannot grasp the meaning behind that specific sign (xxi). The same is true for the reader, who also doesn't reach any conclusion regarding the text's comprehension.

Pynchon, very intelligently laid clues all around the text so that the reader may connect the dots to find the meaning in the bizarre world of Lot 49. There are several interpretations of the clues that correspond to different critical theories that were coming to the literary scene at the time Pynchon was writing Lot 49. The entire novel is filled with supplements of these different meanings and literary lenses from which the novel can lead to a different central cohesive meaning each time.

This is so prevalent in the novel that it hints towards the idea that Pynchon did all this on purpose. For this reason, there has been much research on Lot 49 as the novel has tendencies to indicate a supplement of interpretations and meaning.

For instance, there are hints toward a psychoanalytical interpretation of the novel. It is plausible to view Oedipa as a character immersed in hallucinations, perceiving symbolic meaning in mundane objects like traffic signs and waste bins, which she connects to a 'secret' postal system named W.A.S.T.E. The individuals she encounters in her quest for understanding this postal conspiracy may be figments of her hallucinatory imagination, thus explaining their peculiar names. Additionally, one could consider the possibility that Dr. Hilarius, who is her therapist, has conducted experiments on her, possibly involving the administration of LSD, which Oedipa refuses due to her already heightened state of hallucination. The name Oedipa itself, resembling a feminine version of Oedipus, further suggests the presence of psychoanalytic undertones in the novel.

Another interpretation can be explored within the historical and political context of the time when the novel was written. The era of Lot 49 witnessed significant political turbulence, including the civil rights movement, countercultural movements advocating free love and drug use, as well as protests against the Vietnam War. These societal upheavals are reflected in the novel, such as Oedipa's encounter with "The Paranoids," a satirical music band embodying

American youth and their imitation of British bands, along with their indulgence in marijuana. These elements critique American culture and exemplify the influence of "Beatlemania." The novel captures the

emergence of a new cultural landscape in California, particularly in Los Angeles, which parallels the fictional city of 'Kinneret' in the book, a city steeped in conspiracy theories and alternative narratives. In subsequent years, the United States experienced significant events stemming from the prevailing conspiracy culture. For instance, the formation of Heaven's Gate, occurring a few years after the novel's publication in 1974, led to the tragic mass suicide in 1994. Similarly, the emergence of the Church of Scientology as a religious movement took place in the early 1960s. Additionally, the establishment of Charles Manson's cult, which later unleashed a series of killings across various locations, is worth mentioning.

Other conspiracies, rooted closer to reality, include the alleged involvement of the Freemasons, a secret society that claims to trace its origins back to the Knights Templar, in the establishment of the United States of America. This narrative resonates with the theme of the post horn and its historical context in the novel, as symbols associated with Freemasonry such as the all-seeing eye, pyramids, and obelisks can be observed throughout America. Furthermore, the conspiracy theories surrounding a secret society called the Illuminati, which bears an intriguing resemblance to the fictional "Innamorato Anonymous," have gained notoriety for purportedly exerting clandestine control over world affairs.

It can be inferred that Pynchon's novel serves as a representation, mockery, and parody of the pervasive paranoia that emerged among the American population due to the societal changes of the 1960s, characterized by the prevalence of drugs and sexual liberation. This collective paranoia gave rise to a culture of conspiracy theories, cults, and alternative narratives. Oedipa, whose perception of reality is distorted, embarks on a quest for truth as she investigates a conspiracy rooted in historical context. The connections between the "post-conspiracy" in the novel and the real-world conspiracies mentioned above are readily discernible, highlighting the author's intention to draw parallels and critique the blurred boundaries between reality and illusion.

The character of Oedipa can also be viewed through a feminist lens. Initially portrayed as a housewife, she takes on the role of a truth-seeker following the news of her ex-boyfriend's death. This transformation shifts her position from a conventional housewife to an active participant in the pursuit of truth, navigating a predominantly male-dominated environment in the novel. Despite societal expectations and her nurturing instincts, Oedipa remains committed to uncovering the knowledge hidden within the post-horn conspiracy. Religious interpretations of the novel can also be derived from various religious references, such as the scene where Oedipa embraces the old man, reminiscent of the iconic image of Jesus and Mary in Michelangelo's *La Pietà*. As she holds him in her arms, gazing out with tear-filled eyes, a sense of spiritual connection and compassion is evoked (Pynchon 75).

It is intriguing to note that the skulls used by Inverarity to make cigarette filters are sourced from Lago di Pietà, linking them symbolically to Michelangelo's *La Pietà*. Additionally, the title of the novel, "The Crying of Lot 49," can be interpreted as a reference to the biblical story of Lot, although the meaning of Lot takes on a different context within the novel. In the biblical narrative, Lot is instructed to flee the sinful city of Sodom before its imminent destruction. Similarly, Oedipa is in a constant state of urgency and movement as she attempts to unravel the meanings behind the post horn signs, akin to a search for revelations that may or may not lead to significant conclusions. Postmodernism challenges the notion of fixed meaning, positing that signifiers exist independently from any specific signified and instead form an interconnected network of references. Jean

Baudrillard, in his essay "Simulacra and Simulation," argues that these signifiers, or simulations, lack substance or true reality, generating a hyperreality. According to Baudrillard, signs no longer represent an original reality, and humans are unable to discern between them (1). Additionally, signs can be detached from their original contexts and placed in new contexts, resulting in significant shifts in their meaning—a concept Umberto Eco refers to as "semiotic guerrilla warfare."

Another significant interpretation in the context of Pynchon's writing of "Lot 49" is the postmodern understanding of the absence of meaning within the novel. This interpretation gains importance as it aligns with the theories of post-structuralism and postmodernism that gained prominence during the time of Pynchon's writing. The pervasive presence of the 'horn' signs in the novel further reinforces this interpretation, as they only lead to more intricate webs of signs rather than providing a coherent meaning. In this context, Baudrillard's notion holds true, as the signs within the novel do not culminate in a fixed meaning but rather give rise to further signs, ultimately leaving the narrative hanging in anticipation of the elusive crying of lot 49 at the auction.

The abundance of varied interpretations in the novel highlights the ironic use of meaning, where meaning itself becomes a pun. Pynchon employs puns extensively throughout the text, as previously discussed by Frank Palmeri. The true purpose of the novel is not to delve into its own meaning, but rather to satirize and mock people's obsession with truth and meaning. Pynchon hints at this through the inclusion of a play within the novel, further emphasizing the self-reflexive nature of the narrative, especially when considering the reader as a character, as previously explored.

Linda Hutcheon defines parody as an imitation characterized by ironic inversion and repetition, creating a critical distance from the text being parodied. Parody can either preserve elements of the original text while offering critical elaboration or manipulate the original text altogether (1985, 6). Hutcheon further suggests that parody, often referred to as ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality, is commonly associated with postmodernism. Through the dual process of installation and irony, parody reveals how present representations emerge from past ones and explores the ideological implications of both continuity and difference (1989, 93). Parody and language play are two of postmodernism's most distinctive characteristics. Writers frequently reconstruct an idea, a text, or a piece of work so that it has a different effect on its audience than the original. However, in postmodernism, it is not associated with mere imitation, nor does it need to dominate the entire text; rather, it is concerned with the larger theme of defamiliarization.

Pynchon uses the technique of intertextuality to highlight this wild goose chase of meaning in his novel. As he introduces a play into the novel, and by placing this play within the novel, he traps the reader, who is here in search of meaning. Pynchon introduces 'The Courier's Tragedy', a sort of parody of a Jacobean revenge play, in the third chapter of his novel. This play is crucial to the novel because it is through it that Oedipa first hears the word "*Trystero*," which she believes is a secret mail delivery system, and thus begins her quest to unravel the mystery behind this word.

The play, like the novel, is full of absurd elements and information, but all of these factors combined cannot provide a clear resolution. And, like the reader, Oedipa wants to understand the play, which is why she meets with the director, *Randolph Dribbette*, who also plays *Gennaro* in the play. When Oedipa approaches him to enquire about "*Trystero*," he says:

"Let me discourage you. It was written to entertain people. Like horror movies. It isn't literature, it doesn't mean anything. Wharfinger was no Shakespeare" (Pynchon 47).

Pynchon hints in this play that while reading the novel, the reader will be entertained but will be unable to draw any firm conclusions. A parallel can also be drawn between the novel's protagonist, Oedipa Maas, who seeks meaning in the play "*The Courier's Tragedy*," and the reader or critic who seeks meaning in the novel. And in that case, the play's director, *Randolph Dribbette*, transforms into Thomas Pynchon himself, conveying his message to both of them that anyone who tries to find meaning in the text will be disappointed because there is no hidden meaning in the text. As he says:

"You can put together clues, develop a thesis, or several, about why characters reacted to the *Trystero* possibility the way they did, why the assassins came on, why the black costumes. You could waste your life that way and never touch the truth" (Pynchon 48).

Pynchon argues in this passage that there was a time when literature was thought to be a conduit for meaning and grand ideas, but that era has passed. Pynchon tries to emphasize that he is not Shakespeare and that his work should not be read in that context. In a novel, Pynchon has carefully constructed the concept of play. Shakespeare pioneered the "play within a play" technique in one of his most famous plays, Hamlet. However, his motivation for employing this technique is entirely different. Shakespeare uses the "Murder of Gonzago" in Hamlet to highlight his uncle Claudius' guilt and provide a resolution to the play. Pynchon, on the other hand, employs this technique not for resolution but to play a language game and to provide a hazy idea about the nature of the text.

The novel can be seen as an ironic frame tale with underlying puns and dark humour. It follows the journey of a hallucinating and mentally unstable housewife, set against the backdrop of heightened paranoia in the USA, as she searches for meaning in the signs of W.A.S.T.E. and horns scattered throughout the city streets. This context lends a tragicomic quality to the novel, contrasting with the earnest attempts of critics and theorists to uncover profound meaning in it, akin to approaching a work of Shakespeare. Pynchon intentionally sets a trap for readers and critics, providing the novel with supplements of meaning that simultaneously mock their efforts. This ironic portrayal is exemplified through the character of Oedipa. To fully grasp the role of irony and the notion of "meaning" in the novel, it is crucial to consider Pynchon's status as a dark humor fiction writer, building upon his previous works. Thomas Pynchon employs the language game to pique the reader's interest and entice the reader to discover meanings, connections, or resemblances that do not exist, and in doing so, he challenges the reader's assumptions and establishes the point of view that the reader's way of defining and interpreting the text is incorrect. Moreover, after exploring multiple signs and symbols without reaching a definitive conclusion, the reader may attempt to confine the novel's meaning to a single interpretation, asserting that it functions as an open-ended allegory. As Harold Bloom suggests, the novel appears to be an open-ended allegory, but an allegory always means something other than what is said in the text. Because "Pynchon has no definite doctrine for its purpose, whether religious, political, philosophical, or psychological" (2001, 252) this novel can never be an allegory.

Consequently, the novel serves as a mock tale in which Pynchon cleverly sets a trap for readers and critics alike, enticing them with supplements of meaning while ultimately mocking their attempts to decipher the text's elusive depths through the character of Oedipa. However, the novel does not merely aim to deny the existence of hidden meaning. It also poses a crucial question as why are we so fixated on uncovering meaning, truth or objective reality in the text? Why can't we simply derive enjoyment and entertainment from a work of art? This query is subtly addressed within the novel itself. When Oedipa seeks out Driblette to uncover the true meaning behind the play and Tristero, she is met with the assertion that she is "hung up with words" and fails to understand the value of embracing madness. Driblette also poses a thought-provoking question not only to Oedipa but also to the reader: "Why is everybody so interested in texts?" (48). Moreover, in her moment of weariness with hallucinations and the enigmatic post horn signs and symbols, Oedipa turns to Dr. Hilarius, pleading for him to tell her "Out of a fantasy". In response, he urges her to "cherish it", asking, "What else do any of you have?" (82). These instances prompt reflection on the nature of our obsession with meaning, inviting us to consider whether we might find fulfillment in the sheer experience of art, unburdened by the relentless pursuit of deciphering hidden truths.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, the novel addresses the theme of meaning through its frame tale structure, where the reader is a character attempting to unravel the significance of Lot 49. Oedipa, the main character in the novel, also grapples with making sense of her surroundings. Through the play "The Courier's Tragedy", Pynchon

provides insight into how meaning should be approached in the novel, as demonstrated by the character Driblette, the director of the play.

Regarding the second question, once the reader understands how meaning should be approached in the novel, it takes on an ironic quality. The obsession with meaning must be relinquished, allowing the novel to be appreciated for its puns, dark occurrences, eccentricity and supplementary meanings.

As for the third question, the novel ultimately satirizes critics who persist in seeking a coherent meaning throughout its narrative. This article too, in a sense, falls into the trap of attempting to uncover meaning, contributing to the ironic nature of meaning both within and beyond the novel. The reader becomes entangled in this frame tale, further emphasizing the irony.

In a nutshell, the novel challenges conventional notions of meaning, employing irony and satire to undermine the pursuit of a singular interpretation. It invites readers to embrace its peculiarities and supplementary meanings, ultimately subverting the expectations of traditional literary analysis. This interpretation positions the reader as the "Lot" who empathize with Oedipa's journey and find themselves eagerly waiting for the conclusion of the auction, hoping it will provide the final and most significant clue. However, the novel abruptly ends, leaving the reader in a state of anticipation and yearning for closure. In this sense, the reader himself becomes the Lot who cries, further emphasizing the multi-layered nature of the title.

The open-ended conclusion invites contemplation and reflection, underscoring the novel's exploration of elusive meaning and reader's role in the interpretive process.

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