The Crying of Lot 49

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THOMAS PYNCHON

Thomas Pynchon is famously unforthcoming about his private life: in more than a half-century, he has never granted an interview, talked openly about his past, or allowed his photo to be published. However, this has not prevented critics and journalists from assembling a sketch of his life trajectory. Pynchon was born on Long Island to a comfortable middle-class family with aristocratic roots stretching back to 1630s Massachusetts. After a reportedly traumatic upbringing full of family conflict, Pynchon finished high school at 16 and briefly studied engineering physics at Cornell University before leaving for a short stint in the U.S. Navy. Upon returning to Cornell, he switched his major to English, started writing short stories based on his time in the navy, and even tried his hand at writing opera libretti. In the early 1960s, he spent some time sleeping on friends' couches in New York, until he landed a job as a technical writer for a missile technology project with Boeing in Seattle. As soon as he published his first novel, *V.* (1963), Pynchon quit Boeing and moved to Mexico City, then to Los Angeles, where he stayed until the early 1970s. Pynchon's landmark 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, which was heavily influenced by his time at Boeing, won him widespread recognition, in addition to a 1974 National Book Award. (Pynchon refused to attend the ceremony and sent comedian Irwin Corey on his behalf.) Pynchon published virtually nothing for the next decade. During this period, he frequently lived on the road, and his identity and location became the subject of widespread speculation in the media—one journalist even tried to hunt him down in an isolated shack in the Northern California woods. Soon after winning a MacArthur "Genius Grant" in 1988, however, Pynchon married his literary agent Melanie Jackson and moved to the Upper West Side of New York City, where he reportedly continues to live and socializes widely with friends and other writers.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Crying of Lot 49 is steeped in the contradictions and countercultures of 1960s America. For instance, Pynchon parodies American Beatlemania through a rock band called The Paranoids, who dress like their idols, write Beatles cover songs, and sing in English accents (even though they are American). The Cold War and the Vietnam War constantly lurk in the background of the novel, especially in its references to the giant military contractor Yoyodyne, which is busy developing missile technology as part of the nuclear arms race against the Soviet Union. Marijuana and LSD, which became the subject of national debate in the 1960s, also make prominent appearances in the novel. However, *The Crying of Lot 49* also centers on a purported historical conspiracy that involves the private courier service run by the Princely House of Thurn and Taxis, which started as early as the 1200s and was totally dominant for several hundred years in parts of Europe. The Thurn and Taxis stamps and iconography that Pynchon references are likely historically authentic. Similarly, the conspiracy theorist and postal underground leader Mike Fallopian is writing a study of 19th-century private postal services in the United States, a period during which the federal government began buying and outcompeting private postal companies in order to establish a unified national service.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

While *The Crying of Lot 49* is Thomas Pynchon's shortest, most accessible, and most widely-read work, he is far more famous for two longer and more elaborate novels that take up similar thematic material. One is his debut work *V.* (1963), which follows a navy veteran who uncovers a complicated plot surrounding the letter "V." The other is his masterpiece *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), set in the end and aftermath of World War II, which centers on the search for secret German missile technology. Pynchon's other novels include *Vineland* (1990), which juxtaposes a hippie commune in the 1960s California of *The Crying of Lot 49* with the backlash to American counterculture in the 1980s. Some novels that influenced Pynchon's early work include Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), which many commentators have argued influenced Oedipa Maas's wanderlust and search for meaning in post-World War II California in *The Crying of Lot 49*. William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955) also takes up similar questions of reality and authenticity through the lens of art. Throughout *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon continually parodies Vladimir Nabokov's infamous *Lolita* (1955) by having his male characters proclaim their sexual interest for underage girls. And the character of Dr. Hilarius is clearly based on the controversial psychologist Timothy Leary, who famously advocated for the use of psychedelic drugs in works like *The Psychedelic Experience* (1964). A few of the most prominent postmodern American novels influenced by Pynchon's work include David Foster Wallace's famously encyclopedic *Infinite Jest* (1996), which is often compared to *Gravity's Rainbow*, and Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), an influential satire of academia and consumerism.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Crying of Lot 49

- **When Written:** 1965
- **Where Written:** Manhattan Beach, California
- **When Published:** 1966
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** 1960s California, especially the fictional cities of Kinneret-Among-the-Pines (near San Francisco) and San Narciso (near Los Angeles)
- **Climax:** Oedipa appears to learn about the history of Tristero from Professor Emory Bortz; Oedipa attends the auction of Pierce Inverarity's stamp collection with Genghis Cohen.
- **Antagonist:** The Tristero conspiracy; Pierce Inverarity
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Throwaway Masterpiece. Despite being the most widely-read of his books, Pynchon famously considers *The Crying of Lot 49* one of his poorest works: in the introduction to a 1984 anthology of his short stories, Pynchon wrote that *The Crying of Lot 49* proved that he had "forgotten most of what [he] thought [he]'d learned" before.

Public Disappearances. Although Pynchon has frequently been labeled a "recluse" by journalists and critics, he has openly mocked the term as "a code word generated by journalists…meaning, doesn't like to talk to reporters." While he refuses to appear in the media, Pynchon has insisted that he is no "recluse" because he has a perfectly normal social life. He has also mocked his reputation on his young son's favorite animated television show, *The Simpsons*, in which he appeared wearing a bag over his head while shouting at passing cars, "Get your picture taken with a reclusive author!"

PLOT SUMMARY

The Crying of Lot 49 follows Oedipa Maas, a disgruntled housewife living in the fictional Northern California suburb of Kinneret-Among-The-Pines, as she traces the footsteps of her deceased ex-boyfriend Pierce Inverarity and begins to uncover a vast conspiracy of renegade **mail**-carriers called Tristero. At the beginning of the novel, Oedipa receives a letter from Inverarity's lawyer, Metzger, who explains that Inverarity has died and chose Oedipa to execute his last will and testament. A wealthy businessman who practically owned the sprawling, soulless Los Angeles suburb of San Narciso, Inverarity has left behind a gigantic estate of investments and real estate holdings. Oedipa is baffled: she last heard from Pierce a year ago, when he briefly called, greeted her in several absurd accents, and then hung up.

Oedipa's husband Wendell "Mucho" Maas comes home and starts complaining about his job as a DJ at the KCUF radio station. Annoyed, Oedipa remembers that Mucho hated his old job as a used **car** salesman even more. In the middle of the night, Oedipa gets a call from her therapist, Dr. Hilarius, who asks her to take psychedelic drugs as part of an experiment. (She refuses.) In the morning, Oedipa's lawyer, Roseman, advises her about the will. Oedipa reflects on how isolated she feels in her stagnant marriage and boring suburban life. She feels like Rapunzel, trapped in a tower, unable to escape.

Oedipa drives south to San Narciso, where she rents a room in a dingy motel called Echo Courts. Metzger, who is a stunningly handsome former child actor as well as Inverarity's lawyer, shows up to her room unannounced. Oedipa and Metzger start **drinking** and watching *Cashiered*, an old movie of Metzger's about a man who takes his young son and dog to fight in World War I. Meanwhile, the local commercials advertise Inverarity's bizarre business ventures, like Fangoso Lagoons, a canal-filled suburb built especially for scuba divers, and Beaconsfield cigarettes, which have special filters made of **bone** charcoal.

Metzger goads Oedipa to predict the end of the movie, which starts playing out of order. They begin flirting, and Metzger initiates a game wherein Oedipa gradually undresses. Then, Oedipa goes to the bathroom, where she knocks over a can of aerosol hairspray, sending it flying around and shattering the mirror. Oedipa and Metzger then clumsily have sex while the motel manager, Miles, plays music outside with his Beatles imitation band, the Paranoids, who blow the motel's power out just as Metzger and Oedipa climax. Once the power comes back on, they return to *Cashiered*: the protagonists die, as Oedipa predicted. But she breaks down in tears when Metzger mentions that Inverarity thought Oedipa "wouldn't be easy" to sleep with.

After this, Oedipa begins investigating the mysterious "Tristero system" that soon becomes her overriding obsession. At a bar called The Scope, she meets the rebellious engineer Mike Fallopian, who works for the weapons company Yoyodyne but is also developing an underground postal system in his free time. In the bathroom, Oedipa finds a strange message with a **trumpetlike symbol** that references a communication system called "WASTE."

Oedipa, Metzger, and the Paranoids visit Fangoso Lagoons, where they hijack a boat and run into Manny Di Presso, a lawyer-turned-actor who briefly played Metzger on an unsuccessful TV pilot. Di Presso is hiding out from the mafioso Tony Jaguar, who also happens to be suing Pierce Inverarity's estate. During World War II, some Nazis killed a group of American soldiers in Italy and dumped their bones in the Lago di Pietà. Then, Tony dug up the bones and sold them to Beaconsfield for their bone charcoal cigarettes, but he never got paid. The Paranoids point out that this is exactly like the plot of *The Courier's Tragedy*, a 17th-century English play that

Oedipa decides to go see.

Full of torture, incest, and revenge plots, *The Courier's Tragedy* centers on the rivalry between Squamuglia and Faggio, two duchies in early modern Italy. At the end of the play, masked men attack Niccolò, the heir to Faggio's throne, who is secretly disguised as a employee of the Thurn and Taxis postal company. Angelo, the Duke of Squamuglia, confesses in a letter to killing Faggio's soldiers, dumping their bones in a lake, then later digging up the bones and making them into his letter-writing ink. The play is full of awkward silences, which Oedipa thinks must mean something. A character named Gennaro laments Niccolò's "tryst with Trystero." After the play, Oedipa approaches Randolph Driblette, who played Gennaro and directed the production. But Driblette tells Oedipa that the play "isn't literature" and "doesn't mean anything"—he just stumbled upon the script in Zapf's Used Books.

Oedipa starts to uncover many more clues about Tristero: at the Yoyodyne offices, she catches an engineer named Stanley Koteks drawing the trumpet signal she saw at The Scope. Koteks tells her about a secret **machine** invented by a rogue engineer named John Nefastis. Later, at Zapf's Used Books, Oedipa finds that the script of *The Courier's Tragedy* does not include Gennaro's line about "Trystero." She meets an elderly man named Mr. Thoth, who shows her a ring with the trumpet symbol that his racist frontiersman grandfather stole from a mail-carrying bandit. And the stamp expert Genghis Cohen tells Oedipa that many of the stamps in Pierce's collection are complex counterfeits, watermarked with the muted trumpet signal—which is a modification of the original Thurn and Taxis post horn logo. Next, Oedipa drives to Berkeley to visit the publisher of *The Courier's Tragedy* and the engineer John Nefastis. The publisher's older edition also lacks the "Trystero" line. After a rant about entropy, Nefastis tells Oedipa to stare at his machine until it moves. But after an hour, nothing happens. Nefastis hits on Oedipa, who runs out and drives to San Francisco.

Oedipa realizes that Trystero could either be a centuries-long conspiracy or a figment of her imagination. But over the next day, she sees the muted horn symbol everywhere. In a gay bar, she sees it on a man's lapel pin—but the man explains that it represents the Inamorati Anonymous, a group of voluntarily isolated people who see love as a dangerous addiction that must be cured. Wandering the city and riding the bus all night, Oedipa sees the symbol in shop windows, dreams, children's songs, sidewalk graffiti, and more. She runs into an old acquaintance, the Mexican anarchist Jesús Arrabal, who views Inverarity as absolute evil personified. And in the morning, Oedipa meets an elderly, alcoholic sailor with a tattoo of the horn symbol and agrees to mail a letter to his estranged wife via a W.A.S.T.E. box under a nearby bridge. Oedipa follows the courier, who retrieves the W.A.S.T.E. mail back across to John Nefastis's house in Berkeley.

The next day, Oedipa decides to seek advice from Dr. Hilarius, who happens to be locked in his office with a rifle, trying to fend off invisible Israeli soldiers. Hilarius admits that he is an ex-Nazi and has given up on Freudian psychoanalysis. The police capture him, and Oedipa runs into Mucho outside. Mucho awkwardly interviews her for the radio but credits her as "Edna Mosh." Mucho's boss, Caesar Funch, warns that Mucho is "losing his identity." He's right: Mucho is on Dr. Hilarius's experimental LSD and cannot tell one person from another.

Oedipa returns to San Narciso, where she learns that Metzger has run off with a younger woman. Oedipa visits Professor Emory Bortz, who wrote the introduction to *The Courier's Tragedy*. On the way, she sees that Zapf's Used Books has burned down. The drunken Bortz mocks her for asking about the different versions of the play, then reveals that Driblette, the local production's director, recently committed suicide. The Trystero line was only present in a pornographic version of the play written by a Puritan sect called the Scurvhamites, Bortz explains, but there is other evidence for the existence of Trystero, like the memoirs of the English traveler Dr. Diocletian Blobb. Bortz explains that a Spanish man named Hernando Joaquín de Tristero y Calavera allegedly claimed to be the legitimate heir to the Thurn and Taxis postal empire in 1500s, and then Hernando started a rival company to get revenge. Bortz speculates that Tristero could still exist and that it might have participated in events like the French Revolution.

Oedipa grows uninterested in the Tristero conspiracy, which Mike Fallopian thinks Inverarity manufactured to confuse her. While Genghis Cohen uncovers new clues in Inverarity's stamps, Oedipa also realizes that Pierce owned everything from Zapf's Used Books to the college where Professor Bortz teaches. Oedipa starts to get sick and drink heavily. She calls the Inamorati Anonymous man from San Francisco and ponders how Inverarity's wealth can coexist with poverty and desperation in America. All she can do, she realizes, is wait for a miracle to shatter the system.

Oedipa ultimately attends the auction where Inverarity's stamps will be sold off as lot #49. Genghis Cohen reveals that a secret buyer—possibly from Tristero—signed up to bid at the last minute. Moreover, a prominent auctioneer will be "crying," or selling off the items. Oedipa sits in the back of the auction hall, looking for the secret bidder, waiting for the titular "the crying of lot 49."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Oedipa Maas – Oedipa is the protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49*, a disillusioned housewife living in the fictional Northern California city of Kinneret-Among-The-Pines. After finding out that her millionaire ex-boyfriend Pierce Inverarity has died and

asked her to execute his will, Oedipa spends the rest of the book largely ignoring this task. Instead, she pursues an outlandish conspiracy theory about an underground **mail** service called Tristero, which she expects to somehow change her utterly boring, purposeless, and alienated life. After leaving her feeble husband Wendell ("Mucho") Maas at home, Oedipa journeys south to Inverarity's hometown of San Narciso, moves into an ugly hotel called Echo Courts, and starts an affair with Inverarity's lawyer, Metzger. Although she meets conspiracy theorists like Yoyodyne engineers Mike Fallopian and Stanley Koteks on the way, she quickly outdoes them by developing a complex story about historical mail-carrying rivalries based on a line selectively erased from some editions of the fictional 17th-century English play *The Courier's Tragedy*. Ultimately, although Oedipa finds plenty of evidence to support her theory, she admits that it could also be a hallucination, fantasy, or complex practical joke set up by Pierce Inverarity to entrap her. A study in contradictions, Oedipa switches back and forth between intense curiosity and total apathy, absolute faith in her theory and complete skepticism of everything she sees. By the end of the book, although the Tristero theory remains unresolved, it does successfully focus Oedipa's energies and show her the deep threads of interconnection that tie the world together, even as everyone around her seems to be drifting towards isolation and irrelevance. Her name is an obvious reference to the Greek tragedy *Oedipus*, but it is unclear whether this fact actually says something meaningful about her blindness to fate (as in the tragedy), her relationship with men (as in Sigmund Freud's Oedipus complex), or something else entirely. Similarly, her last name appears to reference both the Spanish word *más* ("more") and the concept of *mass* in science, but it can be interpreted in numerous contradictory ways.

Pierce Inverarity – Inverarity is Oedipa's mysterious millionaire ex-boyfriend who dies before the novel begins and then sets off its entire plot by naming Oedipa as the executor (or "executrix") of his last will and testament. Although Inverarity only speaks in the novel in one brief flashback, he leaves an unmistakable imprint on virtually everything Oedipa encounters during her quest. This is doubly true in his hometown of San Narciso, which he owned so completely that Oedipa eventually wonders if he may have named her as executor and invented the Tristero conspiracy just to drive her crazy. He might be trying to take revenge on her for some problem stemming from their past relationship, but it is impossible to know because the novel reveals virtually nothing about this relationship, nor anything about Inverarity's personal life. In the first chapter, Oedipa remembers him calling her a year before his death—but he just said a bunch of canned catchphrases in a series of theatrical accents before hanging up. One of these accents was the radio character The Shadow, whose invisibility is an apt metaphor for Inverarity's underlying presence throughout *The Crying of Lot 49*. Shape-shifting among voices, at once everywhere and nowhere, Inverarity is a godlike figure in San Narciso. He also stands in for the American ruling class as a whole: he is distant, his motives are unclear, and he has a disproportionate amount of money and power which he invests into seizing even more. In Oedipa's view, Inverarity's profit-driven life is nearly mechanical, or even inhuman. His name is just as ambiguous as his persona: it is similar to words like "invert" "rarity," "verity" (truth), *invertir* (Spanish for "invest"), and so on; it also recalls the famous Sherlock Holmes villain Moriarty.

Metzger – Metzger is Pierce Inverarity's lawyer, a handsome former child actor who clumsily seduces Oedipa. In fact, Oedipa receives a letter about Inverarity's will from Metzger in the book's opening passage, and this is what initially spurs her to go south to San Narciso. When Oedipa arrives at the Echo Courts motel, Metzger shows up at her room unannounced with several bottles of **alcohol**. They watch one of his old movies, *Cashiered*, in which he played a young boy who accompanies his father to World War I and then dies a gruesome death. During the movie, Metzger makes overtly sexual advances at the ambivalent Oedipa and then finally convinces to a play a flirtatious that game he calls "Strip Botticelli." They eventually have sex, although they are too drunk and tired to stay awake through it all. Afterward, Metzger comments that Inverarity told him that Oedipa "wouldn't be easy" to sleep with, and this drives Oedipa to tears. For the rest of the book, although Metzger is supposed to be guiding Oedipa through this process of executing Inverarity's will, in reality he does nothing at all. He and Oedipa spend most of their time having sex, drinking, and otherwise wasting time. When Oedipa returns to San Narciso at in the last chapter, she learns that Metzger has run away with a much younger woman who was previously dating one of the Paranoids. But, owing to the totally transactional and emotionless nature of her connection with Metzger, Oedipa does not mind. Metzger's name is German for "butcher," which could be a reference to his cruelty in both his relationship with Oedipa and his job protecting Inverarity's absurd business ventures. Curiously, Oedipa never even learns Metzger's first name, which further attests to the emptiness of their affair.

Wendell "Mucho" Maas – Wendell is Oedipa's husband, a powerless, middling radio DJ at the radio station KCUF who is constantly grumbling about his job. However, he was a used **car** salesman before, and that was far worse: he felt a kind of "unvarying gray sickness" helping people trade in their worn-out cars for others that were equally old and useless, but slightly more expensive. His lack of autonomy illustrates the predicament of middle-class workers whose jobs are totally disconnected from their individual lives and desires. In fact, this sense of disconnection might be the only thing he shares with Oedipa: although they are married, Oedipa and Mucho have no visible feelings for each other, and it is entirely unclear how

they fell in love and got married in the first place. At the end of the book, Mucho gets hooked on Dr. Hilarius's experimental **LSD** and loses track of reality—he can separate out all the individual tones in a musical chord, but he can no longer tell apart different people who say the phrase "rich, chocolaty goodness." In fact, not only do the people around him blend into one another like the used cars in his lot, but Mucho learns to *accept* the "unvarying gray sickness" of modern America, and Oedipa takes this as a sign that she has forever lost the man she used to know. Although it is unclear what Mucho's nickname means, it is essentially the Spanish *mucho más* ("much more" or "a lot more").

Dr. Hilarius – Dr. Hilarius is Oedipa's eccentric therapist whose lighthearted name belies the fact that he is actually a former Nazi doctor who performed psychological experiments on Holocaust victims at Buchenwald concentration camp. Although Hilarius generally sticks to Freudian psychoanalysis in his sessions, he also enjoys making faces at his patients, which he considers a useful but misunderstood therapeutic procedure. Eventually, he has a mental breakdown: convinced that ghostlike, self-cloning Israeli soldiers are out to get him, Hilarius locks himself in his office and starts shooting at everything that approaches—including Oedipa, who manages to calm him down for long enough for the police to arrive. This could be interpreted in several ways: it could be the result of emotional exhaustion, after dealing with patients' problems for years but never being able to speak his own. It could also represent the battle between Hilarius's own conscious and unconscious, especially as he tries to repent for his crimes against humanity. Or, he could be on the **LSD** that he is prescribing to everyone for an experiment, in a clear parody of real-life psychologist and 1960s counterculture icon Timothy Leary. Ultimately, Hilarius gets Mucho hooked on the drug and loses all sense of the distinctions between objects. In general, Hilarius's egregious malpractice is Pynchon's way of critiquing science's potential to be used for evil and psychology's often speculative theories and methods. And by ironically making his therapist character go insane, Pynchon raises the possibility that society is the root cause of people's unhappiness.

Miles – Miles is a teenager who manages the Echo Courts motel and plays in the band the Paranoids. Like his other bandmates, Miles obsessively imitates the Beatles and embraces anything he perceives to be British, even though he actually has no idea what he is talking about. He sings a number of tacky songs throughout the novel, and when Oedipa offers to show his music to Mucho at KCUF radio, Miles gets offended because he assumes she is making a sexual advance on him.

The Paranoids – The Paranoids are a band of **marijuana**-smoking hippie teenagers (including Miles) who closely imitate the Beatles, even to the point of singing in British accents. They provide background music during much of Oedipa's time in San Narciso, and they take a particular interest in her affair with Metzger, even dropping by Oedipa's room at times to watch her and Metzger have sex. During a day trip to Fangoso Lagoons, the Paranoids alert Oedipa to the similarity between Manny Di Presso's story about soldiers' **bones** being dug out of a lake to make the bone charcoal filters for Beaconsfield cigarettes and the plot of Wharfinger's play *The Courier's Tragedy*.

Manny Di Presso – Manny is an acquaintance of Metzger's who portrays Metzger on a failed TV pilot. While Metzger started out as a child actor and later became a lawyer, Di Presso started as a lawyer, briefly tried his hand at acting, and then went back to law. In fact, he is a lawyer for the mafia, and he is running from the mafioso Tony Jaguar when Oedipa, Metzger, and the Paranoids encounter him in a scuba suit in Fangoso Lagoons. He explains that he is investigating the **bones** at the bottom of Fangoso Lagoons's lake for a case against Pierce Inverarity's estate. Supposedly, when Tony Jaguar dug these bones out of the Lago di Pietà in Italy and sold them to the Beaconsfield cigarette company, Beaconsfield never paid him. A caricature of a fast-talking mob lawyer, Di Presso serves as a character foil to point out Metzger's own moral shortcomings.

Mike Fallopian – Fallopian is a paranoid Yoyodyne employee whom Oedipa frequently meets at a San Narciso bar called The Scope. Fallopian is writing a book on the conflict between the American government and private postal companies in the 19th century, and he tells Oedipa and Metzger about the secret postal system he is starting through the underground Peter Pinguid Society. However, when he actually receives **mail** through the Society, it turns out to be a meaningless greeting from a coworker who is in the same bar. Later, Oedipa realizes that this system might be the same as W.A.S.T.E. In fact, although Fallopian is the first person who introduces Oedipa to string of revelations that later gets her obsessed with the Tristero, at the end of the book, Fallopian actually tries to talk Oedipa out of her conspiracy theory by pointing out that Pierce Inverarity is the common thread among everything she has identified with Tristero. In other words, while Oedipa initially sees Fallopian as a paranoid nutjob, the script is flipped and Oedipa looks like the crazy one by the end of the novel. Fallopian's surname is a reference to the Fallopian tubes in the female reproductive system, although the narrator suggests that the name is actually just a reflection of his Armenian heritage.

Randolph Driblette – Driblette is the director of *The Courier's Tragedy*; he plays Gennaro in his own production. When Oedipa approaches him after the play to ask about his character's reference to Trystero and the scene in which **bones** are dumped in a lake, Driblette insists that the play "isn't literature" and "doesn't mean anything." Rather than depending upon the original script, he insists, the meaning of the play lies in his performance of it—he compares himself to a projector, filling a

planetarium dome with a projection of the universe. Oedipa later borrows this metaphor to talk about putting together a theory of the Trystero conspiracy. But Driblette also refuses to explain why he had the Trystero bandits attack the protagonist, Niccolò, onstage, although he does note that this was his own idea. Ultimately, while it remains unclear whether or not Driblette is actually involved with Trystero, he does ominously warn Oedipa that she will "never touch the truth." Later in the book, he stops answering calls, and Professor Emory Bortz tells Oedipa that "they" (presumably Trystero) attacked Driblette, and then he committed suicide by drowning himself in the Pacific Ocean. Although Oedipa never uncovers the whole story, she attends Driblette's funeral in the last chapter of the novel. Driblette's name is a derivative of "driblet," which means a small amount of liquid (or anything else). This may reference Driblette's relative insignificance as an artist or the Pacific Ocean where he died—or it could mean nothing at all, like so many of the play's other names.

John Nefastis – Nefastis is a rogue scientist and acquaintance of Stanley Koteks who develops the complicated **Nefastis machine** in an attempt to disprove the second law of thermodynamics. When Oedipa visits him, Nefastis goes on an incomprehensible rant about entropy and proclaims that Maxwell's demon—a thought experiment—is a real conscious entity. Nefastis's machine does not work, and after Oedipa gives up on it, he crudely asks her to have sex with him while watching the nightly news. His name comes from the Latin *nefastus*, which refers to a day when public business could not be conducted. This etymology points to Nefastis's anti-institutional tendencies. The root "nefastus" is also the origin of *nefasto*, which means "tragic" or "wicked" in several romance languages.

Genghis Cohen – Cohen is Los Angeles's preeminent stamp expert who helps Oedipa inventory Pierce Inverarity's stamp collection. Cohen identifies several of Inverarity's stamps as complex forgeries, probably tied to the W.A.S.T.E. or Tristero **mail** systems. In fact, he identifies **the Tristero symbol** as a muted version of the Thurn and Taxis emblem, a post horn, and near the end of the novel he finds an article about Tristero's move to the United States and a stamp that spells out the acronym W.A.S.T.E.: "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire." Essentially, Cohen gives Oedipa plenty of supporting details to fuel her conspiracy theory about Tristero. At the very end of the book, Cohen encourages Oedipa to go to the auction of Inverarity's stamps because he believes C. Morris Schrift's secret buyer might be from Tristero. Oedipa feels pity for Cohen because he is awkward and always leaves his fly down, and she finally works up the courage to tell him in this final passage. Cohen's name is a pun on the Mongol Emperor Genghis Khan, to whom Cohen has no clear resemblance at all.

Professor Emory Bortz – Bortz is an English professor and Richard Wharfinger expert who teaches at the Pierce Inverarity-funded San Narciso College and spends much of his free time **binge-drinking** with his students. Oedipa consults him for information about the "tryst with Trystero" line in Randolph Driblette's production of *The Courier's Tragedy*. Whereas Driblette identifies the true version of the play as his company's performance, Bortz insists that Wharfinger's original script is the real version. However, Bortz also admits that most of the play's historical editions have been significantly altered, and he praises Driblette for changing the script to capture the play's spirit. These statements both seem to undermine his emphasis on the sanctity of the script. He chalks the "tryst with Trystero" line up to an intentionally sinful adaptation of the play compiled by a Puritan sect called the Scurvhamites. Then, he directs Oedipa to a series of old books—most importantly, the memoirs of Dr. Diocletian Blobb—that suggest that Tristero was founded by a Spanish nobleman in the 1500s. However, Bortz then fills in several hundred years more of Tristero's history by simply making it up. His nonchalant personality and propensity for wild speculation defy stereotypes about professors—especially those specializing in 17th-century literature. However, his relative neglect of his overburdened wife makes him totally consistent with the rest of the novel's male characters.

The Inamorati Anonymous Member – The Inamorati Anonymous member is a man whom Oedipa finds wearing the Tristero **horn symbol** at a San Francisco gay bar called The Greek Way. The man claims to be straight but explains that he is **drinking** at The Greek Way because he is involved in the Inamorati Anonymous, a group of voluntarily isolated people who view their need for love and relationships as an unhealthy addiction. Curious about the symbol on his pin, Oedipa tells him all about her Tristero conspiracy. But the man later explains that the group's founder saw the muted horn symbol on the watermarks of gasoline-doused stamps after a near suicide attempt. He disappears after going to the bathroom, but at the end of the novel, Oedipa calls him again from a phone booth near the **freeway** in San Narciso. Suspicious of their encounter, she asks him if Pierce Inverarity paid him to talk to her, but he simply replies that "It's too late [...] for me." This is ambiguous: it could mean that he actually was paid off, or it could mean that he is afraid of breaking his Inamorati Anonymous vow by falling in love. Regardless, the Inamorati Anonymous man's tragic but voluntary isolation seems like something of a logical endpoint for many of the novel's men, who consistently refuse intimacy out of fear or because they are unable to communicate about their emotions.

The Sailor – The sailor is an elderly **alcoholic** man with the Tristero **horn symbol** tattooed on his arm, whom Oedipa meets in San Francisco. He asks Oedipa to send a letter to his estranged wife via W.A.S.T.E., and then Oedipa helps him return upstairs to his room, where she helps him cope with delirium tremens hallucinations and contemplates all the memories that

his mattress contains, at least symbolically. Although the old sailor is out of touch with reality, to Oedipa, he represents what Jesús Arrabal called a miracle: a brief meeting of two worlds that opens the possibility of change in each of them. Indeed, he leads her directly to direct proof that the W.A.S.T.E. **mail** system exists, and he gives life to Oedipa's hope that uncovering Tristero will help her escape the sense of alienation that dominates her life.

Roseman – Roseman is Oedipa and Mucho's lawyer, whom Oedipa briefly consults in the novel's introductory chapter for advice about Pierce Inverarity's will. Roseman is miserable because he obsessively compares himself to the television lawyer Perry Mason, and he flirts shamelessly with Oedipa until she points out that he is manipulating her in order to enjoy his own fantasy but does not actually mean any of the things he tells her.

Tony Jaguar – Tony is a mafia boss who hires Manny Di Presso to help with his dirty business but sends goons after him when Di Presso cannot loan him money. According to Di Presso, one of Tony's business ventures involved digging up American soldiers' **bones** from the Lago di Pietà and selling them to the Beaconsfield cigarettes company. Tony never got paid for these bones, so he wants to sue Pierce Inverarity's estate, although Metzger tells Di Presso that Inverarity only owned the filter technology, not the actual Beaconsfield corporation.

Stanley Koteks – Koteks is a rebellious engineer who works with Mike Fallopian at Yoyodyne. Koteks grew up hoping to invent something that would change the world, or at least make him famous. But instead, he ends up working on a team, developing technologies that he does not care about, and doing the bidding of Yoyodyne's inane executives, who spend their days singing cheery songs about going to war and do not know the first thing about actual science. When Oedipa meets Koteks, she sees him drawing the **muted horn symbol** in his notebook and suspects that he might be part of Tristero. Koteks tells Oedipa about John Nefastis's secret communication **machine**, but judges her harshly for pronouncing "W.A.S.T.E." as a single word, not a five-letter acronym. Pynchon parodies both halves of Koteks's disaffection: his self-esteem totally depends upon the individualistic American ideal of the brilliant, autonomous, underground male scientist; and his life revolves around the corporate military-industrial complex that forces talented, inquisitive thinkers to waste their lives developing destructive technologies. There is also an element of self-parody in Koteks: Pynchon spent two years writing propaganda to convince the American public to celebrate Boeing missiles, until he swore off the corporate world and decided to become a writer.

James Clerk Maxwell – Maxwell was a prominent 19th-century Scottish scientist who laid much of the groundwork for modern physics. In part, he is famous for the Maxwell's demon thought experiment that inspires John Nefastis to build his communication **machine**. While Oedipa tries to communicate with the machine, she has to stare at the photo of Maxwell's face that Nefastis has put on his box.

Jesús Arrabal – Arrabal is a Mexican anarchist who founded an activist organization called, ironically enough, the CIA. Oedipa Maas and Pierce Inverarity first met Arrabal in Mexico several years before the events of the novel. He has since gone into exile in the United States, and Oedipa runs into him (or dreams about him) when she visits his restaurant in San Francisco. In a symbolically significant passage, Arrabal comments that Pierce was the perfect embodiment of his mortal enemy—a wealthy, soulless businessman—and compares this to the definition of a miracle: "another world's intrusion into this one." The name "Jesús" obviously recalls Christ, and "Arrabal" means a marginal, poor suburb outside of a city. Thus, Arrabal's name suggests that salvation (or a miracle) comes from people who live at the margins of mainstream society.

Mr. Thoth – Named after the Egyptian god of scribes, Mr. Thoth is an old man who lives at Vesperhaven House, a San Narciso retirement home owned by Pierce Inverarity. While visiting all of Inverarity's companies and properties, Oedipa runs into Thoth by chance, and Thoth tells her a story about his racist frontiersman grandfather, a Pony Express **mail**-carrier, delightfully slaughtering a group of bandits with "a Mexican name" and stealing a gold ring with **the muted post horn symbol** on it. Oedipa assumes that this group must be Tristero, and Thoth's explanation is consistent with Professor Bortz's suggestion that the members of Tristero immigrated to the United States in 1849 and continued carrying mail while disguising themselves as Mexicans and Native Americans in the American West. However, Oedipa never decides whether or not to believe this story.

The Founder of Inamorati Anonymous – According to the Inamorati Anonymous member whom Oedipa meets in The Greek Way, the group was founded by a laid-off Yoyodyne executive who was replaced with a machine and then could not find any reason to live without his corporate job. The founder nearly committed suicide but found his wife sleeping with the boss who laid him off and decided to instead dedicate himself to helping people avoid falling in love. A parody of corporate capitalism's profit-seeking tendencies, the founder's story suggests that American individualism leads people to sacrifice the most important, human parts of themselves—the identities and relationships that make life worth living—for the sake of efficiency and production.

Winthrop ("Winner") Tremaine – Winthrop is the racist owner of a government surplus store who gets rich selling guns and mock Nazi memorabilia. Like the executives at Yoyodyne and everyone else involved in the military-industrial complex in the novel, Tremaine only cares about his profits and does not think about the implications of his business.

Richard Wharfinger – Wharfinger is the fictional 17th-century English playwright who wrote *The Courier's Tragedy*. A kind of absurdist Shakespeare, Wharfinger may have known about the rivalry between Thurn and Taxis and Tristero, or this might have been added to *The Courier's Tragedy* later by the Scurvhamites. His name admits of multiple interpretations, like "wharf-finger," "war-finger," and "Wahr-finger" (*Wahr* meaning "true" or "real" in German).

Angelo – In Wharfinger's *The Courier's Tragedy*, Angelo the evil Duke of Squamuglia who spends the whole play trying to seize control of the neighboring duchy of Faggio by installing his ally, Pasquale, in place of the legitimate heir, Niccolò. He also has an incestuous relationship with his sister, Francesca, but wants to marry her to Pasquale—who is Francesca's son. After Tristero bandits kill Niccolò, Angelo admits to killing a group of Faggio's soldiers, dumping their **bones** in a lake, digging up the bones, and making ink out of them. This exactly resembles Tony Jaguar's business with Beaconsfield cigarettes, although it is unclear what this coincidence means. Gennaro and his men kill Angelo and his entire court at the end of the play.

Niccolò – The protagonist of Wharfinger's fictional play *The Courier's Tragedy*, Niccolò is the legitimate heir to the Dukedom of Faggio. Long before the events of the play, Niccolò's illegitimate brother Pasquale plotted with the evil Duke of Squamuglia, Angelo, to take power by killing Niccolò. But the dissident Ercole saved Niccolò's life and raised him in secret. The play revolves around Niccolò's attempt to regain his rightful place in Faggio, and he spends much of the play in Angelo's court, disguised as Thurn and Taxis employee. When Angelo sends him to deliver a letter to Gennaro, Niccolò realizes that he is about to finally win control over Faggio. But Angelo also sends Tristero bandits to kill Niccolò, and they do in a bizarre scene that convinces Oedipa to start investigating the mysterious Tristero for some deeper meaning.

Pasquale – In Wharfinger's *The Courier's Tragedy*, Pasquale is the evil, illegitimate brother of Niccolò, who works with Angelo (the Duke of Squamuglia) to overthrow his father and usurp the Dukedom of Faggio. In some versions of the play, he marries his mother Francesca in order to unite Squamuglia and Faggio. Throughout the play, Pasquale is unaware that Niccolò is still alive and plotting revenge against him. Accordingly, he is surprised when Ercole interrupts one of his orgies and tortures him to death.

Francesca – In Wharfinger's *The Courier's Tragedy*, Francesca is a noblewoman who is connected through incest to both the houses of Squamuglia and Faggio. She is Angelo's sister and lover, but she was also the former lover of the Duke of Faggio, who is the father of her son Pasquale. Before the events of the play, Angelo killed the Duke of Faggio and replaced him with Pasquale instead of his legitimate heir, Niccolò. Then, he insists that Francesca marry her son Pasquale in order to unite the two duchies. Francesca objects, but Angelo insists that Francesca cannot complain about sleeping with her son if she is already sleeping with her brother. In some versions of the play, she does marry Pasquale, while other versions include a disturbing sex scene between her and Angelo.

Gennaro – In Wharfinger's *The Courier's Tragedy*, Gennaro is a "complete nonentity" who takes over the Dukedom of Faggio after Ercole's army murders the illegitimate Duke Pasquale. (Notably, Gennaro's claim to the Dukedom is never explained or shown to be legitimate.) On their way to invade Duke Angelo's Squamuglia, Gennaro's army discovers the body of Niccolò—the legitimate ruler of Faggio—by the lake that marks the border between the two duchies. Gennaro proclaims that Niccolò has died after a "tryst with Trystero," and Oedipa (who goes to see the play) realizes that "Trystero" must be the important word that the actors refused to speak throughout the whole play (and replaced with a mysterious silence instead). As if the story were not already complicated enough, the actor who portrays Gennaro happens to be Randolph Driblette, the play's director. Oedipa thinks that Driblette must know something about this Trystero, so approaches him after the play, but he dismisses her question.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Caesar Funch – Funch is Mucho's boss at the radio station KCUF. Mucho frequently overreacts to Funch's advice, and Funch first alerts Oedipa when Mucho loses his mind on Dr. Hilarius's **LSD**.

C. Morris Schrift – Schrift is an estate agent who represents the secretive mystery bidder seeking to buy Pierce Inverarity's stamps. Curiously, *schrift* is the German word for "writing," which references the way the mysterious buyer—like so many important plot points in the novel—plans to communicate through the **mail**.

Ercole – In *The Courier's Tragedy*, Ercole is a rebellious dissident who saves Niccolò's life and then becomes his close friend and ally. Ercole tortures Niccolò's enemies and leads the rebellion that kills Pasquale, Niccolò's illegitimate brother who has usurped the throne of Faggio.

TERMS

Tristero / Trystero – Tristero—or "Trystero," as it is spelled for most of the book—is the mysterious conspiracy about a shadowy organization of mail-carriers that's at the center of *The Crying of Lot 49*'s plot. **Oedipa Maas** spends most of the novel trying to unmask or at least understand Tristero. By following Tristero's muted horn symbol, Oedipa gradually pieces together a theory about the secretive organization in the novel's middle chapters. But she eventually realizes that while the Triestro could be a real conspiracy, it could just as easily be an elaborate made-up plot designed by **Pierce**

Inverarity to harass her or drive her crazy after his death. The unknowability of the truth about Tristero represents Pynchon's central argument that any one interpretation is only ever subjective and tentative—there is no absolute truth.

W.A.S.T.E. – W.A.S.T.E. is the underground postal system that **Oedipa** gradually uncovers over the course of the book. Although Oedipa never learns about W.A.S.T.E.'s origins or if it is the same as **Mike Fallopian**'s secret postal service, stamp expert Genghis Cohen eventually shows her a stamp that explains the acronym: "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire." This suggests that the system is a direct descendent of the European Tristero postal system, exported to the United States around the year 1849. Beyond being literal waste in this sense, as the system was discarded and cast out of Europe, it also exists at the fringes of society, where it is run primarily by homeless and socially outcast people. In this sense, as its name suggests, W.A.S.T.E. also represents the underlying power of those who are deemed disposable and valueless.

Inamorati Anonymous – Inamorati Anonymous is a fictional secret organization modeled on Alcoholics Anonymous. Like Tristero, it uses the muted horn symbol as its emblem. The Inamorati Anonymous's purpose is to cure people of their addiction to love, which they consider dangerous, and help people live happily without human relationships. As a parody of 20th-century American culture's extreme individualism and tendency to value human life thorough economic measures at the expense of all else, the Inamorati Anonymous shows what happens when people follow the model of corporate capitalism in their personal lives. In fact, the organization's **founder** was a disgruntled Yoyodyne executive who could not figure out what to do with himself after losing his job to a computer.

Yoyodyne – Yoyodyne is an enormous aerospace company that also appears in Pynchon's earlier novel *V.* In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Yoyodyne's Galactronics Divisions factory is located in San Narciso and partially owned by **Pierce Inverarity**. While disillusioned Yoyodyne engineers like **Mike Fallopian** and **Stanley Koteks** reluctantly spend their lives building new missile technologies for Yoyodyne, the company's out-of-touch stockholders sing childish songs about the company's beautiful weapons. A dystopian parody of the American military-industrial complex (the Cold War in particular), Yoyodyne shows how corporate capitalism saps people's creativity and how science gets transformed into a tool for apocalyptic destruction. It also demonstrates Pynchon's view that people in power are often absurdly incompetent and unfit for rule, selected for their positions by sheer nepotism and luck rather than merit or ability.

Thurn and Taxis – Thurn and Taxis is a postal company run by a wealthy family of the same name, which was a dominant monopoly throughout Western and Central Europe from roughly the 16th through 19th centuries. The conflict between Thurn and Taxis and its fictional underground rival, Tristero, plays a central role in *The Crying of Lot 49*.

Entropy – Entropy is the name of two related concepts, one in thermodynamics and one in information theory. In thermodynamics, entropy refers to the amount of unavailable energy or the (degree of disorder) inside a given system. For instance, if heat is spread out throughout a room, entropy is higher than if all the heat is concentrated in one corner. When entropy is lower, or heat is more concentrated, then the system can do work, or make things move (like in **Nefastis**'s box, which tries to raise a piston by concentrating all the heat in one part of the container). The second law of thermodynamics states that thermodynamic entropy increases over time, meaning that heat spreads out, eventually creating a more or less random distribution of hot molecules (and therefore a more or less homogeneous temperature throughout the space). Pynchon also crosses his discussion of thermodynamic entropy with a consideration of information entropy from mathematics. Essentially, information entropy represents the distribution of probabilities for an unknown event (or the content of an unknown message). If the probability of an event or the content of a message is certain, then the event or message's information entropy is lower, whereas if there are more different possibilities, the event or message's entropy is higher.

The Second Law of Thermodynamics – The second law of thermodynamics states that entropy never decreases over time in an isolated system (one that is totally closed and does not interact with anything outside of itself). In practice, this means that any system becomes disordered, or homogeneous over time. Based on the **Maxwell**'s demon experiment, **John Nefastis** builds a machine that he believes will decrease entropy over time, thus violating the second law of thermodynamics. His unclear explanation for this involves the conversion of information entropy to heat entropy (even though the two concepts have nothing in common). Needless to say, when **Oedipa** tries out the machine, it does not work.

Maxwell's Demon – **Maxwell**'s demon is a thought experiment developed by the scientist James Clerk Maxwell in 1867, which becomes the basis for **John Nefastis**'s secret machine in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Maxwell designed this experiment to show how the second law of thermodynamics could theoretically be violated—meaning that the thermodynamic entropy of a system would decrease rather than increase over time, or that the system would become more ordered rather than more homogeneous. In the thought experiment, a small demon operates a door that divides a gas chamber into two halves. The demon selectively opens and shuts the door so that hotter (faster) molecules end up in one half of the chamber, and cooler (slower) molecules cluster on the other side. Therefore, while the second law of thermodynamics states that the system should become more homogeneous in temperature over time, the demon has actually made it *less* homogeneous—or increased its entropy through a sorting process. In Pynchon's

novel, the rogue scientist John Nefastis tries to actually create this box, as he seemingly forgets that the demon is only a thought experiment. Nefastis believes that Maxwell's demon actually connects the two kinds of entropy—thermodynamic entropy and information entropy—which otherwise have nothing in common and are only both called "entropy" because the equations for them look similar. **Stanley Koteks** first explains the idea to **Oedipa**, who visits Nefastis but is disappointed to find out that his box does not work.

Post Horn – A post horn is a brass instrument similar to a French horn that postal workers often carried in the 18th and 19th century, so that they could announce their departure or arrival. Now, post horns are frequently used as iconography to represent postal services. Thurn and Taxis's symbol was a post horn, and the novel's famous Tristero symbol is a modified version of this horn, with a mute added.

Wells, Fargo & Company – Wells, Fargo was an early iteration of the modern-day Wells Fargo bank, which provided mail delivery services in addition to banking in the 1800s.

Pony Express – The Pony Express was a short-lived private mail service that used horse-mounted deliverymen to connect the American West—especially California—with the rest of the nation in 1860 and 1861.

Delirium Tremens – Delirium tremens is a dangerous, often fatal syndrome associated with alcohol withdrawal in severe alcoholics. Common symptoms include confusion, fever, paranoia, and hallucination. **Oedipa** notes that the **sailor** she meets in San Francisco appears to be suffering from delirium tremens (or "DT"), but she decides that this is just one among many perspectives on the universe.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CONSPIRACY, INTERPRETATION, AND MEANING

Set in 1960s California, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* follows the unassuming housewife Oedipa Maas after she discovers that her ex-boyfriend, the wealthy real estate mogul Pierce Inverarity, has recently died under mysterious circumstances and named her as the executor (or "executrix") of his last will and testament. As she sorts through the assets that Inverarity has left behind, Oedipa gradually uncovers clues that point her to a centuries-long, anti-government conspiracy of **mail** carriers called Tristero (or Trystero). Although Oedipa dedicates all her time to figuring out these clues, she never figures out precisely what Tristero is, if it has anything to do with Inverarity, or if it even exists at all. Eventually, she realizes that she might have just become a paranoid conspiracy theorist, pursuing a fantasy with no basis in reality. However, Pynchon uses Oedipa's fruitless investigation to show how *everyone* interprets the world just like Oedipa investigates Tristero and readers analyze literature. Namely, people select clues, extract significance from them, and weave meanings together into a narrative that forms their sense of reality. But Pynchon ultimately argues that these narratives are only ever subjective and tentative—while interpretation is an essential part of both living and reading, there can be no singular, authoritative truths about the meaning of life or art.

Oedipa Maas pursues the shadowy Tristero organization as a detective and reader would, identifying clues that she weaves together into a grand conspiracy theory. The Tristero conspiracy takes shape when Oedipa coincidentally discovers clues ranging from a symbol representing a **muted horn** (which she later learns is Tristero's emblem) to a reference to a "tryst with Trystero" in the fictional 17th-century play *The Courier's Tragedy*. As Oedipa analyzes these clues, she convinces herself that a secret mail system called Tristero is delivering messages all around the world, and she starts treating everything with suspicion. For instance, when her husband, Mucho, sends her a letter with a typo on the envelope, Oedipa even wonders if *he* could secretly be part of Tristero. Like a detective investigates a crime or a dedicated fiction-reader looks for symbolism in a novel, Oedipa develops a theory about Tristero by interpreting clues and then connecting them to "project a world"—or build a story about their underlying meaning. By turning Oedipa into a *literary* detective, Pynchon clearly connects her search for Tristero to his reader's search for meaning in this novel. While investigating different editions of *The Courier's Tragedy* for inconsistencies, Oedipa meets Professor Emory Bortz, who tells her a plausible but unverifiable story about Tristero forming in 16th-century Europe. Like any elaborate conspiracy theory, Bortz's explanation finally links all of Oedipa's clues into a coherent story. But this does not automatically make it true—it is still just an unproven interpretation based on ambiguous clues that might not mean anything at all.

Oedipa eventually realizes that she will never learn the truth about Tristero and starts to question the very practice of interpretation, which she realizes can never lead people to absolute truths. Late in the book, Oedipa spends a night in San Francisco, where her experiences and dreams start blending together and she starts seeing the Tristero horn symbol absolutely everywhere. No longer able to distinguish real clues from imagined ones, she realizes that Tristero could just be a figment of her imagination—or even a complicated trick that Inverarity invented before his death. In fact, these

interpretations are just as reasonable as Oedipa's stubborn belief that Tristero is real, which shows that there are usually multiple, equally plausible interpretations of the same set of facts. Ultimately, Oedipa never solves the puzzle of Tristero. Rather, she learns to accept that "transcendent meaning" is unachievable, whether about Tristero or about anything else. In Pynchon's view, people only make subjective guesses about the world when they interpret it, and they must eventually accept that they cannot know whether they have guessed right.

Pynchon also uses the novel's language and style to show his readers that their interpretations are never certain or verifiable. Pynchon's character names and allusions are famously satirical and opaque. Some are easy to interpret ("Oedipa Maas" references the Greek tragedy *Oedipus*), but it is never clear whether these references are meaningful. Others force multiple conflicting interpretations: "Inverarity" suggests "into variety," "inverse rarities," the Sherlock Holmes villain Moriarty, and more. Without definitive answers, readers must decide whether to view these names as significant, and if so, what to make of them. Pynchon specifically uses *The Courier's Tragedy* to mock his readers' search for meaning. The play briefly mentions Tristero, but its director Randolph Driblette insists that it "isn't literature" and "doesn't mean anything." Although Oedipa tries to hunt down the origins of the play's line about Tristero, only some versions of the script include it. Oedipa ultimately admits that it is impossible to distinguish the original version of the play from the deliberately altered ones. But Pynchon suggests that Oedipa's paranoid obsession with interpreting the play, which leads her nowhere, is just as legitimate a way to approach a work of art as Driblette's insistence that it "doesn't mean anything" in the first place. People can view anything in the world—works of literature, events, coincidences, and so on—as meaning nothing at all, or as hiding a complex web of hidden meanings. But Pynchon argues that neither view is more correct than the other.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon reveals how people inevitably find and interpret clues in order to understand the world, but he shows that this process will never yield the "transcendent meaning" that people seek. By constantly shifting between absurd parody and serious narrative, Pynchon forces his readers to ask themselves whether his clues are meant to be taken literally at all. For good reason, critics have frequently characterized this novel as intentionally ambiguous and resistant to interpretation: in order to make *some* sense of it, readers must first give up on "getting it right" through a single interpretation at all.

AMERICAN MODERNITY AND COUNTERCULTURE

The Crying of Lot 49 is undoubtedly a novel of the 1960s: its protagonist, Oedipa Maas, is a conservative young housewife who feels stuck in suburban America and seeks an alternative to her boredom by adopting a wild conspiracy theory about an underground group of **mail**-carriers called Tristero. Oedipa shares the sense of profound alienation that many Americans felt in the 1960s, as their society became increasingly privatized, homogeneous, consumerist, and militaristic. But she also encounters various antiestablishment groups that symbolize famous political and countercultural movements from the 1960s, like the sexual revolution, the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the hippie subculture. Pynchon satirizes both of these trends: while he points out the absurdity of American consumer capitalism and the danger of privatizing modern technology, he also argues that counterculture replicated the errors of the dominant culture and became absorbed into the very structures it protested.

Pynchon's characters are exaggerated figures of American consumer capitalism who reveal that economic system's misguided and inhuman impulses. Pierce Inverarity, Oedipa's deceased ex-boyfriend who charges her with sorting out his estate, was a stereotypically greedy and egocentric businessman during his lifetime. He owned virtually everything in his hometown of San Narciso, California, and he dealt with nefarious actors like the mafioso Tony Jaguar and the hyper-patriotic defense contractor Yoyodyne. While Pierce never contributed to any identifiable social good, Oedipa realizes that his "legacy was America," which makes it clear that he stands for the excesses of postwar America's fully privatized economy. In contrast, Oedipa and her husband, Mucho, represent the disaffected middle class. Stuck at home, Oedipa is profoundly bored and has no meaningful relationships, and Mucho is a depressed radio DJ who feels utterly disconnected and purposeless at work. While Inverarity is busy making millions for no clear reason, Mucho and Oedipa are exhausted and unfulfilled. American capitalism, the novel seems to imply, does not make anybody's lives any better.

Like Pynchon's characters, California itself is alienated in this novel, which speaks to the way that modern capitalism and technology create material excess but spiritual poverty. Oedipa experiences San Narciso as "less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts—census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei." It is a meticulously planned, soulless, and centerless place covered in **smog** and full of "unnatural" buildings. Built for efficiency, scale, and production—rather than for human beings to live in—San Narciso's emptiness is the direct product of Pierce Inverarity's business empire. And it looks the same as the rest of Southern California, which suggests that businesspeople like Inverarity have developed the whole region for their own investments rather than for people's actual needs. While destroying California, wealthy Americans reward themselves with inauthentic simulations of reality. One example is Fangoso Lagoons, a ritzy neighborhood that Inverarity builds for rich

scuba-divers and fills with imported shipwrecks from the Bahamas and ruined columns from the mythological lost city of Atlantis. Fangoso Lagoons is even built around an artificial lake—although the Pacific Ocean is just around the corner. (*Fangoso* means "muddy" in Spanish and Italian, which suggests that Pynchon considers it absurd that people would strive to live there.) Fangoso Lagoons demonstrates how consumer capitalism leads people to lose touch with reality by selling them a fantasy.

Having shown how modern America saps meaning from its citizens' lives and turns the physical environment into a homogeneous wasteland, Pynchon depicts Americans trying to reclaim autonomy by seeking alternatives to the dominant consumer culture. But these alternatives inevitably fail: either they become integrated into mainstream culture, or they fizzle out completely. The most obvious examples of counterculture in this novel are the hippie band the Paranoids and the Tristero postal system. While the Paranoids smoke marijuana and promote free love, they are actually blindly copying the Beatles. The Paranoids' so-called counterculture, then, is an accessory derived from the dominant culture rather than an actual reaction to it. In contrast, Oedipa imagines the Tristero system as a true alternative to the mainstream. As an underground mail system for secret communication, Tristero could help rebels organize alternatives to mainstream society by circulating pamphlets and petitions, planning protests, and bartering outside of the formal economy. The problem is that it might not exist—and even if it does, Tristero is so secretive that most people cannot use it. Still, the idea of Tristero represents Oedipa's desire for this kind of underground alternative to her otherwise alienating and suffocating life in modern America. But the fact that she never proves Tristero's existence suggests that this desire might be impossible to fulfill. The rebellious Yoyodyne scientist Mike Fallopian also develops an underground postal system in this book. But his system proves useless: its members **drink** together most nights anyway, so they have no reason to write one another letters. Designed to make a statement rather than actually change society, Fallopian's system also does not present a meaningful alternative to the official mail system and the formalized, impersonal economy it represents. In fact, it outsources the actual distribution of mail to Yoyodyne, so rather than challenging the system, it actually requires corporate capitalism to function. Like all the other countercultural groups in this book, Fallopian's collective never develops a real alternative to the status quo.

Pynchon critiques the ways in which American consumer capitalism, suburban expansion, and military technology transformed middle-class life into a homogenous, alienating, anti-intellectual slog, but he was not optimistic about the resistance movements of the 1960s. Rather, he saw that the backlash to the backlash (the extreme conservatism of the 1970s and 80s) would just ingrain consumer capitalism further. Now, its ingredients—highways, televisions, suburban homes, and office jobs—are a default lifestyle throughout the United States.

MEDIA, COMMUNICATION, AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Throughout *The Crying of Lot 49*, protagonist Oedipa Maas constantly fights an overwhelming sense of isolation. The exaggerated characters she meets have plenty to say but very little interest in actually connecting with her, and she forms no meaningful relationships throughout the entire book. Pynchon links mass media to this breakdown in human connection by showing how it distracts people and prevents them from actually communicating with one another in purposeful, significant ways. Instead of developing reciprocal relationships with others, in the 20th century, people develop individual relationships to the mass media. When they *do* try to communicate with one another, the novel's characters model this communication on the media, and they end up sending empty messages that only multiply their sense of isolation. For Pynchon, the rise of mass media clearly contributes to a broader social collapse in interpersonal communication, which in turn makes it difficult for people to form genuine relationships and ultimately leaves them isolated and unloved.

The Crying of Lot 49 is full of communication without content, which reveals the fundamental emptiness in characters' relationships. Oedipa and her husband, Mucho, view each other primarily as annoyances—although Oedipa is away from home for most of the book, the spouses do not miss each other at all. Oedipa writes Mucho rambling, unsubstantial **letters** that communicate nothing but a sense of obligation. She does not mention the affair she has started with a lawyer, Metzger, but only because she assumes that Mucho "would know." What goes unspoken proves far more important than the nonsense they actually do exchange, which shows how communication technology does not actually improve the quality of communication in this novel. Oedipa later meets the engineer Mike Fallopian, who runs an underground mail system that lets his coworkers write to each other in secret. This sounds like an innovative way to improve communication, but actually, the group just mails basic greetings back and forth because they have nothing to say to one another. While they want to be able to communicate in principle, they do not actually communicate in practice, which suggests that they seek a kind of human connection that they have forgotten how to cultivate.

Pynchon explicitly ties his characters' lack of meaningful human communication to the growth of mass media, which cuts people off from one another and becomes a substitute for genuine, reciprocal relationships. At the beginning of the second chapter, Oedipa first meets Metzger, the lawyer who is supposed to help her execute the last will and testament of her

ex-boyfriend, Pierce Inverarity. In a caricature of Los Angeles entertainment culture, Metzger used to be an actor but gave it up to be a lawyer, which he says is practically the same thing. After briefly trying to have a conversation, Metzger and Oedipa get **drunk** and watch television instead. They stumble upon Metzger's old movie, *Cashiered*, and Oedipa gets to know the man next to her more through the television than through an actual conversation. During the movie, Metzger repeatedly pesters Oedipa, who grows progressively more irritated until they have lackluster sex. But Oedipa and Metzger do not really connect: they used *Cashiered* as a substitute for communication, and both of them are really only interested in their individual sexual satisfaction. The television allows them to go through the motions of a one-night stand without actually communicating or putting in any effort. Similarly, when Oedipa reencounters Mucho later in the book, he immediately starts interviewing her on the radio as part of his job as a DJ. They share no affection and have no interest in reconnecting: Mucho even intentionally misreads Oedipa's name as "Edna Mosh," which dramatizes the distorting effects of mass media.

Oedipa spends the whole novel searching for an authentic connection with another person—preferably a man—but she is unsuccessful because everyone she meets has cut off communication with other human beings. In part because they cannot find an adequate medium for two-way communication, all the novel's men live in isolation, without any meaningful relationships. In the novel's opening sequence, Oedipa compares herself to Rapunzel, locked in a tower and cut off from the rest of humanity. She yearns to escape, especially through relationships with the novel's male characters. But all of these men permanently lose their capacity for connection: Oedipa's husband, Mucho, and her therapist, Dr. Hilarius, go insane; the theater director Randolph Driblette kills himself; Metzger disappears; and even an old sailor Oedipa briefly meets in San Francisco does not show her any sympathy. All of these men end up completely isolated, Oedipa realizes, because they are unable or unwilling to open legitimate reciprocal communication with other people. For instance, Mucho only talks at people on the radio, and Dr. Hilarius cannot stand listening to his patients' problems all day without sharing his own worries and insecurities. In San Francisco, Oedipa meets a man who belongs to the Inamorati Anonymous, a group that views love as an unhealthy addiction and hopes to cure people of it. Its members live in total isolation and never form lasting relationships with anyone. In fact, they carefully restrict communication because they are afraid of falling in love. Although the Inamorati Anonymous is group is yet another example of isolation in the novel, their very existence shows that they understand how open lines of communication are also the solution to the lack of caring relationships in the world of this novel.

Pynchon does not argue that mass media *alone* explains the collapse of human relationships in 20th-century America, but he does draw a clear link between Oedipa's fight to escape loneliness and her inability to form relationships that are not entirely structured by media (whether Mucho's radio station, Fallopian's secret mail service, or Metzger's old movies). In a sense, the search for Tristero—a centuries-old service that enables two-way communication through mail—can be seen as a metaphor for Oedipa's desire to reestablish genuine communication and make genuine human relationships possible in a world that has been emptied of both.

CHANGE, REDEMPTION, AND MARGINALIZATION

Throughout *The Crying of Lot 49*, protagonist Oedipa Maas searches for something to liberate her from her utterly boring life as a housewife. Indeed, this is why she gets fixated on the Tristero conspiracy, pursues an affair with a lawyer named Metzger, meets rogue scientists like John Nefastis, and obsesses over the will of her deceased ex-boyfriend, Pierce Inverarity, which she is supposed to execute. Although she never quite finds the renewed sense of purpose and identity she seeks, she does identify with what this salvation will require—in fact, Pynchon uses Oedipa's quest to present an entire theory of change and redemption. He argues that anything people see as a closed system—like a person's life, a particular society, or a physically sealed-off box—can only be changed by something *outside* it. It takes "another world's intrusion into this one" for this world to fundamentally change. This is why Oedipa becomes fixated on things like trash, disinheritance, and marginalized people: she realizes that her salvation will come from the people and things that society discards and sees as external to its closed system.

Pynchon combines scientific and religious theories to present a vision of revolutionary change in this novel. Namely, he argues that a closed system cannot change unless something *outside* the system affects it. The concept of entropy becomes a metaphor for Oedipa's dissatisfaction when she meets John Nefastis, a rogue engineer who builds a boxlike **machine** based on a thought experiment called Maxwell's Demon. Nefastis believes that "sensitive" people can guess how the air inside the box is distributed and predict which of the pistons connected to the box will move. Essentially, entropy is a measure of disorder, and the second law of thermodynamics states that entropy does not decrease over time in a closed system. This means that heat spreads out evenly throughout a space, rather than all converging in one area. But Nefastis thinks that if someone can communicate with the box, its thermodynamic entropy *can* decrease. Hot air would collect in one part of the box, lifting one of the pistons. Oedipa tries and fails, but Nefastis's principle of change becomes a key metaphor for her quest: entropy decreases only through the intrusion of something outside the system. A decrease in entropy means that things

become more diverse rather than more homogeneous, just like Oedipa wants to give up the cookie-cutter life of a suburban housewife and instead define her own identity by doing something original. Later in the book, Oedipa rediscovers the same principle when she encounters Jesús Arrabal, an anarchist activist she first met years before in Mexico. She remembers Arrabal proclaiming that anarchy requires a miracle, which means that "another world's intrusion into this one." This offers a humanistic and religious parallel to Nefastis's view of entropy: a closed system will not change unless something it excludes acts upon it.

Throughout the novel, Oedipa chases novelty and change by searching for people, organizations, and ideas that society has rejected—and that can act on the system from which they have been excluded in order to change it. Specifically, she tries to find value in the waste people discard and recover the legacy of people who are disinherited. The clearest example of this search is Oedipa's quest for the **mail** conspiracy called Tristero, which forms the backbone of the novel's plot. Oedipa first learns about Tristero through an underground mail system called W.A.S.T.E., a name that references its own marginalization. When Oedipa later follows a W.A.S.T.E. deliveryman, she sees him collect mail from an actual waste bin and eventually take it to John Nefastis's house. W.A.S.T.E. is able to function in secret and challenge the dominant order precisely because nobody is looking for an antigovernment conspiracy in the trash, where people discard things that have lost their value or purpose. Similarly, according to the professor Emory Bortz's elaborate theory of Tristero, the organization operates underground because it was forced into hiding. In the 16th century, a mysterious Spanish man named Hernando Joaquín de Tristero y Calavera claimed that he was the rightful heir to Thurn and Taxis, Europe's predominant postal company. Tristero's followers dressed in black and raided Thurn and Taxis mail carriers in order to fight their leader's disinheritance. While many people saw these raids as a myth or random acts of God, in reality they were the disinherited Tristero's response to the system that cast him out. While investigating Tristero, Oedipa also sorts through the scattered legacy left behind by Pierce Inverarity, her wealthy ex-boyfriend, who has no obvious heir. Oedipa realizes that, had they not broken up, *she* would be Inverarity's heir. She is disinherited, but she is also putting together Inverarity's estate and shaping his legacy—or the system that has cast her out. The novel is full of other references to the transformative power of the outcast and marginalized, like Jesús Arrabal's name. "Jesús" explicitly recalls the Christian messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, and "Arrabal" is a Spanish word for a poor or informal suburb—the literal margin of a city.

At the novel's conclusion, Oedipa has not found any miracles, but she finally recognizes that she needs one. Curiously, the stamp collector Genghis Cohen finally reveals what W.A.S.T.E. means: "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire." W.A.S.T.E. represents a faith in miracles, so it is only sensible that Oedipa searches for miracles in the trash. Just as she searches for redemption through the Inverarity will that she might have inherited, W.A.S.T.E. awaits redemption for the disinherited—Tristero—which is able to reclaim its rightful place in the world only because the world has cast it out and stopped paying attention. The novel ends with Oedipa searching for Tristero at the auction where these stamps are being sold. The auctioneer gestures like a "priesthood of some remote culture" or a "descending angel," perhaps signaling that a miracle is about to arrive, and then Oedipa ends the novel the same way that readers begin it: "await[ing] the crying of lot 49."

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE TRISTERO MUTED HORN SYMBOL

Beyond literally representing the shadowy Tristero organization, the muted post horn symbol also represents the impossibility of objective interpretation—an idea that's embodied by Oedipa Maas's uncertain, confusing investigation into Tristero. Just like the reader, Oedipa Maas spends much of the novel struggling with the very process of interpretation. Eventually, she learns that the Tristero symbol is a muted version of the post horn from the Thurn and Taxis emblem, representing Tristero's origins in a rebellious offshoot of Thurn and Taxis. But during most of the book, Oedipa is convinced that the symbol is meaningful despite having no evidence about what it means or where it comes from. In other words, while the horn symbol is still just one among many suspicious images that could be taken as meaningful clues, Oedipa actively picks it out and gives it the importance that it later takes on.

Later, when Oedipa spends a night in San Francisco, the symbol suddenly surrounds her. She sees it on the Inamorati Anonymous man's lapel pin, in a laundromat's window, and in several other places that could not all possibly be part of Tristero's **mail** conspiracy. By emphasizing Oedipa's struggle to identify the horn symbol's meaning, Pynchon explicitly shows her struggle to form a coherent explanation of the Tristero phenomenon as a whole. Of course, at this point in the novel, the reader is likely to be having the same problem: Pynchon's ambiguous clues make it nearly impossible to separate the meaningful signal from the distracting noise. Everything can mean something, something else, or nothing at all—while the post horn symbol could mean Tristero, it could also mean that Inamorati Anonymous has a wide membership in San Francisco, or its appearance could just be a coincidence. The horn thus

represents the idea that interpretation is always subjective and that explanations are always in the eye of the beholder.

BONES

Since bones are often regarded as the sacred remains left behind by past generations, their conversion into consumer goods in *The Crying of Lot 49* represents how capitalism cheapens and defaces the human experience. Oedipa first catches wind of the Tristero conspiracy when, in a bizarre coincidence, she twice hears the same story about soldiers' bones being thrown in a lake, then dug up to be used as raw materials in manufacturing. The first time, the mafioso Tony Jaguar digs up the bones of American World War II soldiers from the Lago di Pietà in Italy to make special bone charcoal filters for Pierce Inverarity's Beaconsfield cigarettes. The second time, in fictional 17th-century English playwright Richard Wharfinger's work *The Courier's Tragedy*, the evil Duke of Squamuglia, Angelo, also dumps his rivals' bones in an Italian lake and then digs them up, this time to make the ink that he uses to write a confession of his crimes. In both cases, bones are turned into a junk commodity—they are neither a necessary ingredient nor a clearly useful one in either cigarettes or ink. Rather, they are mixed in for shock value, as though the precious histories and memories of the deceased could somehow be captured by turning their bones into consumer goods. In reality, of course, the effect is the opposite: turning bones into cigarettes is vulgar and disrespectful, emblemizing the idea that capitalists like Pierce Inverarity value nothing besides money and end up corrupting society as a result.

CARS, SMOG, AND FREEWAYS

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, the most significant symbols of how modern consumerism hurts humanity are cars, the freeways laid down for them, and the smog they leave behind. In the novel, Oedipa get everywhere by car, and practically everything in California is designed around driving, reflecting the rise of American consumerist culture in which modern comfort like cars and freeways are deemed more important than the aesthetic beauty or climate of an entire city. Additionally, driving represents the double-sided nature of empowerment that comes with modern comforts: on the highway, Oedipa feels free but rootless, both empowered to act for herself (or go wherever she wants) and totally rootless, without any clear goals to fulfill or places to go in her life. Her mind clears up when she drives, but the world gets obscured by a thick layer of smog that seems to separate her both literally and figuratively from the rest of reality. And while all of Southern California becomes an endless concrete jungle full of unfamiliar places to explore, it is horrendously ugly and there is nothing at all worth seeing. To rebuild the world for cars, nature and history have to be paved over, like the city tears up a cemetery to build the East San Narciso Freeway. And by the end of the novel, building a world for cars seems to mean building a world that is not suitable for people to live happy, fulfilling lives.

THE NEFASTIS MACHINE

John Nefastis's mysterious, useless, hermetically sealed communication box is a metaphor for the feelings of alienation and entrapment that Pynchon believes are inherent to modern American society. In particular, Oedipa's failure to communicate with the box symbolizes her inability to fight that society's entropy, or gradual tendency toward social conformity and decline. The root cause of this decline is the same as the reason that Nefastis built his machine: a misplaced faith in the inherent power of rationality ends up perverting science and technology, ultimately directing these fields toward unnecessary goals.

According to Nefastis's theory, the Maxwell's demon separates the air inside his box into hot and cold, then communicates with the "sensitive" person nearby. Nefastis assumes that the box is a closed system which nothing can enter or exit. (Of course, if the "sensitive" really can communicate with it, then this assumption is false.) This is much like the novel's own self-referential closed system, in which everything ultimately refers back to Tristero, San Narciso, and Pierce Inverarity. The hot air that spreads out inside the box is like the **smog** that spreads out over the Los Angeles of the novel: a cultural drift toward uniformity that's caused by material consumption. Oedipa is distraught to see everyone increasingly becoming the same: consuming mass-produced consumer goods, watching mass media, living in suburban homes, having cookie-cutter jobs and families. She wants none of it, but she cannot find an alternative, just as she cannot break open the system of the Nefastis box by communicating with the demon inside. In fact, this demon is a thought experiment and does not exist. Nefastis's misplaced, religious faith in it shows that he forgets that science is a tool to serve other human needs, not a need in itself. The same goes for America's misplaced faith in production, which leads to the decadence that Oedipa wants to escape.

MAIL

Although mail might seem like an unremarkable feature of modern life, it represents the social interconnectedness that Oedipa is searching for, and it stands in contrast to the electronic, immaterial media technologies that were increasingly taking over Americans' lives in the 1960s, when *The Crying of Lot 49* was written and set. The complex web of signs that draws Oedipa into the Tristero conspiracy in this novel centers on letters and postal systems.

Whereas these new media recycle absurd stories like *Cashiered* and form adults whose primary relationships are to a screen rather than another person, the mail systems in this novel are an essential infrastructure connecting many Americans who send letters or packages back and forth. This service is easy to forget only because it has taken an immense amount of work over generations to create a robust network of mail-carriers across an enormous country. But now, mail exists in the shadows because it is not as convenient as the telephone or as glamorous as the radio or television. Curiously, however, many of the letters sent in this novel—like the notes Mike Fallopian sends to his friends and the letter Mucho writes to Oedipa in the third chapter—do not say much of anything at all. In fact, these empty letters point out the dwindling importance of direct, tangible social connections, and Oedipa's quest to unmask the Tristero system can be seen as a search for the authentic human connections are fading fast all around her.

DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

A constant presence throughout *The Crying of Lot 49*, drugs and alcohol represent Pynchon's characters' futile attempts to escape their stagnant, unsatisfactory lives. Characters drink and use drugs in response to a reality so twisted that it actually seems unreal. But this does not rescue them: rather, it only alters their perceptions further and pushes them into an alternate reality where the sins of modern America—violence, social disconnection, and dispassion—are further amplified.

Oedipa Maas starts the novel inebriated from spiked fondue and drinks to try and escape her boredom in several scenes, ranging from her tryst with Metzger in the second chapter to her reckless drunk driving at the beginning of the last one. She meets important characters like Mike Fallopian and the Inamorati Anonymous member in bars, and the elderly sailor who reveals the W.A.S.T.E. system to her is an alcoholic hallucinating because of delirium tremens. While Oedipa learns to see the sailor's perspective as one among others, like the perspectives of her husband Mucho and her therapist Dr. Hilarius when they lose their minds on LSD, all three of these characters become socially isolated and disconnected from reality. They represent the mirror image of Oedipa's own fears, which center on her lack of relationships and sense that she is losing her mind as she descends into the Tristero conspiracy. Indeed, Oedipa soon realizes that the entire Tristero conspiracy might be a drug-induced hallucination: it would be no more bizarre than reality, which is totally crazy, too. Thus, drugs and alcohol represent Pynchon's underlying argument that attempts to escape reality are futile and only end up reinforcing the very societal or personal failures that one is trying to leave behind.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *The Crying of Lot 49* published in 1965.

Chapter 1 Quotes

One summer afternoon Mrs Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupperware party whose hostess had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue to find that she, Oedipa, had been named executor, or she supposed executrix, of the estate of one Pierce Inverarity, a California real estate mogul who had once lost two million dollars in his spare time but still had assets numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary. Oedipa stood in the living room, stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube, spoke the name of God, tried to feel as drunk as possible. But this did not work.

Related Characters: Pierce Inverarity, Oedipa Maas

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening sentences of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon introduces his protagonist, Oedipa Maas, and presents the driving force behind the plot: the mysterious death and will of Pierce Inverarity. From the start, it is clear that Oedipa is living a stagnant, alienated life as a housewife. The Tupperware party, a way of turning suburban housewives' gatherings into a marketing technique to sell Tupperware storage containers, is an emblem of mid-20th-century America. It shows how the rise of a gendered division of labor among the middle class also influenced consumption: being a respectable woman meant not only sticking to domestic labor, but also spending the right kind of money on the right kind of consumer goods. And the kirsch (liquor) in the fondue shows that the Tupperware party's hostess felt the need to trick the other attendees into socializing and buying her Tupperware, implying that the partygoers' relationships are superficial.

Additionally, the play on "executor" and "executrix" consciously points out that the legal and professional spheres are defined as male—including, of course, Inverarity's real estate empire. Oedipa tries to distort her perceptions through media, religion, and alcohol. But this

fails to distract her from how utterly bizarre it is for Inverarity to name her as executrix, totally out of the blue, transforming her life from beyond the grave with no warning or explanation.

❝ Yet at least he had believed in the cars. Maybe to excess: how could he not, seeing people poorer than him come in, Negro, Mexican, cracker, a parade seven days a week, bringing the most godawful of trade-ins: motorized, metal extensions of themselves, of their families and what their whole lives must be like, out there so naked for anybody, a stranger like himself, to look at [...] Even if enough exposure to the unvarying gray sickness had somehow managed to immunize him, he could still never accept the way each owner, each shadow, filed in only to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else's life. As if it were the most natural thing. To Mucho it was horrible. Endless, convoluted incest.

Related Characters: Pierce Inverarity, Oedipa Maas, Wendell "Mucho" Maas

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4-5

Explanation and Analysis

Wendell "Mucho" Maas, much like his wife, Oedipa, typifies the alienation of middle-class America. He takes a boring job as a DJ at a radio station just because it is less miserable than his previous job selling used cars, which Oedipa reminisces about in this passage. Mucho's job at the used-car lot gave him a unique perspective on America because it allowed him to see how working-class people, those who were "poorer than him," lived—which was also how *he* would live if he lost his tenuous foothold in the middle class. Despite the common belief in prosperity and progress, in reality Mucho's working-class clients remained completely stagnant: they constantly worked and consumed just to stay in the same place, as though running on a treadmill for no clear purpose except the enrichment of wealthy people like Pierce Inverarity. Over the course of the book, as Oedipa becomes progressively overcome by the "unvarying gray sickness" of American life, she learns to see the same spiritual bleakness that Mucho long ago identified, lurking behind material abundance.

The hollowed-out cars of Mucho's clients are significant not only as symbols of class and identity, but also because of the very fact that they are trash, thrown out and left for people like Mucho to salvage. For everyone else involved in the process, Oedipa realizes—the people discarding the cars, the people who funded the whole business—it just seems natural that someone would throw away such a "naked" "extension[] of themselves." But for Mucho, it is somehow obscene, because he "believed in the cars"—he saw their value when others did not. Of course, this was his job: to evaluate and resell the used cars. Specifically, when his clients left their junk cars behind, he had to convince them that someone else's junk car was valuable. The mental labor involved in this—turning trash into treasure, day after day—seems to have exhausted him. If Mucho's used-car lot is a metaphor for a broader swath of America's culture or economy, then Pynchon seems to be suggesting that everyone is just trading their discarded junk back and forth rather than producing or experiencing things of value.

❝ There had hung the sense of buffering, insulation, she had noticed the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix. And had also gently conned herself into the curious, Rapunzel-like role of a pensive girl somehow, magically, prisoner among the pines and salt fogs of Kinneret, looking for somebody to say hey, let down your hair. [...] In Mexico City they somehow wandered into an exhibition of paintings by the beautiful Spanish exile Remedios Varo: in the central painting of a triptych, titled "Bordando el Manto Terrestre," 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: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. Oedipa, perverse, had stood in front of the painting and cried.

Related Characters: Wendell "Mucho" Maas, Pierce Inverarity, Oedipa Maas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10-11

Explanation and Analysis

Oedipa Maas reflects on her sense of stagnation and isolation: living in the fictional Northern California suburb of Kinneret-Among-The-Pines, she does not seem to have any meaningful relationships—not least of all with her

husband Mucho—and nothing seems to give her any meaningful pleasure. She compares her social isolation and her physical entrapment in the domestic sphere to Rapunzel's isolation in her storied tower—and, like Rapunzel, she is disempowered, unable to escape until a man gives her an opportunity to. (Now, Inverarity is doing so from beyond the grave.)

At the same time, Oedipa's isolation in the tower also explicitly connects to a sense of vision or power: like the women in the painting, she can weave the world together. In this novel, she specifically does so by weaving a conspiracy theory about the Tristero organization and using this perspective to derive a narrative about the whole world. As is typical of Pynchon's writing, real references mix with fictional ones in *The Crying of Lot 49*: Remedios Varo is a real artist, and "Bordando el Manto Terrestre," or "Embroidering the Earth's Mantle," is a real painting. It is no surprise that Oedipa cried at this painting, which represents both her own predicament and the unhappy irony that, even if she somehow has the power to shape, project, or embroider the world, she has to separate herself from the world in order to use that power.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ San Narciso lay further south, near L.A. Like many named places in California it was 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. But it had been Pierce's domicile, and headquarters: the place he'd begun his land speculating in ten years ago, and so put down the plinth course of capital on which everything afterward had been built, however rickety or grotesque, toward the sky; and that, she supposed, would set the spot apart, give it an aura. [...] Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding.

Related Characters: Pierce Inverarity, Oedipa Maas

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13-4

Explanation and Analysis

When Oedipa first arrives in San Narciso, she is both horrified and entranced. Like so much of suburban America, it is empty and soulless, "a grouping of concepts" rather than a traditionally-conceived town with a nucleus (a market or downtown) and peripheries (houses and farms). Because of universal car ownership and the freeway system, California is not built on a human scale: rather, it becomes an endless expanse of indistinguishable, homogeneous urban sprawl. Because everything is connected, no one needs to be self-sufficient—in other words, people are so busy being free that they never root themselves to any specific identity. But San Narciso is not only built for cars: it is also built for investment. Or, rather, it is built by and for wealthy capitalists like Pierce Inverarity, who has turned the whole area into an ever-growing stock of capital, a testament to his own power. Its purpose is not to house human beings, then—rather, San Narciso looks the way it does because an endless, horizontal concrete jungle is the cheapest way to expand a city.

Strangely, even though Oedipa sees San Narciso as a fundamentally soulless, meaningless place, she nevertheless seeks some deeper meaning within it. Of course, the entire novel soon becomes a study in looking for meanings where meaning may or may not exist. While Oedipa spends the whole book hunting for a hidden organization called Tristero and trying to make sense of Inverarity's business empire, she is constantly haunted by the possibility that Tristero does not mean anything at all, and that Inverarity's will is nothing more than what it purports to be. But in San Narciso, like most people, Oedipa assumes that there must be *some* intention behind the world, whether an intelligent God or at least a city planner. She believes that, like in a circuit board, the meaning is encoded in some "hieroglyphic" language that she cannot understand. But she later has to confront the possibility that San Narciso is just a farce that Inverarity simply built because he could, because he had nothing better to do with his millions.

> She made the mistake of looking at herself in the full-length mirror, saw a beach ball with feet, and laughed so violently she fell over, taking a can of hair spray on the sink with her. The can hit the floor, something broke, and with a great outsurge of pressure the stuff commenced atomizing, propelling the can swiftly about the bathroom. [...] The can collided with a mirror and bounced away, leaving a silvery, reticulated bloom of glass to hang a second before it all fell jingling into the sink; zoomed over to the enclosed shower, where it crashed into and totally destroyed a panel of frosted glass; thence around the three tile walls, up to the ceiling, past the light, over the two prostrate bodies, amid its own whoosh and the buzzing, distorted uproar from the TV set. She could imagine no end to it; yet presently the can did give up in midflight and fall to the floor, about a foot from Oedipa's nose.

Related Characters: Metzger, Oedipa Maas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24-5

Explanation and Analysis

While Oedipa and Metzger are drinking in Oedipa's room at the Echo Courts motel, Oedipa reluctantly agrees to play a game that Metzger calls "Strip Botticelli"—she will remove an article of clothing every time she wants to ask him a question. To circumvent Metzger's absurd rules, Oedipa goes to the bathroom and puts all of her clothing on—but then, in this passage, she knocks over a hairspray can that starts zooming around the room. Ultimately, the hairspray shatters the mirror in which Oedipa looked at herself, both literally and figuratively shattering her previous self-image.

The decompressing can of hairspray is an early metaphor for one of the novel's central motifs: the movement toward entropy, or the releasing of energy in order to reach a state of equilibrium. This is literally what is happening to the hairspray bottle: because the pressure is higher inside than outside, the hairspray inside goes shooting out as soon as there is a hole in the bottle. But it is also a potent metaphor for the sense of decompression or loss that Oedipa feels throughout the novel, as she confronts a world that seems thoughtless, homogeneous, and degraded.

> Outside a fugue of guitars had begun, and she counted each electronic voice as it came in, till she reached six or so and recalled only three of the Paranoids played guitars; so others must be plugging in.
>
> Which indeed they were. Her climax and Metzger's, when it came, coincided with every light in the place, including the TV tube, suddenly going out, dead, black. It was a curious experience. The Paranoids had blown a fuse.

Related Characters: The Paranoids, Metzger, Oedipa Maas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29-30

Explanation and Analysis

When Oedipa and Metzger finally give up on watching *Cashiered* and have sex, the Paranoids (the motel manager's Beatles imitation band) start playing outside Oedipa's room, next to the pool. As Oedipa and Metzger's romp intensifies, the Paranoids plug in more guitars and play louder. They serve as a kind of chorus, like literary backup dancers: they comment on the action from the sidelines, interpreting the story from within it. Of course, Metzger and Oedipa do not need to be interpreted—everyone knows what they are doing, and if the power blowing out is a metaphor for them climaxing, then it is a redundant one, because the narrator all but points it out. In fact, Pynchon uses the Paranoids as a chorus in order to parody the very norms of literary interpretation: he hits the reader over the head with a symbol so obvious that it cannot be missed. Then, he loudly repeats what he has just done, as though mocking readers in their constant search for signs, symbols, and hidden meanings.

In particular, this kind of metaphor for sex is common in mass media: it is much less scandalous to show the lights going out than to show an orgasm, so Hollywood quickly caught onto this kind of overly obvious symbolism. Beyond implying that this strategy cheapens stories, Pynchon specifically ties it to Oedipa and Metzger's relationship, which thus far is entirely rooted in television. They met a few hours before this scene and have spent nearly all that time staring at the flashing television box. When the lights go out, this shows how modern electricity and media infrastructure have made this possible, but also—more importantly—how Oedipa and Metzger do not seem to have much of a relationship outside of their joint TV-viewing and conversations about Metzger's past as an actor. The blown fuse, in other words, reminds the reader that Oedipa and Metzger have no genuine connection at all.

Chapter 3 Quotes

Things then did not delay in turning curious. If one object behind her discovery of what she was to label the Tristero System or often only The Tristero (as if it might be something's secret title) were to bring to an end her encapsulation in her tower, then that night's infidelity with Metzger would logically be the starting point for it; logically. That's what would come to haunt her most, perhaps: the way it fitted, logically, together. As if (as she'd guessed that first minute in San Narciso) there were revelation in progress all around her.

Related Characters: Metzger, Oedipa Maas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator starts to get ahead of themselves: Oedipa has not even encountered the word "Tristero" yet, but the reader already knows that Tristero will be some secret "system" that promises to free Oedipa from her sense of confinement, is somehow associated with divine "revelation," and has to all "fit together." In fact, the paranoid repetition of the word "logically" scarcely covers up the fact that Oedipa's theory does not seem to have any logical basis at all.

This passage primes the reader, preparing them for Oedipa's coming paranoia and sensitizing them to the key word, "Tristero." But it also makes it easy to forget that Oedipa develops a wild conspiracy theory about the Tristero after hearing the word just once, and that this conspiracy theory is driven by her total lack of knowledge about it. In other words, this passage encourages the reader to think like Oedipa—to convince themselves that there is a conspiracy where, in reality, there may not be anything at all. And, therefore, it is as much an example of paranoid reasoning as an induction into it. Indeed, throughout the book Pynchon challenges the reader to take or leave Oedipa's paranoia—in other words, to test whether they are also willing to become a conspiracy theorist themselves.

"It's the principle," Fallopian agreed, sounding defensive. "To keep it up to some kind of a reasonable volume, each member has to send at least one letter a week through the Yoyodyne system. If you don't, you get fined." He opened his letter and showed Oedipa and Metzger.

Dear Mike, it said, *how are you? Just thought I'd drop you a note. How's your book coming? Guess that's all for now. See you at The Scope.*

"That's how it is," Fallopian confessed bitterly, "most of the time."

Related Characters: Mike Fallopian (speaker), Metzger, Oedipa Maas

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

At The Scope, a San Narciso bar frequented by workers at the massive Yoyodyne Galactronics Division factory, Oedipa and Metzger meet a rebellious, paranoid Yoyodyne engineer named Mike Fallopian. Frustrated with the government's monopolistic control over the postal system, Fallopian and his Peter Pinguid Society are trying to develop a secret mail system that can operate in parallel to the official one. For now, they are using Yoyodyne's internal delivery system to send notes back and forth. The problem is that they don't have enough interested members with enough to say to each other to make the system truly viable. Ironically enough, then, Fallopian's mail service is too secretive to have users and too anti-government to survive without creating laws to regulate how people use it. His attempt at resistance falls into the same errors that he is trying to resist.

In short, Fallopian's failure suggests that that resistance to established institutions ends up falling into the same problems and mistakes as those institutions. Often, institutions fail because the problems they are trying to address are difficult to solve, not because they are themselves inherently oppressive. Fallopian seems to be blaming institutions for their imperfection, then creating an even worse alternative. This passage also foreshadows the other secret postal systems—W.A.S.T.E. and Tristero—that later become the overriding focus of the novel's plot. And finally, it suggests that the failure of Fallopian's system—and, indeed, the eclipse of mail by other forms of media—implies a broader social breakdown in terms of

communication in the mid-20th century. The problem is not only that the author of Fallopian's letter will also be there at The Scope with him: it is also that the writer does not seem to have anything to say to Fallopian (besides commenting on his book).

> *He that we last as Thurn and Taxis knew*
> *Now recks no lord but the stiletto's Thorn,*
> *And Tacit lies the gold once-knotted horn.*
> *No hallowed skein of stars can ward, I trow,*
> *Who's once been set his tryst with Trystero.*

Related Characters: Randolph Driblette, Gennaro (speaker), Angelo, Niccolò

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

These cryptic lines from *The Courier's Tragedy* are Oedipa's first and—until the final chapter—*only* taste of the mysterious Tristero (or Trystero). In the play's fourth act, masked, black-clad assassins kill Niccolò, the heir to the Dukedom of Faggio, who is disguised as a courier for the monopolistic Thurn and Taxis company and in the process of carrying a secret letter from the evil Duke of Squamuglia, Angelo. When he finds Niccolò's body, Gennaro—the interim ruler of Faggio, who is played by the production's director, Randolph Driblette—speaks these lines. Oedipa's mental alarm bells go off: she realizes that "Trystero" must somehow be central to her quest, and she spends the next several dozen pages obsessively hunting Trystero down. Of course, this verse is full of other allusions to important elements of the Tristero conspiracy that are only revealed later on—like the "horn" going "tacit," which refers to the Tristero symbol, a muted version of Thurn and Taxis's post horn emblem. Ultimately, while Oedipa's obsession with interpreting this verse does propel her conspiracy theory forward, it also confuses just as much as it clarifies.

> "You came to talk about the play," he said. "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."
>
> "Who was he?" she said.
>
> "Who was Shakespeare. It was a long time ago."

Related Characters: Oedipa Maas, Randolph Driblette (speaker), Tony Jaguar, Angelo, Richard Wharfinger

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

After the end of *The Courier's Tragedy*, Oedipa approaches the play's director, Randolph Driblette, to ask about the coincidence that led her to the play in the first place: Duke Angelo confesses to throwing soldiers' bones into a lake, then fishing them up and turning them into ink, just as Tony Jaguar allegedly pulled American soldiers' bones out of the Italian Lago di Pietà in order to make charcoal filters for Beaconsfield cigarettes out of them. She ultimately forgets to mention the bones and asks him about Tristero instead—which she views as yet another sign of the Tristero conspiracy's importance.

But before Oedipa can even get a word in, Driblette preempts her questions by discouraging her. He thinks the play "isn't literature" and "doesn't mean anything"—in other words, while Oedipa believes that every clue is meaningful and ought to be pursued, Driblette holds that interpretation and analysis do not actually add anything to the meaning of a work of art. He recognizes that analyses and interpretations might help people make sense of a play, but he contends that this prevents them from enjoying it—since interpretations are only stories and never the real truth about an artwork, for Driblette, they are mostly a waste of time.

Chapter 4 Quotes

> Under the symbols she'd copied off the latrine wall of The Scope into her memo book, she wrote *Shall I project a world?*

Related Characters: Randolph Driblette, Stanley Koteks, Oedipa Maas

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Besides later derailing her conversation with the paranoid engineer Stanley Koteks, this brief note in Oedipa's journal actually speaks volumes about the necessity and fragility of all interpretation (or ways of "*projecting a world*"). Oedipa borrows the idea of projection from Randolph Driblette, the director of *The Courier's Tragedy*, who compares his control over the play to a projector casting an image of the universe onto the inside dome of a planetarium. Notably, while the universe is real, any perspective on it is only a reconstruction: nobody can ever see the universe in the same form as the projector depicts it. Accordingly, the projection is a model or schema of the universe—but it is only through such models and schemas that people can visualize it.

The idea of "*projecting a world*" also plays on the "Bordando el Manto Terrestre," the Remedios Varo painting that Oedipa remembers seeing in the novel's first chapter. In this painting, a group of women locked in a tower are embroidering the world, a cloth that flows out of their tower. To Oedipa, this means that everybody is always constructing their own vision of the world—in other words, people are *always* projecting a world.

Oedipa's theory of projection is also a theory of narration. Over the course of the novel, as Oedipa develops her theory about the Tristero organization and pieces together a tentative understanding of Pierce Inverarity's legacy, what she is really doing is "*projecting a world*" for herself. In other words, she combines visible clues, ideas, and scenes in order to make a story about the world (and about Tristero). But by the end of the novel, she realizes that various versions of this story are equally plausible, and she is forced to confront the fact that none of them is the actual truth: all of them are mere projections.

> *High above the L.A. freeways,*
> *And the traffic's whine,*
> *Stands the well-known Galactronics*
> *Branch of Yoyodyne.*
> *To the end, we swear undying*
> *Loyalty to you,*
> *Pink pavilions bravely shining,*
> *Palm trees tall and true.*

Related Characters: Mike Fallopian, Stanley Koteks, Pierce Inverarity, Oedipa Maas

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Seeking to find out more about Pierce Inverarity's investments, Oedipa goes to a stockholders' meeting at the offices of Yoyodyne's Galactronics Division in San Narciso. She gets in because she represents the Inverarity estate, but she finds herself surrounded by old men who briefly talk business and then spend half their meeting singing more than a dozen songs about their company. This is one such song: the stockholders sing about their "undying loyalty" to the corporate headquarters where they are currently seated.

Pynchon ridicules the Yoyodyne stockholders in order to point out that the supposedly rational central principle of American corporate capitalism—profit—actually creates a completely irrational and dysfunctional society. This small club of sleepy, senile, predatory old men controls the jobs and fates of myriad engineers like Stanley Koteks and Mike Fallopian, who have given up on the dream of building technologies that will improve human life in order to spend their lives developing missiles. Apparently blinded by their own glory, the stockholders fail to see the consequences of their company's work, which are blatantly obvious to Oedipa: the intensification of a catastrophic Cold War nuclear arms race that threatens to destroy the whole planet.

The Yoyodyne men also represent the power-brokers in society as a whole, like Pierce Inverarity, who deliberately structure the economy in a way that rewards destructive and irresponsible impulses. This theory of power helps explain Pynchon's fondness for satire: society is not oppressive and stagnant because its leaders are sinister and cruel, he thinks, but rather because they are simply stupid and out of touch with the people whom their actions affect.

"Patents," Oedipa said. Koteks explained how every engineer, in signing the Yoyodyne contract, also signed away the patent rights to any inventions he might come up with.

"This stifles your really creative engineer," Koteks said, adding bitterly, "wherever he may be."

"I didn't think people invented any more," said Oedipa, sensing this would goad him. "I mean, who's there been, really, since Thomas Edison? Isn't it all teamwork now?" Bloody Chiclitz, in his welcoming speech this morning, had stressed teamwork.

"Teamwork," Koteks snarled, "is one word for it, yeah. What it really is is a way to avoid responsibility. It's a symptom of the gutlessness of the whole society."

"Goodness," said Oedipa, "are you allowed to talk like that?

Related Characters: Stanley Koteks, Oedipa Maas (speaker), Wendell "Mucho" Maas, Pierce Inverarity, John Nefastis

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 67-8

Explanation and Analysis

When Oedipa visits the Yoyodyne Galactronics Division factory as a representative for Pierce Inverarity's estate, she meets the paranoid engineer Stanley Koteks, who complains about the company stunting his creativity and stealing his patent rights. Oedipa soon realizes that Stanley has a very rigid concept of creative freedom: he wants to be able to experiment and innovate alone, like the great scientists of the past—whose collaborators and supporters are often edited out of history. In fact, in this novel, the notion that achievement is fundamentally individual and that "teamwork" implies weakness is one of the most powerful myths that contributes to the degradation of American society. Like Pierce Inverarity, who invests endlessly in San Narciso for his own personal gain, or John Nefastis, who considers himself the solitary genius that Stanley dreams of becoming, all of the characters in the novel who define their identity around individual achievements end up isolated and disconnected from the rest of humanity. Oedipa's quest for a new way to organize human life is really about finding a way to bridge this disconnection and learn to overcome people's narcissistic obsession with defining and improving themselves.

At the same time, Stanley's concerns about not having control over the form or the fruits of his own labor reflect a serious problem with the society in which he and Oedipa live. Just like Oedipa is miserable as a housewife and her husband Mucho cannot stand working for someone else, Stanley feels that his human potential is being snuffed out by the norms of the modern American economy. Like Stanley, many people perform repetitive, highly specialized tasks that give them no fulfillment or sense of purpose. According to Pynchon, many people live in a kind of everyday dystopia under American capitalism, wasting their precious time in order to make their higher-ups richer.

"Then the watermark you found," she said, "is nearly the same thing, except for the extra little doojigger sort of coming out of the bell."

"It sounds ridiculous," Cohen said, "but my guess is it's a mute."

She nodded. The black costumes, the silence, the secrecy. Whoever they were their aim was to mute the Thurn and Taxis post horn.

[...]

"Why put in a deliberate mistake?" he asked, ignoring—if he saw it—the look on her face. "I've come up so far with eight in all. Each one has an error like this, laboriously worked into the design, like a taunt. There's even a transposition—U. S. *Potsage*, of all things."

Related Characters: Genghis Cohen, Oedipa Maas (speaker), Wendell "Mucho" Maas

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 77-8

Explanation and Analysis

When Oedipa visits the eminent stamp expert Genghis Cohen, she finally gets some empirical evidence for the conspiracy he has long suspected: the Tristero organization, the W.A.S.T.E. mail system, and the mysterious muted horn symbol are all connected. The muted horn's meaning is clear: Thurn and Taxis, Europe's dominant mail monopoly, had a post horn as its emblem, so Tristero, which dedicated itself to destroying Thurn and Taxis, chose a muted (or silenced) version of the same symbol.

Cohen also points out Tristero's stamp forgeries, which are curious because they are *more* elaborate than the original stamps. Like a secret code, the added details in the forged stamps are a signal meant only for people who are already in

on the conspiracy—or who know what to look for. Similarly, Cohen points out the typo "U.S. *Potsage*" (instead of "Postage"), which is significant because this is the same typo Oedipa noticed on a letter from her husband, Mucho, earlier in the book. This implies that Mucho might actually be part of Tristero without Oedipa knowing—or at least that he sent his original letter via W.A.S.T.E. In this way, it's as though Oedipa has unwittingly been in on the Tristero conspiracy the whole time.

But the minute differences in the forgeries and the "*Potsage*" typo also taunt the reader by suggesting that even the smallest and seemingly most irrelevant details can actually make all the difference in Oedipa's quest. In this sense, they scramble readers' proverbial radar, forcing them to abandon the common sense assumption that obvious metaphors and blatant symbols are more important than forgettable details and minor coincidences. Of course, this leads the reader to think just like Oedipa: conspiratorially.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ "Communication is the key," cried Nefastis. "The Demon passes his data on to the sensitive, and the sensitive must reply in kind. There are untold billions of molecules in that box. The demon collects data on each and every one. At some deep psychic level he must get through. The sensitive must receive that staggering set of energies, and feed back something like the same quantity of information. To keep it all cycling. On the secular level all we can see is one piston, hopefully moving. One little movement, against all that massive complex of information, destroyed over and over with each power stroke."

"Help," said Oedipa, "you're not reaching me."

"Entropy is a figure of speech, then," sighed Nefastis, "a metaphor. It connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow. The Machine uses both. The Demon makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true."

"But what," she felt like some kind of a heretic, "if the Demon exists only because the two equations look alike? Because of the metaphor?"

Nefastis smiled; impenetrable, calm, a believer. "He existed for Clerk Maxwell long before the days of the metaphor."

Related Characters: John Nefastis, Oedipa Maas (speaker), James Clerk Maxwell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 84-5

Explanation and Analysis

When Oedipa goes to Berkeley, she pays a visit to the nutty engineer John Nefastis, who has supposedly developed a special communication box full of hot air that can use the Maxwell's demon thought experiment to reverse the second law of thermodynamics. In brief, this means that the air in the box should go from equally distributed—the same temperature everywhere—to segregated—or hot in one side and cold in the other. This would be kind of like a house that air conditions itself without an air conditioner by way of a magical window that only lets hot air out and cold air in.

If this sounds improbable, it's because it is—unsurprisingly, the box doesn't work. And when Nefastis totally fails to explain the complicated relationship between heat entropy and communication entropy to Oedipa, he starts to look even more insane than he already did before. There is actually a scientific basis for everything that he is saying, but it is far too complex to go through here: in order for the Maxwell's demon thought experiment to work out, the demon has to somehow sort the hot air from the cold ones and direct the appropriate ones to each side of the box. It is impossible for the demon to do this without using some energy—in other words, it would heat up, like a computer that is processing information. But it has to get this energy from somewhere, and it has to cool down somehow. This is the purpose of Nefastis's "sensitive": the person outside the box sends energy in to support the demon, and then receives the demon's discharged energy in return. In other words, the "sensitive" has to somehow, miraculously, establish communication with something that is stuck inside a closed system.

This is why the box becomes a metaphor for communication: the "sensitive" has to establish a closed loop with the (imaginary) demon inside the box. In this passage, Nefastis's inability to communicate his theory obviously parallels the box's failure and the broader pattern of failed communication that pervades *The Crying of Lot 49* from start to finish. In order to make his own scientific theory connect, Nefastis has to resort to wishful thinking: he has to convince himself that there is an "objectively true" connection between heat and information, as well as that Maxwell's demon really exists. In other words, to achieve his brilliant scientific advance, he has to resort to the crudest kind of faith. While this reflects the way that Oedipa is forced to simply wait for a miracle at the end of the book, it also shows that science has lost its proper place in the

world: whether at Yoyodyne or in John Nefastis's living room, people have started pursuing science for its own sake, just to see what they can do with it or to make themselves rich and famous.

Looking down at San Francisco a few minutes later from the high point of the bridge's arc, she saw smog. Haze, she corrected herself, is what it is, haze. How can they have smog in San Francisco? Smog, according to the folklore, did not begin till farther south. It had to be the angle of the sun.

Amid the exhaust, sweat, glare and ill-humor of a summer evening on an American freeway, Oedipa Maas pondered her Trystero problem. All the silence of San Narciso—the calm surface of the motel pool, the contemplative contours of residential streets like rakings in the sand of a Japanese garden—had not allowed her to think as leisurely as this freeway madness.

For John Nefastis (to take a recent example) two kinds of entropy, thermodynamic and informational, happened, say by coincidence, to look alike, when you wrote them down as equations. Yet he had made his mere coincidence respectable, with the help of Maxwell's Demon.

Now here was Oedipa, faced with a metaphor of God knew how many parts; more than two, anyway. With coincidences blossoming these days wherever she looked, she had nothing but a sound, a word, Trystero, to hold them together.

Related Characters: John Nefastis, Oedipa Maas

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

After Oedipa runs out of the creepy rebel scientist John Nefastis's house, she finds herself driving into hazy San Francisco, contemplating her devotion to the Tristero conspiracy. Nefastis's crazy devotion to his box, which doesn't work, makes Oedipa question whether she might be devoted to Tristero in the same unhealthy way. She realizes that Nefastis has a bizarre dedication to his communication box because he is trying to draw a connection that does not really exist between two superficially similar concepts: heat entropy and communication entropy. They have nothing to do with each other but are both called "entropy" because their equations look similar. It is a great coincidence that the Maxwell's demon thought experiment also relies on the idea that heat and information can be interchanged—but it is just a coincidence, nothing more. However, Nefastis is so obsessed with the thought experiment that he insists it has to be real, that this coincidental unity of heat and information has to be a meaningful clue that nobody else has ever discovered for hundreds of years. In short, Nefastis is so convinced that there has to be a meaning behind the clues he finds that he makes up a quasi-religious explanation in order to satisfy his paranoid curiosity. And on some level, Oedipa knows that she is doing the same thing with Tristero.

But there is another important factor in Oedipa's ability to honestly reflect on her conspiratorial thinking here: she thinks that reflection of this sort is only possible because of "this freeway madness." She is on the road, in motion. Ironically, of course, she is also periodically frustrated by Americans' inability to freely think about their lives, which she also ties to their obsessive consumerism and obsession with things like cars. After all, San Narciso is stagnant and impossible to think in for the same reason as the freeway enables thought: because it is made for cars. And while cars clear Oedipa's mind, they pollute the air. But Oedipa's careful distinction between "haze" and "smog" is more than a joke about the eternal rivalry between Northern and Southern California—it is also a comment on the kinds of superficial similarities that she sees in her own Tristero conspiracy and John Nefastis's faith in his machine. If she and Nefastis use one word for two totally different things—"Tristero" or "entropy"—then "haze" and "smog" are two totally different words for the same exact thing.

"You know what a miracle is. Not what Bakunin said. But another world's intrusion into this one. Most of the time we coexist peacefully, but when we do touch there's cataclysm. Like the church we hate, anarchists also believe in another world. Where revolutions break out spontaneous and leaderless, and the soul's talent for consensus allows the masses to work together without effort, automatic as the body itself. And yet, señá, if any of it should ever really happen that perfectly, I would also have to cry miracle. An anarchist miracle. Like your friend. He is too exactly and without flaw the thing we fight. In Mexico the privilegiado is always, to a finite percentage, redeemed —one of the people. Unmiraculous. But your friend, unless he's joking, is as terrifying to me as a Virgin appearing to an Indian."

Related Characters: Jesús Arrabal (speaker), Pierce

Inverarity, Oedipa Maas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

Jesús Arrabal's theory of miracles is also a straightforward analysis of Oedipa's quest in the novel: stuck in the stagnant, soulless life of the American suburbs, what Oedipa really wants is for "another world" to "intru[de] into this one" and rescue her. Just like John Nefastis's communication machine looks for an outside source of energy through the "sensitive," Oedipa seeks an alternative to the drudgery and meaninglessness of her life by pursuing the Tristero conspiracy. Shadowy and forgotten, Tristero represents an alternate world—that of the disinherited, neglected, and discarded, whose energy has been rejected by the mainstream world and therefore can still intrude into it. Cleverly, Arrabal performs what he preaches, because his theory combines two worlds that he explicitly declares to be opposites: religious imagery (the virgin and the Indian) and political philosophy (the anarchist Bakunin). And he also arguably represents the miracle Oedipa is looking for, just as Pierce represented the miraculous appearance of a perfect enemy to him.

She remembered John Nefastis, talking about his Machine, and massive destructions of information. So when this mattress flared up around the sailor, in his Viking's funeral: the stored, coded years of uselessness, early death, self-harrowing, the sure decay of hope, the set of all men who had slept on it, whatever their lives had been, would truly cease to be, forever, when the mattress burned. She stared at it in wonder. It was as if she had just discovered the irreversible process. It astonished her to think that so much could be lost, even the quantity of hallucination belonging just to the sailor that the world would bear no further trace of.

Related Characters: Wendell "Mucho" Maas, John Nefastis, The Sailor, Oedipa Maas

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 104-5

Explanation and Analysis

During the final hours of her overnight jaunt in San Francisco, Oedipa runs into an elderly, hallucinating, alcoholic sailor who ends up providing her most potent moment of human connection in the entire novel. After she helps the sailor return upstairs to his room, Oedipa contemplates the man's mattress burning down and wonders how much stored-up information would be lost in the process. Although the mattress is an inanimate object, it somehow bears the traces of all the men who have used it, just like the used cars Mucho sold in his previous job. Oedipa compares this process to the demon in John Nefastis's machine, which has to discharge its heat energy back to the "sensitive" in order to keep functioning. Because Nefastis conflates of heat with information, this discharge of heat into the surrounding environment also represents the diffusion of information, which is why the "sensitive" can know which side of the box is hot (and which of its two pistons will raise). Oedipa sees the same principle at work in the sailor's mattress: when it burns, it releases heat as well as the information it has stored up. Like anything that increases entropy, this is an irreversible process, and once the memories, perspectives, and histories contained in the mattress are lost, they can never be recovered.

Oedipa spotted among searchlights and staring crowds a KCUF mobile unit, with her husband Mucho inside it, spieling into a microphone. She moseyed over past snapping flashbulbs and stuck her head in the window. "Hi."

Mucho pressed his cough button a moment, but only smiled. It seemed odd. How could they hear a smile? Oedipa got in, trying not to make noise. Mucho thrust the mike in front of her, mumbling, "You're on, just be yourself." Then in his earnest broadcasting voice, "How do you feel about this terrible thing?"

"Terrible," said Oedipa.

"Wonderful," said Mucho. He had her go on to give listeners a summary of what'd happened in the office. "Thank you, Mrs Edna Mosh," he wrapped up, "for your eyewitness account of this dramatic siege at the Hilarius Psychiatric Clinic. This is KCUF Mobile Two, sending it back now to 'Rabbit' Warren, at the studio." He cut his power. Something was not quite right.

"Edna Mosh?" Oedipa said.

"It'll come out the right way," Mucho said. "I was allowing for the distortion on these rigs, and then when they put it on tape."

Related Characters: Wendell "Mucho" Maas, Oedipa Maas (speaker), Dr. Hilarius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113-4

Explanation and Analysis

After Oedipa helps the police get to her psychotic psychotherapist, Dr. Hilarius, she happens upon her husband, Mucho, outside. Strangely, they reconnect live on the radio, in an interview format that underlines how truly distant they have become from each other. Not only does their awkward communication air publicly, but when Mucho presses his cough button and they briefly have a moment to speak privately, they say nothing at all. (Of course, this cough button also demonstrates how the media replaces real human expressions with simulated ones.)

Entirely relayed through the radio, Oedipa and Mucho's marriage is no longer based on any genuine connection. Oedipa's interview responses also show that the media does not provoke thought or responses from its listeners: rather, it pushes a concocted narrative. "This terrible thing" is "terrible," nothing more, and all the wild irony that the reader learns about Dr. Hilarius's mental breakdown is totally erased from the official media version, which presents a deeply distorted version of the truth. Of course, when Mucho calls Oedipa "Edna Mosh," this doesn't just represent the distorting effects of media—Mucho also openly announces that he knows this is the case. Somehow, he is aware of what is happening to him and yet still unable to resolve it, much like Oedipa fully understands that she is trapped in her pointless suburban life but cannot escape any more easily.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ It may have been some vision of the continent-wide power structure Hinckart could have taken over, now momentarily weakened and tottering, that inspired Tristero to set up his own system. He seems to have been highly unstable, apt at any time to appear at a public function and begin a speech. His constant theme, disinheritance. The postal monopoly belonged to Ohain by right of conquest, and Ohain belonged to Tristero by right of blood. He styled himself El Desheredado, The Disinherited, and fashioned a livery of black for his followers, black to symbolize the only thing that truly belonged to them in their exile: the night. Soon he had added to his iconography the muted post horn and a dead badger with its four feet in the air (some said that the name Taxis came from the Italian *tasso*, badger, referring to hats of badger fur the early Bergamascan couriers wore). He began a sub rosa campaign of obstruction, terror and depredation along the Thurn and Taxis mail routes.

Related Characters: Professor Emory Bortz, Oedipa Maas

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 131-2

Explanation and Analysis

When Oedipa visits the eccentric English professor Emory Bortz, she finally finds historical facts to support her wild conspiracy theories about Tristero. From the memoirs of one Dr. Diocletian Blobb, Oedipa pieces together a story about Tristero's formation in the 1500s, when Hernando Joaquín de Tristero y Calavera sought to seize the Thurn and Taxis monopoly from Jan Hinckart. Although it is unclear whether Tristero y Calavera was actually disinherited or just saw an opportunity to seize power, his claim to the "right of blood" and vow to wage war on Thurn and Taxis explain the stories of shadowy, black-clad bandits that Oedipa has consistently come across in association with the Tristero. (It is worth mentioning that "Tristero" is not an actual Spanish word, and "Calavera" means "skull," which further associates the Tristero organization with death, violence, and the occult.)

This historical Tristero story fills out Oedipa's conspiracy theory, but curiously enough, she actually starts to lose interest in it afterward, much like people naturally lose interest in a jigsaw puzzle after they finish it. When she finds the explanation she has been seeking, she realizes that Tristero is just another part of the world as she knows it, and that it may not have the radical, revolutionary potential she has been ascribing to it. Of course, she soon starts to question whether the conspiracy exists at all—but this is just because she finds multiple satisfactory explanations of all the clues she has encountered, and she realizes that having an explanation is by no means the same as having an absolute, undeniable truth.

> Either you have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream [...] Or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you [...] all financed out of the estate in a way either too secret or too involved for your non-legal mind to know about even though you are co-executor, so labyrinthine that it must have meaning beyond just a practical joke. Or you are fantasying some such plot, in which case you are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull.
>
> Those, now that she was looking at them, she saw to be the alternatives. Those symmetrical four. She didn't like any of them, but hoped she was mentally ill; that that's all it was. That night she sat for hours, too numb even to drink, teaching herself to breathe in a vacuum. For 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.

Related Characters: Professor Emory Bortz, Pierce Inverarity, Oedipa Maas

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 140-1

Explanation and Analysis

Despite finally learning about the alleged historical origins of the mysterious Tristero mail-carrying conspiracy, Oedipa still cannot rest easy at the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*. In fact, she grows even more anxious and distraught when she learns that Pierce Inverarity owned every channel that has given her information about Tristero, from Zapf's Used Books to the theater where she saw *The Courier's Tragedy* to the college where Emory Bortz teaches English. Named for the mythical Narcissus, San Narciso now seems to represent Pierce Inverarity building the world in his own image so that he could stick around even after his death. Oedipa realizes that the conspiracy could, in a sense, be even larger than she feared: Inverarity could have paid everyone off, forged *The Courier's Tragedy*, and even built a mock-up of the W.A.S.T.E. system for her to discover. In other words, Tristero could be an plot designed by Inverarity—who may not even really be dead—to take revenge on her. Taking stock of her options, Oedipa realizes that there are four: a fantasy, a dream, a real conspiracy, or a conspiracy by Inverarity to convince her of a fake conspiracy.

This passage marks the apex of Oedipa's paranoid thinking, but also—paradoxically enough—the apex of her self-awareness. Throughout the whole novel, she has been chasing a theory: convinced that Tristero exists, she has been looking for evidence to prove it. Now, however, she takes one step back and sees how there are multiple stories for her to choose from, multiple legitimate interpretations that would fully explain the Tristero she has observed. Now able to choose among her "symmetrical four" alternatives, Oedipa realizes that interpretation inevitably hits a limit. It is possible to form a more or less complete and consistent story about the nature of some reality (or conspiracy, or literature), but never to verify that this story is identical to the *actual* truth.

> San Narciso was a name; an incident among our climatic records of dreams and what dreams became among our accumulated daylight, a moment's squall-line or tornado's touchdown among the higher, more continental solemnities—storm-systems of group suffering and need, prevailing winds of affluence. There was the true continuity, San Narciso had no boundaries. No one knew yet how to draw them. She had dedicated herself, weeks ago, to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America.
>
> Might Oedipa Maas yet be his heiress; had that been in the will, in code, perhaps without Pierce really knowing, having been by then too seized by some headlong expansion of himself, some visit, some lucid instruction? Though she could never again call back any image of the dead man to dress up, pose, talk to and make answer, neither would she lose a new compassion for the cul-de-sac he'd tried to find a way out of, for the enigma his efforts had created.

Related Characters: Pierce Inverarity, Oedipa Maas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

As Oedipa contemplates Pierce Inverarity's legacy at the end of the novel, she stops thinking about him as an individual and starts viewing him as part of an interconnected system. She sees the railroad tracks as extending out to the rest of the country and already knows that San Narciso is meaningless as a city, understandable only by virtue of its relationship to other places. Similarly, even as the people around her willfully isolate themselves and let their relationships degrade, Oedipa ultimately finds peace in the basic fact of interconnection: everyone suffers, flails, and degrades together. Accordingly, just as Oedipa

starts acutely resenting the profound inequalities that Inverarity's wealth represents, she also learns to accept that he was acting in a rational—or at least understandable—way. When analyzed in isolation, it makes no sense to accumulate wealth or build a city in one's own image. But as part of America's "continental solemnities," Inverarity is just one among many senseless millionaires. In addition to inhabiting that vast, closed, interconnected system of profound wealth and profound poverty, Inverarity also shapes the future of that system with the traces he leaves behind. This is why his "legacy was America" and Oedipa, like everyone else, will end up inheriting it.

"It's time to start," said Genghis Cohen, offering his arm. The men inside the auction room wore black mohair and had pale, cruel faces. They watched her come in, trying each to conceal his thoughts. Loren Passerine, on his podium, hovered like a puppet-master, his eyes bright, his smile practiced and relentless. He stared at her, smiling, as if saying, I'm surprised you actually came. Oedipa sat alone, toward the back of the room, looking at the napes of necks, trying to guess which one was her target, her enemy, perhaps her proof. An assistant closed the heavy door on the lobby windows and the sun. She heard a lock snap shut; the sound echoed a moment. Passerine spread his arms in a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture; perhaps to a descending angel. The auctioneer cleared his throat. Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49.

Related Characters: Genghis Cohen (speaker), Pierce Inverarity, Oedipa Maas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 151-2

Explanation and Analysis

The novel's title comes from its final line, in which "crying" actually means the auctioneer selling an item, and "lot 49" is Inverarity's stamp collection. As one final example of the novel's paranoid fixation on interpretation and encryption, this closing line finally gives meaning to the title, which may have seemed obscure or even meaningless until this point. In fact, Pynchon seems to be taunting those of his readers who complain that his work is too dense and cryptic. In addition to mocking the very assumption that clues always mean something and have to be decrypted throughout the book, here, he presents a code that decrypts itself: the novel straightforwardly says what "the crying of lot 49" means, and one only has to read to the end to find out.

Then again, Oedipa ends the novel in a state of profound uncertainty and anxiety, still *awaiting* the crying to which the reader has finally uncovered the key. She is clearly awaiting some kind of religious intervention in the world—the kind of radical change that Jesús Arrabal referred to as a "miracle"—and she interprets Loren Passerine's gestures as evidence that some kind of salvation is imminent. Concretely, she is waiting to see if the Tristero representative who she believes to be attending the auction will reveal themselves. That is why this passage is suffused with religious symbolism: the auction also means the possible arrival of Tristero. Crucially, 49 is also the number of days between Easter and the Pentecost in Christianity and the number of days that a deceased person waits for rebirth in some schools of Buddhism. The religious symbolism could not be clearer: as Oedipa has been waiting for Tristero throughout the whole book, she ends it somehow closer to her miracle and yet no closer to the truth.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Oedipa Maas returns home slightly **inebriated** from a Tupperware party and discovers that she is responsible for executing the last will and testament of wealthy real estate investor Pierce Inverarity. Confused, she calls up memories of her past and wonders how Inverarity might have died. Oedipa has received a **letter** from someone named Metzger at a Los Angeles law firm, who writes that Inverarity died several months before and promises to help Oedipa resolve any disputes that arise regarding the will. After reading the letter, Oedipa goes to the market and then spends the rest of the day making dinner and drinks for her husband, Wendell (who usually goes by his nickname, "Mucho").

Oedipa Maas opens the novel in the role of an ordinary 1960s California housewife, attending Tupperware parties with other local women, cooking and cleaning, and caring for her husband. But Pynchon's prose highlights her sense of boredom and alienation: for Oedipa, as for many women, domestic tasks are an empty, isolating routine, not a source of fulfilment. Like the characters' names, the mysterious letter from Metzger is intentionally ambiguous. Through Oedipa's sense of blind confusion at receiving it, Pynchon implies that it may not mean anything at all. By extension, he suggests that different elements of The Crying of Lot 49*'s plot might not fit together—or need to fit together—at all. Indeed, nothing in the novel's opening scene seems to have a clear purpose behind it—not least of all Oedipa's daily routine.*

During the evening news, Oedipa remembers that she got a phone call in the middle of the night the year before. The caller made a bunch of absurd requests in different, exaggerated accents, and Oedipa knew it must be Pierce Inverarity. As Inverarity went on imitating The Shadow, Mucho told Oedipa to hang up. Inverarity warned that The Shadow will visit Mucho, then hung up. Oedipa did not even know where Inverarity was, and that was the last she heard from him.

While Mucho's jealousy about Inverarity's call suggests that Oedipa and Inverarity might have been involved in the past, the phone call also deepens the sense of the absurd and the surreal in the novel. The call contains no message—it is an empty act of communication with no content. Inverarity's performance is totally one-sided: he completely disregards Oedipa, both by not giving her the chance to reply and by waking her up in the middle of the night in the first place. None of the identities Inverarity assumes seem realer than any of the others. Like The Shadow (an invisible detective character from mid-20th-century novels, comic books, and radio shows), Inverarity remains disguised throughout the novel. He leaves a mark on everything that Oedipa touches, and his presence (or absence) constantly haunts her as she looks for some meaning in his legacy and estate.

Mucho gets home and starts complaining about his day at work. He is a radio DJ on the station KCUF, but he complains just as much as he used to at his old job selling used **cars**. Back then, he carefully tried to avoid embodying any stereotype about used-car salesmen, and he still gets uncomfortable whenever he sees things that remind him of old cars. He remembers cleaning trash out of the "godawful" cars that his working-class customers traded in. Maybe he would have enjoyed wrecking these cars in a junkyard, but he could not handle watching customer after customer trade one rundown car for another. Five years after leaving the used-car lot, Mucho still constantly complains about working there. Oedipa compares it to how the war haunts men a generation older than him.

Mucho's one-sided complaining is just as inconsiderate as Inverarity's one-sided phone call. Judging by how Mucho vents to Oedipa rather than engaging her in conversation, it seems that they are playing the roles of husband and wife as though out of obligation—not because they genuinely want to. And Mucho has the same attitude toward work: it is soul-crushing to waste his life doing something he does not care about. Worst of all, he has to deal with the "godawful" waste of others who also never get any closer to freeing themselves from the obligation of work. The trash in their cars becomes the only record of their lives, and their trade-ins represent the same sense of pointless, unnecessary, but obligatory stagnation that Mucho also feels, and that defines life under American capitalism in the novel.

Mucho complains to Oedipa that his boss, Funch, wants him to be less "horny" on the radio, especially when he talks to young women who call to request a song. Mucho announces that this is "censorship," but he and Funch get into arguments like this all the time. Changing the subject, Oedipa shows Mucho the **letter** she received. Mucho, who was always jealous of Oedipa's relationship with Pierce Inverarity, tells Oedipa that he cannot help and that she should check with their lawyer, Roseman.

Mucho seems comically blind to Funch's point: his predatory "horny" attitude is making women uncomfortable. Ironically, at the same time as he is hitting on other women, he is also overly possessive towards Oedipa, though he proves completely useless when she actually needs his advice. Mucho seems to care about living up to contradictory imaginary standards of masculinity—both promiscuity with and ownership over women—but he does not actually care about women themselves. At work, Mucho is oversensitive to others stepping on his autonomy precisely because he has so little of it: he conflates a reasonable request with "censorship" because the way he talks on the radio is basically the only real freedom he has in his otherwise unfulfilling life.

Oedipa goes to visit Roseman the next morning, but first she spends half an hour doing her eye makeup. She is trying to disguise her exhaustion: she did not get any sleep because the phone rang again in the middle of the night, just like it did when Inverarity called her the year before. This time, it's her therapist, Dr. Hilarius. He asks about Oedipa's pills, but she explains that she is not taking them because she doesn't know what they are. Hilarius is running an experiment on how local housewives respond to psychedelic **drugs**, but Oedipa refuses to participate.

Pynchon tempts the reader to search for symbolic links between Hilarius's late-night call and Inverarity's, but it is unclear what they actually have in common besides bothering Oedipa. For one, Hilarius gets straight to the point, whereas Inverarity had nothing to say at all. Hilarius's ethically questionable experiment is a parody of 1960s counterculture: psychedelic drugs were all the rage, including among prominent researchers like psychologist Timothy Leary. But Hilarius is such an exaggerated, absurd figure that he allows Pynchon to critique this movement in the same way as he critiques mainstream culture. For example, he is so coercive and indifferent to Oedipa's needs and autonomy that he does not appear to be a trustworthy authority on anything.

Hilarius tells Oedipa that "we want you," which reminds her of the famous posters on which Uncle Sam says, "I want *you*," for the army. Hilarius says that he feels like Oedipa was somehow calling for *him*, but Oedipa hangs up on him. Unable to sleep, Oedipa tells herself that she will never take Hilarius's **pills**. She still visits him for therapy just because it would be complicated to stop. He likes to make faces, which he thinks can have a therapeutic effect. She remembers his "Fu-Manchu" face, in which he sticks out his tongue and stretches out his eyes, mouth, and nose.

*The similarity between Dr. Hilarius's "we want you" and Uncle Sam's "I want you" clearly establishes a link between the insanity of Hilarius's experiment and the insanity of American foreign policy—specifically, the Vietnam War, which was just starting in 1964 (*The Crying of Lot 49 *is set around this time). Hilarius's performance of a "Fu-Manchu" facial expression also solidifies this connection, as Fu-Manchu was a fictional character who perpetuated racist stereotypes about Asian people (like those that many Americans espoused toward Vietnamese people during the war). Through this parallel, Pynchon suggests that both Hilarius and the U.S. government's recruitment efforts deceive people into sacrificing themselves for someone else's benefit by falsely promising that this sacrifice will give meaning to their lives. Like her relationship with Mucho, Oedipa's therapy with Hilarius is more the product of obligation and inertia than of genuine desire. She does not think his treatments might actually work—even Hilarius's own name points out that his practices cannot be taken seriously.*

Like Oedipa, Roseman was awake all night: he was ruminating about Perry Mason, the TV lawyer whom he both admires and resents. When Oedipa walks into Roseman's office, she catches him stuffing a bunch of papers—a draft of fictional charges against Perry Mason—into his desk. She awkwardly comments that Roseman looks less guilty than usual. (They first met in therapy.) Over lunch, Roseman clumsily hits on Oedipa while they discuss the will, and afterwards he explains all the work that goes into executing a will, from learning about Inverarity's business and inventorying his estate to dealing with his taxes. Roseman says that he can help with the work, but it might be interesting for Oedipa.

Roseman's obsession with Perry Mason suggests that his own identity now depends upon his relationship to the mass media. He feels inadequate because he cannot live up to a fictional character, but this shows that he is losing track of the boundaries between fiction and reality. In fact, his gutless sexual advances seem more like failed attempts to play a role than genuine interest in Oedipa: even though Oedipa is right in front of him, he is treating her as an element of his own fantasy rather than as an actual person.

Oedipa contemplates inventorying the estate herself. She feels slightly buffered from the world, like watching an out-of-focus movie. In fact, she feels trapped in her boring life in the suburb of Kinneret-Among-The-Pines, like Rapunzel in her tower. She briefly tasted excitement with Pierce Inverarity, like when they went to Mexico, where they visited an art exhibit by the Spanish painter Remedios Varo. Varo's painting "Bordando el Manto Terrestre" (or "Embroidering the Earth's Mantle") depicted women in a tower embroidering a tapestry that contains the whole world. Looking at this painting, Oedipa started crying into her sunglasses because she realized that she never truly could escape her proverbial tower. Wherever she goes, some "formless magic" is holding her captive, and she is not sure what she can do to understand or escape it.

The blurry movie and Rapunzel's tower are Oedipa's metaphors for her own sense of alienation, purposelessness, and indifference. She feels disconnected from the world because she has no sense of direction in it—no meaningful relationships or interests. This certainly has to do with being a middle-class woman in a society that gives her no options besides becoming a housewife and mother. But the stultifying "formless magic" also has to do with other social processes that are so all-encompassing as to seem indistinct. Namely, after World War II, American life became organized around cars, suburban neighborhoods, and consumer goods—all of which suddenly made society seem far more homogeneous than ever before. Treated as interchangeable workers and consumers, Americans like Oedipa began losing their sense of individuality and their feeling that they could somehow leave an impact on the world. Curiously, the juxtaposition between the story of Rapunzel trapped in her tower and Remedios Varo's painting (in which women trapped in a tower are actually creating the world) suggests that Oedipa might have more power than she realizes.

CHAPTER 2

Oedipa leaves Mucho in Kinneret-Among-The-Pines and goes to meet Metzger in Pierce Inverarity's hometown San Narciso, which is an average suburb of Los Angeles. As soon as Oedipa arrives, she pauses and looks out through the **smog** at the city's endless sprawl, which reminds her of a circuit board: she knows it fits together but does not understand how. It's like someone is saying something, but she cannot hear the message. She wonders if Mucho feels the same way at the radio station, having lost his faith in his job.

The city of San Narciso visually represents the alienating homogeneity of post-World War II American life: every street, house, and lifestyle look essentially the same. Its smog both literally and figuratively represents Oedipa's feeling of being buffered off from the world. And because this smog is the direct result of cars—the ultimate symbol of American consumerism—it becomes clear that Oedipa's sense of alienation is a response to the culture of mainstream, white, middle-class America in the 1960s. Because everything is identical, nobody has the autonomy to truly define their own life: everyone is merely playing out a role that the society has chosen for them. Oedipa's search for some hidden code in the city's metaphorical circuit board represents her attempt to somehow find meaning in the homogeneity.

Oedipa **drives** off, past an endless stream of unassuming beige industrial buildings. She also passes the huge missiles standing outside the Yoyodyne company's huge Galactronics Divisions factory, which she remembers that Inverarity invested in. Disillusioned by the city's ugliness, Oedipa pulls into a motel called Echo Courts, which has a giant sculpture of a nymph outside. Oedipa realizes that she looks like the nymph, who holds a flower while a huge fan blows her clothing out of the way to expose her breasts and thighs.

The names San Narciso and Echo Courts are a clear play on the Ancient Roman myth of Narcissus and Echo. In this story, the beautiful hunter Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection, scorning the mountain nymph Echo, who faded away into a literal echo. Of course, San Narciso ("Saint Narcissus" in Spanish) happens to be ugly instead of beautiful, and Oedipa is clearly associated with Echo, which raises the danger that she might become an empty reflection of the ugly city (or the sexually objectified nymph sculpture). Indeed, the Narcissus and Echo myth reflects how the novel's self-obsessed male characters mistreat Oedipa. But the story also serves as a broader metaphor for what Pynchon sees as a broader social tendency toward self-interest, obsession with appearances, and disdain for others.

Although Oedipa's room has a view of the swimming pool, the motel is eerily silent. Miles, the teenage motel manager, sings in a British accent while he carries Oedipa's bags and tells her that he's in a band called the Paranoids. Oedipa offers to show Miles's music to Mucho. Miles assumes that she is asking for a sexual favor in return, but he ends up demanding a tip and going back downstairs.

Miles and his band are an obvious parody of the Beatles, another landmark of 1960s American culture. But his band is so glaringly unoriginal that it is really a cheap copy of the mainstream culture—the Paranoids dress, sing, and act exactly like the Beatles. In fact, the Beatles quickly went from counterculture to being absorbed into the mainstream culture, which suggests that it may not be possible to fight the mainstream without becoming absorbed into it.

Metzger surprises Oedipa at Echo Courts the same night. He is so attractive that Oedipa wonders if he is an actor playing a trick on her. Over a bottle of **wine** on the motel room floor, Metzger explains that his mother actually forced him to act in in movies as a child, under the name "Baby Igor." He implies that this was emasculating and that he might be gay.

The lawyer Metzger, unlike his counterpart, Roseman, is good enough to be on TV. If Oedipa is the nymph from the Echo Courts sign, then Metzger seems to be Echo's counterpart, Narcissus. At the same time, his attractiveness and past as an actor are bound up with obvious insecurities which suggest that he is emotionally out-of-touch.

Oedipa turns on the television, which shows a dog licking an androgynous-looking child: it is Metzger, acting as Baby Igor in an absurd movie called *Cashiered*. The film is about a man, son, and dog who take it upon themselves to build a submarine and fight in World War I. Baby Igor breaks out into song, and Metzger sings along. Oedipa wonders if all of this is an elaborate joke or conspiracy. Then, a commercial about Fangoso Lagoons comes on: it's a housing development full of canals and lakes that Inverarity built specifically for scuba-divers.

The reader might share Oedipa's suspicion that the world could be playing a practical joke on her. It is hard to tell which is most absurd: the coincidence that Metzger's movie happens to be on, the plot of that movie, or the Fangoso Lagoons project that Inverarity has built. (Fangoso means "muddy," and the project is so over-the-top that it seems gaudy, cheap, and unsophisticated.) The sense of living through a joke or conspiracy points to people's tendency to seek meaning in coincidences, even when they rationally know that these coincidences mean nothing at all. In a novel, however, readers usually do expect coincidences to mean something—and yet, by sticking so many of them together, Pynchon taunts his readers and challenges them to make sense of the book without starting to feel ridiculous or paranoid themselves.

Metzger pulls out a bottle of **tequila** and tells Oedipa that being a lawyer and being an actor are really similar. Manny Di Presso, a former lawyer who became an actor, is even playing Metzger on a television pilot. Metzger asks Oedipa to guess the ending to *Cashiered*. They're interrupted by a commercial for Beaconsfield **bone** charcoal cigarettes, which used a filter technology owned by Inverarity. Then, Oedipa remarks that the movie *should* have a happy ending, so she will bet the opposite: that the protagonists will die. Metzger pressures her into agreeing that the winner of the bet will get anything they want from the other person. He kisses Oedipa's hand, which reminds her of when she first had sex with Inverarity.

With lawyer-turned-actor Di Presso playing actor-turned-lawyer Metzger on television, reality and fiction again become comically intertwined, to the point that reality is just appearances and appearances are just reality. Similarly, between the alcohol and the movie, Oedipa and Metzger manage to pass the night together without really getting to know each other at all. Not only is their relationship blatantly superficial, but they both seem to recognize and accept this fact. Paradoxically, this recognition shows that they are not actually superficial as individuals*—rather, they are simply choosing to have a superficial relationship rather than putting in any serious effort. Indeed, Metzger pesters and pressures Oedipa in a way that makes it clear that he does not really care about her, except to the extent that he can manipulate her for his own purposes.*

The next scene of *Cashiered* shows the father character alone, and Metzger objects that the movie is out of order. Oedipa asks where this current scene belongs, but Metzger refuses to answer her questions unless she agrees to take off one article of clothing per question. She agrees, runs to the bathroom, and puts on all of the clothing she brought with her, which makes her look completely ridiculous. When she sees herself in the mirror, she breaks out laughing so hard that she falls to the floor and knocks over a hairspray aerosol can, which starts fly around the bathroom as it depressurizes. Metzger comes inside and hides on the floor with Oedipa. While the can shatters the mirror and the glass shower wall, a massacre scene plays on the television in the bedroom, and Oedipa bites Metzger's arm.

The jumbled movie presents Oedipa with an interpretive challenge that is not unlike the difficulty that The Crying of Lot 49 *presents to its readers. Unsurprisingly, Metzger takes advantage of this opportunity to make sexual advances, and Oedipa puts on all her clothing in order to show Metzger that she fully understands what he is doing and is capable of manipulating him back. Laughing at her figure in the mirror, Oedipa has a classic moment of self-awareness: wearing so many layers of clothing, she proves unrecognizable to herself. This is a total inversion of the Narcissus myth, in which Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection. Of course, the can of hairspray then shatters the bathroom mirror, depriving Oedipa of her reflection altogether.*

The hairspray can runs out of air and falls to the ground. Suddenly, Miles is at the door, accompanied by three guys who look exactly like him and a handful of girls their age. They think that the sight of Oedipa dressed in all her clothes, biting Metzger on the bathroom floor, is "kinky." Miles starts talking about a similar orgy he went to a few days earlier. Oedipa asks Miles and his bandmates to leave, and they play a loud rock song about loneliness and the moon from somewhere near the swimming pool.

The hairspray could symbolize many different things, ranging from sexual release to the gradual equalization of pressure across the system through an increase in entropy (which later becomes an important concept in the novel). If Oedipa and Metzger's position on the bathroom floor is not comical enough, it gets funnier when the socially tone-deaf Miles unironically assumes that they are acting out some sexual fantasy. (Of course, this is a more logical explanation than the actual truth.)

Oedipa and Metzger return to *Cashiered*, and Oedipa starts making guesses about the plot and taking off one of her numerous pieces of jewelry every time. Meanwhile, Metzger eagerly takes his pants off. They keep **drinking** and watching advertisements for things that Pierce Inverarity owned. At some point, Oedipa goes to the bathroom and changes into fewer clothes, but when she returns, Metzger is asleep in his underwear. Oedipa climbs on top of him and starts kissing him, but Metzger falls asleep several times while they have sex. The movie is still on, and the Paranoids are still playing music outside. More of them start plugging in their guitars. Precisely when Oedipa and Metzger climax, the Paranoids blow the motel's power supply, and all the lights go out.

After giving up on their lazy stripteases, Oedipa and Metzger have sex with such a total indifference and lack of passion that it becomes obvious that they only care about satisfying themselves. The Paranoids echo the main action throughout, and the fuse blowing and the lights going out are a clear metaphor for Oedipa and Metzger climaxing. This also highlights the interplay between their relationship and the technology that mediates it: they have only really interacted in relation to Metzger's movie, and when they have sex and the lights go out, they have to share a genuine moment of personal intimacy for the first time.

When the lights come back on, Oedipa and Metzger watch the end of *Cashiered*. The protagonists die one by one in their submarine, and Baby Igor is electrocuted to death in a particularly gruesome scene. Oedipa announces that she won their bet, and she wants to know what Pierce Inverarity told Metzger about her. Metzger says that Inverarity told him that Oedipa "wouldn't be easy." When she hears this, Oedipa cries, but only for a little while.

Although uncharacteristically cruel, the ending of Cashiered *allows Pynchon to parody the unrealistic narrative tropes of Hollywood—which, as his novel's plot suggests, seem to be gradually pushing everyday life toward exaggeration and absurdity. When Metzger reports that Inverarity said Oedipa "wouldn't be easy" to have sex with, he reveals a contradiction in the attitude of the novel's men: Inverarity and Metzger only value women as sexual objects, yet they evaluate women's character based on how easily they give in to sexual advances.*

CHAPTER 3

The narrator explains that Oedipa gradually learns about the "Tristero System," which might help her overcome the feeling that she is trapped in life, like Rapunzel in her tower. This process begins when she has sex with Metzger and gradually unfolds around her, as though the world were logically revealing the truth to her. The next part of this process involves Pierce Inverarity's treasured stamp collection, which he used to gaze at for hours when he and Oedipa were together.

Curiously, Pynchon's narrator introduces the "Tristero system" before Oedipa ever encounters it. The novel pushes the reader to start looking for a conspiracy, just like Oedipa. And this sensitizes the reader to the idea of Tristero: if and when the word pops up again, readers will know to take it seriously as a clue because the narrator has already signaled its importance beforehand. By explicitly foreshadowing the novel's main plot before it truly begins, Pynchon underlines the very fact that this plot is a web of events and concepts that he has deliberately constructed. In other words, at the same time as the narrator muses about Oedipa discovering the hidden truths of the universe and overcoming her sense of imprisonment, Pynchon draws attention to the way that people's sense of reality depends upon their individual perception.

Oedipa pays attention to Inverarity's stamps for two reasons. The first is that she receives a **letter** from Mucho. In her letters to him, she does not mention her affair with Metzger. She does this out of respect, just as she and Mucho do not talk about his habit of hitting on underage teenaged girls. On one of Mucho's letters back to her, the envelope is stamped with a typo: it reads "POTSMASTER" instead of "POSTMASTER."

Much like Pierce Inverarity's phone call, Mucho's letter says absolutely nothing of merit, revealing how empty his relationship with Oedipa really is. The most important subjects of all—Oedipa's affair and Mucho's predatory advances toward younger women—go totally unspoken, so Mucho and Oedipa come to a mutual understanding despite *their communication, not* because *of it. The slight typo on Mucho's envelope is totally ambiguous: although it later connects with other elements of the plot, for now it is impossible for Oedipa or the reader to tell if it is a significant clue or a meaningless coincidence.*

The second reason Oedipa thinks about Inverarity's stamps is that she visits a nearby bar called The Scope with Metzger. They go to get a break from Echo Courts, where Miles and the Paranoids frequently walk in on them having sex (even after they start doing so in the closet as a precaution). The Scope is full of Yoyodyne employees, who awkwardly stare at Oedipa and Metzger. The bar only plays avant-garde electronic music; sometimes, there are live performances.

Like the novel's other settings—Echo Courts, San Narciso, Fangoso Lagoons, and so on—The Scope is alienating and obscure. It is not only that Oedipa and Metzger are nothing unlike The Scope's other patrons—they also simply cannot understand what these people are up to. None of this passage's intricate detail seems to make Oedipa's quest any clearer or her life any less baffling. It is ironic that The Scope puts on live performances of music made by computers, as this shows how humanity's drives for technological advancement and human connection are actually opposed. By definition, electronic music is perfectly reproducible regardless of context, so it does not need to be performed.

At The Scope, a young man named Mike Fallopian approaches Oedipa and Metzger and starts telling them about the Peter Pinguid Society. The Society is named after an obscure Confederate officer who may or may not have lost a battle with a Russian admiral in California during the Civil War and then decided that capitalism and slavery are one and the same. Pinguid's followers hate everything industrialized, including both capitalism and communism, even though Pinguid eventually became a wealthy real estate speculator in Los Angeles.

Mike Fallopian's bizarre story is actually based on surprising elements of fact (like Russian ships being in California in the 1860s). In other words, while Fallopian's story violates all common assumptions about historical events, his conspiratorial interpretation of reality can actually be justified. Similarly, Pinguid's reasoning about capitalism and communism is counterintuitive yet common: he considered both systems unjustifiably cruel, so he totally gave up on changing the world and became the thing he originally most hated. There is no question that men like Pinguid and Inverarity are principally responsible for the soulless landscape of cities like San Narciso. Finally, Pynchon specifically relates the battle that may or may not have occurred in the Peter Pinguid myth to the Gulf of Tonkin Incident that largely precipitated the American involvement in the Vietnam War in 1964, the same year that Pynchon wrote The Crying of Lot 49. *Famously, the Gulf of Tonkin attack was in large part a fabrication invented by the American government to justify intervening in Vietnam. At the time, however, its truth had not been widely established, so it was plausible but unproven, just like Fallopian's whole theory. Of course, the fact that the United States government would launch a war based entirely upon self-interested lies shows that Pynchon understands the genuine appeal of conspiratorial thinking, which can never be proven but always* might *be true.*

Someone in the bar suddenly starts handing out **mail**. Oedipa goes to the bathroom, where she finds a suspicious message written neatly on the wall: it claims to be a solicitation for sex, it but asks interested parties to contact the writer, Kirby, through "WASTE." It includes a strange **symbol** that looks like a muted trumpet.

The message on the bathroom wall is not obviously suspicious—the only reason it becomes an important plot point in the novel is that it just so happens to catch Oedipa's attention. In a sense, it is the least absurd thing she sees in The Scope, and this *is why she pays attention to it: the lettering is too conventional and the message too predictable for Kirby to be sincere.*

Back in the bar, Fallopian explains that his group has been developing an alternative **postal** system, in part by sending letters through Yoyodyne. The problem is that they have nothing to send or say to one another—Fallopian shows Oedipa and Metzger the letter he has just received, which is from a friend who asks how he's doing and whether he's progressing on his book. Fallopian explains that he is researching private mail systems in the 1800s, because he thinks that the government postal service is an unjust monopoly that abused its power and caused the Civil War.

Fallopian's underground postal system, which reflects his search for an alternative to mainstream institutions and systems of government, is highly contradictory. The postal system is one of the most functional, mundane, and broadly accepted aspects of American government: there are myriad other causes for legitimate rebels to take up in the 1960s. The fact that Fallopian and his colleagues exchange empty messages shows both the pointlessness of their system and the emptiness of their relationships. Additionally, although it is supposed to be an underground alternative to ordinary institutions, the postal system actually relies completely upon Yoyodyne, the massive militaristic defense corporation that Fallopian himself works for. Accordingly, while Fallopian and his colleagues pretend to be rebels, they are actually supporting the system they are rebelling against.

The narrator explains that this conversation with Mike Fallopian is Oedipa's first taste of the mysterious Tristero. The truth unfolds for her over time, like a performance. Its continues with a trip with Metzger and the Paranoids to the Fangoso Lagoons neighborhood that Inverarity built. On the **drive** over, Oedipa thinks about how the Pacific Ocean redeems humankind's excesses on land. When they arrive, they find their way to the manmade Lake Inverarity, which has an island with a beautiful social hall in the middle. To get there, the group decides to hijack one of the many boats docked nearby.

Although the reader still has not been acquainted with the Tristero, Pynchon again foreshadows its role in the novel's plot. By self-consciously comparing Oedipa's belief in the Tristero to a performance, the novel again calls attention to the similarity between the construction of a narrative (like this very novel) and the process of developing a theory or perspective about the world. It's deeply ironic that Fangoso Lagoons is totally artificial when it is right next to the Pacific Ocean: this suggests that people are choosing cheap, spruced-up imitations of reality over reality itself. Accordingly, Oedipa and her crew are deprived of a day in nature, at the beach, and instead end up in something closer to an amusement park. Built to imitate reality, Fangoso Lagoons ends up actually debasing or devaluing it.

Manny Di Presso, the lawyer-turned-actor who works with Metzger, suddenly jumps out from under a tarp and boards the boat. He needs to cross the lake, and two men in gray suits are pursuing him. While the Paranoids sing, Di Presso explains that the mafia is after him and that he's planning to sue Pierce Inverarity's estate. Before he can continue further, the boat reaches the island, and the group climbs up onto the social hall's roof to have a picnic. Then, Di Presso explains that Tony Jaguar, his client in the mafia, is after him because he is broke and cannot loan Tony any money. Tony is suing Inverarity because he sold Inverarity some human **bones** for his Beaconsfield cigarettes, but Inverarity never paid Tony.

Manny Di Presso literally jumps into the novel without warning or context, and he briefly turns the story into an exaggerated parody of a Hollywood mob movie. Similarly, Tony Jaguar's dispute with Inverarity over bones parodies the cruelty of profit-minded businesspeople, whether real estate tycoons or mobsters. Di Presso's appearance—like those of Fangoso Lagoons, Beaconsfield cigarettes, and so many other coincidences—is utterly absurd and implausible outside fiction. In fact, it serves to parody the very tropes of fiction. The novel is a kind of closed system in which everything seems to be connected but nothing can explain why. In this way, the plot itself mirrors Oedipa's feeling of being trapped and confused in a tower, like Rapunzel, suggesting that objective meaning or truth is impossible to deduce.

Oedipa asks where the **bones** for Beaconsfield cigarettes came from. Metzger suggests that they have to dig up cemeteries to build highways like the East San Narciso **Freeway**, but Di Presso explains that the bones were really from the Lago di Pietà in Italy, where there was a long siege during World War II. The Germans killed off a group of stranded American troops, then dumped their bodies in the lake. Thinking he could get someone to pay for the bones, Tony Jaguar had them dug up and sent to the United States, where they ended up in Beaconsfield cigarettes. Metzger triumphantly points out that Inverarity invested in the company that designed the filters, not Beaconsfield, which actually bought the bones.

Both of the theories about the source of the Beaconsfield bones are equally outrageous and inhumane: they violate people's common sense that the dead are sacred and should not be tampered with. If the bones are the remains of the past, then Tony Jaguar and Inverarity are essentially selling history out for the sake of their profits. At the same time, the novel makes it clear that this kind of exploitation is a principle of the post-World War II American economy. Indeed, the notion that soldiers' bones are being turned into consumer goods can be taken as a metaphor for the way in which the horrible violence of World War II ended up jumpstarting the American economy, eventually creating millionaires like Pierce Inverarity. It starts to look like the whole system profits from violence.

Miles and one of the other Paranoids' girlfriends comment that the story about the **bones** reminds them of *The Courier's Tragedy*, a play they saw recently. Di Presso freaks out because he didn't think the Paranoids were listening to his conversation, and then he realizes that the men in the gray suits are coming after him in a boat. He runs off, commandeers the boat that the group hijacked, and disappears, leaving the rest stuck on the island.

The connection between the Beaconsfield cigarettes and The Courier's Tragedy *again suggests a deeper, more sinister meaning to Oedipa. Ironically enough, Di Presso is frantically paranoid, while the actual* Paranoids *are totally relaxed. As always, there is no genuine connection between the novel's characters here: everyone is living in their own world, and while these different worlds coexist, they do not seem to affect one another at all. Of course, the exception is that Di Presso strands the rest on the island—but fortunately, they do not seem to care much.*

Oedipa, Metzger, and the Paranoids eventually get off the island after they get the neighborhood security force's attention that night. All afternoon, the **marijuana**-smoking Paranoids try to explain the complicated plot of *The Courier's Tragedy*. Confused, Oedipa decides to just go and see the play, which is being put on by a struggling local theater company. Although it is all in a Shakespearean dialect of "Transplanted Middle Western Stage British," Oedipa is entranced by *The Courier's Tragedy*. Written by the 17th-century writer Richard Wharfinger, it is set during a "preapocalyptic, death-wishful" civil war in Italy.

Too high to get their story straight, the Paranoids again embody stereotypes of 1960s counterculture. In fact, this counterculture became part of the mainstream only because so many people (like the Paranoids) started imitating it. After leaving the Paranoids behind, Oedipa gets "transplanted" into another exaggerated stereotype of the past: a Shakespearean-type drama by a fictional playwright. Readers are likely to assume that, as with any story-within-a-story, Wharfinger's play will make some symbolic commentary on the novel as a whole. It's clear that Oedipa also sees Cold War America as "preapocalyptic [and] death-wishful," but it will be up to her (and the reader) to determine how much of the rest of the play is truly meaningful, and how much is simply distracting.

The excessively complicated plot of *The Courier's Tragedy* centers on the ruling families of two Italian duchies, Squamuglia and Faggio. Ten years before the play starts, Angelo, the malicious Duke of Squamuglia, plotted to kills the Duke of Faggio and his young son Niccolò. This would allow Angelo's ally, the Duke of Faggio's illegitimate son Pasquale, to take power. Angelo successfully killed the Duke of Faggio, but a dissident named Ercole secretly saved Niccolò, who started plotting his revenge after Pasquale took power.

Although The Courier's Tragedy *is Pynchon's satirical take on Jacobean literature, it certainly resembles real plays from the early 17th century. In particular, it likely reminds many readers of struggling through Shakespeare—who is famously remembered for using the play-within-a-play technique to make metafictional commentary on his own works. Like the novel itself, the plot of* The Courier's Tragedy *is rife with twists that are hard to follow. It dares readers to make connections and look for clues linking Niccolò's disinheritance and resistance to Oedipa's quest, but any such connections will ultimately be tenuous and unproveable.*

After explaining this lengthy backstory, an adult Niccolò reveals that he is working in disguise at Duke Angelo's court in Squamuglia. Angelo refuses to use the **postal** company Thurn and Taxis, which is dominant throughout Europe, because he does not want to reveal that he is secretly corresponding with Pasquale. So Thurn and Taxis hires Niccolò as a "special courier" to lobby on their behalf in Squamuglia. Meanwhile, to unite Squamuglia and Faggio under his rule, Duke Angelo tries to marry his sister Francesca to Duke Pasquale, who happens to be Francesca's son. Francesca objects to the incest, even though she also happens to be having sex with Angelo, her brother.

Mistaken identity, disinheritance, sexual taboos, and, above all, mail end up being major tropes in The Courier's Tragedy, *just like in the novel as a whole. It is possible to draw easy comparisons between the play and the novel—Angelo's secret postal company is like Mike Fallopian's, for instance, and Niccolò fighting for his birthright mirrors Oedipa's attempts to sort through Inverarity's will, which she would have inherited if she'd married him. But it is much harder to tell whether these parallels are meaningful or just red herrings (misleading clues).*

The rest of the first act of *The Courier's Tragedy*, as well as all of Acts Two and Three, consists of graphic scenes of medieval torture and murder. First, Ercole tortures a friend who tried to betray Niccolò. In Act Two, Angelo's men torture and kill a priest who objects to the incestuous marriage between Francesca and Pasquale, and Niccolò learns that a group of 50 Faggian knights mysteriously disappeared just before Angelo poisoned the Duke of Faggio. In Act Three, Ercole's allies interrupt Pasquale during an orgy and torture and murder him, which leads to a man named Gennaro taking power.

These scenes of violence add little to the play besides brutality—they seem purposefully excessive and gratuitous. Interestingly, like in Cashiered, *all the violence in* The Courier's Tragedy *dramatized onstage, in full view of the audience. But in the rest of the novel, violence is hidden or presented as something more noble than what it is. For instance, Yoyodyne displays huge missiles outside its headquarters, Manny Di Presso runs off to confront his pursuers, and Pynchon constantly makes veiled references to the Vietnam War. Later incidents of violence both happen "off-camera," so to speak, as Oedipa hears about the events from someone else. Although their environment is built to carefully hide it, Pynchon's characters are really surrounded by violence—both physical conflict and the gradual erosion of humanity due to everyone and everything becoming a source of profit.*

After the intermission, in Act Four, Angelo learns that Niccolò is really alive and that Gennaro is planning to attack Squamuglia. He sends a cryptic **letter** for Gennaro with the official courier from Thurn and Taxis—who happens to be Niccolò. When Angelo soon learns about Niccolò's true identity, he starts planning to kill him, but he strangely refuses to say who he is sending to commit the deed and shares an unusual moment of silence with everyone on stage. When Gennaro and his army learn that Niccolò is coming, they respond with the same uncomfortable silence.

The cryptic message and the strange moments of silence onstage are examples of signs that draw Oedipa in and practically beg to be incorporated into her conspiracy theory. But precisely because these things are intangible to the audience, she does not know what they mean—whatever Angelo and Gennaro reference seems to be somehow outside the closed world of the play. But the weight that they give this mysterious figure suggests that it has to mean something.

Meanwhile, at the same lake where Faggio's soldiers disappeared, Niccolò reads Angelo's letter to Gennaro and realizes that he is about to win back his rightful place as the Duke of Faggio. Then, he falls into the same awkward silence as Angelo's court and Gennaro's army, and he starts stuttering, "T-t-t-t-t…" Three limber men dressed in black leotards inexplicably run onstage.

The Courier's Tragedy *starts revolving around the mysterious character or force that nobody is willing to name. When Angelo gets killed, it becomes impossible for the audience to fully understand what is happening without understanding who the mysterious men are—accordingly, Oedipa starts to feel like everyone else is "in" on a conspiracy that only she doesn't know about.*

Later, Gennaro and his men find Niccolò's body at the lake and share another moment of suspicious, uncharacteristic silence. They realize that Angelo's letter has transformed into a confession. Among other things, Angelo admits to killing Faggio's soldiers, dumping them in the lake, retrieving their **bones**, and then turning them into charcoal—which eventually became the very ink that he used to write his **letters**. The soldiers say a prayer, and Gennaro laments that Niccolò has died after a "tryst with Trystero." Oedipa realizes that this is the name nobody was willing to say, but she doesn't yet understand that it will be the next clue in her quest.

Although Oedipa finally gets to witness the rehashed version of Manny Di Presso's story that the Paranoids first told her about, now she is confronted with a far more pressing mystery. At last, the reader hears a version of the name that the narrator has repeatedly argued will be central to the novel's plot: "Trystero." Neither Oedipa nor the reader seems to understand why *Trystero is so important, but both must proceed with the assumption that it is—and that it's their job is to figure out why. In other words, the reader's sense of the novel's world is now anchored around the central concept of Trystero. Acting as literary detectives of sorts, Oedipa and the reader now know that Trystero is somehow the answer to their question—they just have to figure out what question they are supposed to be asking.*

The play's last act just shows Gennaro's army slaughtering Angelo and everyone who works for him. Everybody dies except Gennaro himself, who is played by the play's director, Randolph Driblette. Oedipa insists on meeting Driblette backstage after the play to ask about the **bones**. Metzger mocks her for caring so much about an unsolved mystery from World War II, 20 years ago. He waits in the **car** while Oedipa goes to investigate the possible connection between the play and the Lago di Pietà.

After the play returns to the gratuitous violence of its earlier scenes, Oedipa returns to the unresolved coincidence that initially brought her to see the play. It is significant that the lone survivor is at once the director, the actor who spoke the line about "Trystero," and a character who gets the Dukedom that everyone has been fighting over, but whose relationship to the rest of the characters is never actually defined. This contrasts with Oedipa's own storyline: while she's tasked with distributing Pierce Inverarity's estate according to his legitimate will, the play ends with Gennaro inheriting something that should not be his at all. Although never fully explained, this rogue corruption of normal inheritance procedures in the play suggests that Oedipa, in turn, might have the power to do more than just blindly fulfill the procedures set out for her as executor.

Oedipa meets Driblette in his dressing room. Although he insists that the play "isn't literature" and "doesn't mean anything," Oedipa asks him for a script. He points her to a filing cabinet, but the documents inside are old and stained. Driblette explains that he found the original script at Zapf's Used Books, in an anthology called *Jacobean Revenge Plays*. There was another copy, so he tells Oedipa to look for it there. He complains how people are seeking out this original text, probably for some academic analysis, and then looks at Oedipa the same way that the actors looked at one another instead of naming Niccolò's assassins—Trystero.

Oedipa assumes that, as the play's director, Driblette must have some insight into its fundamental meaning. However, Driblette totally ridicules Oedipa, talks past her, and rejects her idea. He insists that his creative control does not give him a monopoly on deciding the work's meaning. At the same time, he also rejects Oedipa's presumption that the absolute meaning of a play must instead reside in its original written script. In fact, by boldly suggesting that that his play "isn't literature" and "doesn't mean anything," Driblette offers a theory of meaning and interpretation that is completely opposite to Oedipa's. While Oedipa thinks that the clues she encounters hold some definite meaning that needs to be uncovered, Driblette thinks that people interpret works of art however they want—but this does not make them any one person more or less right than anyone else. Pynchon clearly wants the reader to ask the same questions of his novel: should it be treated as literature, and does it mean anything at all?

Oedipa asks about the mysterious silences surrounding Trystero, and Driblette explains that it was his idea. In fact, the assassins did not even come onstage in the original script. He tells Oedipa that he invented the real version of the play, projecting it out like a projection of the universe on the dome of a planetarium. Oedipa asks him why he changed the script, but Driblette continues saying that words are not as real as things. Even if Oedipa spends her whole life trying to explain Trystero's role in the play, he declares, she will "never touch the truth." Oedipa gives up and leaves, then realizes that she completely forgot to ask about the **bones**. She meets Metzger in his **car**, where he is listening to Mucho on KCUF.

Even after disavowing the very notion of meaning in literature, Driblette explicitly takes credit for the play's greatest mystery. But he frustratingly refuses to explain himself, just like his actors did throughout the play. This sets off Oedipa's mental alarm bells: where everyone else says that there is nothing, she sees a hidden conspiracy. So when Driblette says that she will "never touch the truth," he seems to be saying that there is *no truth—but in this message, Oedipa hears that the truth is buried so deep that she will have to go to great lengths if she wants to uncover it. In fact, this very misunderstanding shows how all language is inevitably open to distortion and multiple interpretations. Meanwhile, it's significant that Metzger is listening to Mucho on the radio: it draws an explicit link between the two men, who seem to treat Oedipa with equal amounts of indifference and disdain. Additionally, Oedipa's husband seems to only drop into her world through his job in the media. Much like Oedipa first got to know Metzger by listening to him talk incessantly about his movie, this shows how Oedipa and Mucho's marriage is also largely dependent upon mass media (the radio station), which acts as a kind of buffer or mediator between them.*

CHAPTER 4

The narrator declares that, beyond Mike Fallopian and *The Courier's Tragedy*, other elements of Oedipa's world will gradual start becoming "woven into The Tristero." After looking over Pierce Inverarity's will, Oedipa decides to visit Yoyodyne. She attends a stockholders' meeting full of old men who spend an hour talking business and an hour singing songs about the company and the weapons it's developing. Then, Oedipa goes on a tour with the elderly stockholders, but she gets lost among the Yoyodyne office workers and starts wandering around, looking for an exit.

The reference to weaving elements of the world together "into The Tristero" directly recalls the Remedios Varo painting Oedipa reflected on in the Chapter 1. In this painting, several women weave together an enormous cloth, which contains the whole world and spills out of the tower where the women are trapped. The metaphor is clear: Oedipa, feeling trapped as though in a tower, is weaving the clues she encounters into the massive Tristero conspiracy that is gradually coming to define her world. The Yoyodyne stockholders meeting is jarring because it pairs the seriousness of destructive military technology with the inane childishness of elderly stockholders singing songs about their own greatness. Pynchon is clearly suggesting that the people who hold power in America are foolish and comically incapable of wielding power responsibly. Given that Pynchon served in the navy and worked at Boeing, he may have considered this sentiment particularly true of the men who ran the Cold War military-industrial complex.

Oedipa notices that one off the employees, a very young man named Stanley Koteks, is drawing the same **trumpet-like symbol** that she saw in the message from Kirby on the bathroom wall at The Scope. Oedipa clumsily tells Stanley that Kirby sent her and then explains that she's a company stockholder. He asks if she can get the Yoyodyne management to stop taking patent rights away from engineers. Hoping to provoke him, Oedipa declares that individual engineers don't invent anything anymore, but Stanley insists that "teamwork" is just an excuse for people who are afraid to take risks.

Another unlikely coincidence convinces Oedipa that her investigation must be on the right track. Struggling to find the words to suggest that she is already in on the conspiracy, Oedipa instead ends up introducing herself as one of the stockholders—the exact people she and Stanley both despise. Stanley's disdain for "teamwork" suggests that his job designing weapons is alienating and unsatisfying (much like Mucho's job at the radio). But it also aligns him with the classic trope of the solitary genius inventor, totally cut off from the world, who singlehandedly changes it from the outside. Clearly, Oedipa is suspicious about such straightforward theories of invention and authorship—after all, she is busy investigating what she conceives as a complex underground network of conspirators.

Stanley shows Oedipa the patent for John Nefastis's **Nefastis Machine**, a box connected to two pistons, with a bearded man on the outside. This man is the scientist James Clerk Maxwell, who famously thought that the second law of thermodynamics could be violated if some demon managed to sort hot from cold air inside a box. This would reduce entropy and create a difference in temperature that could, say, power a perpetual motion machine. By staring at Maxwell on the Nefastis Machine, Stanley declares, some people can control which of the two pistons will rise. Oedipa ponders her bizarre luck: among all the engineers surrounding her, she had to choose the crazy one.

Like Stanley Koteks, John Nefastis also clearly imagines himself as a misunderstood solitary genius—he believes in his mystical machine even though he claims that it violates the basic laws of physics. Unsatisfied with their day jobs, it seems, Koteks and Nefastis take a religious kind of faith in their bizarre scientific experiments. Although the book's symbolic discussion of entropy is incredibly complex and open to interpretation, the second law of thermodynamics states that entropy never decreases over time, which means that hot air should spread out evenly through Nefastis's box. Nefastis's desire to sort the air inside the box back into separate hot and cold sections can be seen as a metaphor for Oedipa's desire to define her individual identity and escape the seemingly entropic world, in which things grow more homogeneous and uniform over time. The sealed system of the box itself can be seen as representing the closed, interconnected worlds of American society and the novel itself.

Stanley explains that only special "sensitives" can make the Nefastis **Machine** work, and Oedipa could get in touch with Nefastis in San Francisco at a certain **P.O. box** if she wanted to try. To take down Nefastis's address, Oedipa opens her journal to a page where she has drawn the **hornlike symbol** from The Scope and written, "*Shall I project a world?*" Stanley Koteks suddenly grows suspicious and tells her that he was giving her the wrong address. Oedipa asks about the WASTE address from the bathroom wall, but Stanley tells her that it's pronounced as an acronym—W.A.S.T.E. Then, he returns to his work and starts ignoring her.

*Stanley seems to be part of the conspiracy that Oedipa is searching for but unable to learn anything about. In fact, her question "*Shall I project a world?*" deals precisely with the question of how she can make sense of the conspiracy that she cannot prove. She recognizes that all she has is her own perception of the mystery—she cannot verify any of her clues beyond her own perception. This is how all interpretation works, including how people form a sense of reality and interpret literature. Indeed, Oedipa's line about projection is a direct reference to her conversation with Randolph Driblette after* The Courier's Tragedy, *when Driblette said that he created the play like a projection that brings the universe to life in a planetarium. His interpretation of* The Courier's Tragedy *is just one version—similarly, Oedipa's projection of the conspiracy is just one among many coherent perspectives on it. An audience can only ever come up with one among many valid interpretations of what a piece of literature or art* means.

After a few days, Oedipa sees Mike Fallopian at The Scope. He tells her that Stanley Koteks is part of an underground network of disgruntled scientists who grew up thinking they could be great, independent inventors. Then, the scientists realized that being an engineer now means working in a team for a corporation that ultimately takes all the credit and reaps all the rewards.

Fallopian lends credibility to Oedipa's suspicions about Stanley Koteks, whose underground movement is just as futile as Fallopian's own secret postal system. Whether they like it or not, both are doing Yoyodyne's bidding, and their personal political and scientific commitments will never reverse this fact.

While Metzger and Fallopian get into an argument about patent rights and politics, Oedipa thinks about the other clues that have pointed her towards the truth. For instance, next to the lake in Fangoso Lagoons, there was a small monument to Wells, Fargo postmen killed by unidentified bandits dressed in black. Apparently, one of the victims traced out a cross—which reminds Oedipa of Niccolò's stuttered "T-t-t-t-t…" in *The Courier's Tragedy*.

The event memorialized at Fangoso Lagoons clearly seems like a real-life parallel to Niccolò's murder in Driblette's version of the play, just like the soldiers' bones in the Italian lake after World War II recall the soldiers' bones in the Italian lake onstage. As these stories strangely cross over from fact to fiction, it seems increasingly possible that The Courier's Tragedy *was somehow based on real events. When Oedipa relates Niccolò stuttering "T-t-t-t-t…" to the cross on the ground, what she means is that both might be sending a signal about Tristero.*

Oedipa tries to contact Driblette to ask him about the marker in Fangoso Lagoons, but he never answers. She visits Zapf's Used Books and buys *Jacobean Revenge Plays*—the proprietor says she's not the only one to look for it. Oedipa looks to the passage that mentions Trystero and sees a note in pencil about a variant in the 1687 edition of the play. She sees that the play's text has been copied from another 1957 anthology. The L.A. library does not have a copy, so Oedipa plans to visit the publisher—and maybe also John Nefastis—up in Berkeley.

Just as the reader starts resembling Oedipa by trying to piece together the mysteries of Tristero and Pierce Inverarity along with her, Oedipa starts to resemble the reader, hunting for clues in obscure details of a book. The conflicting editions recall Randolph Driblette's belief that a performance captures the truth of a work of art just as much as an original text—in this case, there is not even an authoritative original version to consult. The multiple versions all seem equally legitimate to Oedipa, much like she can find multiple reasonable explanations for all the clues she encounters and interpret the conspiracy as a whole in various conflicting (but equally legitimate) ways.

In fact, the narrator explains, Oedipa first saw the marker in Fangoso Lagoons when she went there as part of her attempt to visit all of Inverarity's scattered businesses and investments. The day after, she went to a retirement home that he built. Inside, a nurse viciously pursues a fly, and an elderly man named Mr. Thoth tells Oedipa about his grandfather, a **mail** courier on the Pony Express who loved murdering Native Americans. In his dreams, Thoth mixes a scene from a Porky Pig cartoon with a story about his grandfather defeating a group of bandits with "a Mexican name" that he can't remember. He shows Oedipa a gold ring that his grandfather cut off of one of these people's fingers: it has the W.A.S.T.E. **horn symbol** on it.

Given all her concerns about secret mail systems and obscure 17th-century plays, it is easy to forget that Oedipa actually came to San Narciso to execute Pierce Inverarity's last will and testament. Strangely enough, the reader has not learned anything about what is actually in this will—only that Pierce seemed to own absolutely everything in San Narciso. Mr. Thoth's ring and story are perfectly consistent with the other tales of bandits that Oedipa has come across so far, and Trystero could certainly be "a Mexican name." Just as experience is refracted through fiction in The Courier's Tragedy, *history gets filtered through dreams for Mr. Thoth. Crucially, Thoth is the Ancient Greek name for the Egyptian scribe-god who invented writing. This suggests that the elderly Mr. Thoth somehow represents the written or historical record, the process that allows past information to be passed down to the present.*


Oedipa visits Mike Fallopian, since the history of 19th-century **mail** carriers is his specialty. Fallopian laments that there is no solid evidence about bandits attacking them, although he suspects that the national government might have hired them to reinforce its monopoly. He also knows nothing about the W.A.S.T.E. **horn symbol**.

Although Oedipa initially saw Fallopian as an unstable conspiracy theorist when she met him in the previous chapter, now she is much further down the rabbit-hole than he is—especially as an expert on the precise subject of her conspiracy theory. Or there is another option: Fallopian might actually be part of the conspiracy.

Next, Oedipa visits Genghis Cohen, a local stamp expert whom Metzger has asked to evaluate Pierce Inverarity's stamp collection. He calls and asks her to visit one day to settle some "irregularities," and when she arrives, he serves her **wine** made from dandelions that grew in the old cemetery that has been demolished to make way for the East San Narciso **Freeway**. Oedipa knows that this is a clue, but she still has no idea what it points to. She starts to wonder if she will ever figure it out at all.

Again, in the remarkably closed system of Southern California, the novel returns to a seemingly irrelevant detail from the previous chapter: the cemetery that was torn up to build the East San Narciso Freeway. Oedipa does not know how to make sense of this detail in the context of her conspiracy theory, but its message about the world she lives in is clear. The destruction of the cemetery shows how post-World War II America ruthlessly discounts the value of everything that stands in the way of efficiency and profit—including the bones of the dead. Unlike the dandelions, the highway prioritizes function at the expense of beauty. And now, just like the bones in The Courier's Tragedy *and Beaconsfield cigarettes, the cemetery's dandelions have been turned into human consumer goods. When this process converts the flowers' physical components into something worth buying, their aesthetic and sacred value gets totally erased.*

Cohen shows her what he finds peculiar about one of the stamps: its is printed with the mysterious W.A.S.T.E. **symbol** as a watermark. Another stamp, from Germany, says "Thurn und Taxis." Cohen explains that Thurn and Taxis was Europe's dominant **mail** carrier from 1300 to 1867, and he shows Oedipa the stamp's watermark, which is a post horn very similar to the W.A.S.T.E. symbol. In fact, the W.A.S.T.E. symbol just has one more shape next to the horn, and Cohen suggests that this is a mute. Oedipa thinks this makes sense, since whoever is behind W.A.S.T.E. is clearly trying to "mute the Thurn and Taxis post horn."

Just like the masked bandits from The Courier's Tragedy *unexpectedly showed up in the Fangoso Lagoons monument and in Mr. Thoth's story, now the real historical company of Thurn and Taxis turns out to have an important connection to the mystery of W.A.S.T.E. Even more importantly, it becomes clear that Pierce Inverarity himself was somehow involved with W.A.S.T.E., whether intentionally or not. (He might have been part of its network, collected its stamps as keepsakes, or unknowingly bought its forgeries.) Cohen finally solves the mystery of the muted trumpet symbol for Oedipa, and this suggests some kind of rivalry between W.A.S.T.E. and Thurn and Taxis. The only problem is that W.A.S.T.E. exists in the 1960s, and Thurn and Taxis shut down a century prior.*

Because of the watermarks, Cohen continues, the stamps are clearly counterfeit. But he might still be able to sell them—someone might even want to collect them, knowing that they are false. The Pony Express stamp also has a peculiar black feather added to the image, as do seven others, and a mysterious typo: "U.S. *Potsage*," instead of "U.S. *Postage*." Oedipa tells Cohen that she saw the same thing on her **letter** from Mucho.

It is significant that W.A.S.T.E. and its counterfeit stamps actually lead Oedipa to a landmark discovery in her quest: both the association and its stamps are inherently associated with trash, which is seen as having no real value. And yet they are far more valuable to Oedipa than the real, official versions would be. The typo replacing "Postage" *with* "Potsage" *suggests that Mucho might even know something about W.A.S.T.E.—after all, he and Oedipa scarcely know about each other's lives, so she probably wouldn't know if he were involved in it. This raises the curious possibility that the letter Oedipa received at the beginning of Chapter 3 was actually sent by W.A.S.T.E. In other words, even* Oedipa *could be in on the conspiracy without really knowing it.*

Genghis Cohen notes that these eight forgeries span from 1893 to 1954, and he wonders if they might even go back to Thurn and Taxis—even to the 13th century. Oedipa tells him about all the other clues she has discovered, and Cohen declares that the fraudsters must still be going. Oedipa asks if they should report their findings, and Cohen suddenly gets nervous—when she asks him about W.A.S.T.E., he's clearly no longer interested in answering her questions, and he starts talking about the dandelion **wine**.

Cohen proposes that the W.A.S.T.E. conspiracy might be unimaginably vast, which suddenly makes it seem both less likely and more important than before. Like Stanley Koteks's reaction when Oedipa showed him her journal and the actors' reaction onstage during The Courier's Tragedy *whenever the mysterious Trystero assassins were mentioned, Cohen's silence about W.A.S.T.E. seems like a possible admission of guilt—but Oedipa is still guessing. Ultimately, while Oedipa now has a far clearer and more complete picture of the mystery she has been trying to solve, this does not resolve her doubts—it only intensifies her desire to find the pieces that are still missing.*

CHAPTER 5

Oedipa **drives** to Berkeley to investigate the Wharfinger play and the inventor John Nefastis. Metzger does not mind her going, and she does not stop at Kinneret-Among-the-Pines, even though it is on her way. In Berkeley, Oedipa checks into a grandiose hotel that is hosting a conference for deaf-mute people. She has a vague nightmare about the mirror in her room, and then she dreams of having sex with Mucho on a beach.

Oedipa's decision not to visit home clearly shows that her time away has not warmed her up to the idea of dealing with Mucho or briefly returning to the drudgery of her life as a housewife. Meanwhile, her new hotel's deaf-mute conference shows how people can develop alternative ways to communicate when they are unable to use more common methods. This gestures to the underground mail system Oedipa seems to be investigating, which is literally an alternative to ordinary communication mechanisms for people, as well as the general breakdown in communication among the novel's characters, who spend much of the book talking past one another. Oedipa's nightmare about the mirror recalls the last time she checked into a hotel (Echo Courts) and promptly shattered the bathroom mirror. Like the part of her dream about Mucho, this nightmare about the mirror suggests that she is afraid of repeating her past.

The next day, Oedipa visits Lectern Press in search of their original anthology, and she eventually finds a copy in their warehouse later that afternoon. But the line about Trystero is gone, replaced with a totally different couplet. A footnote in the book explains that Wharfinger's original line may have been changed for legal reasons, and it also notes that the dubious, fragmented Whitechapel edition of the play included a line about a "tryst or odious awry." Although one scholar has said that this is a play on "trystero *dies irae*," the Lectern anthology notes that "trystero" is not actually a word and concludes that this version of the line was just one of the Whitechapel edition's numerous errors.

"Tryst or odious awry" simply implies that something goes wrong when Niccolò dies, and "trystero dies irae*" specifically recalls the Latin funeral mass* Dies irae*, which is about Judgment Day. Oedipa's failure to find the original source of the "tryst with Trystero" line has two main effects. First, it shows her that there is no authoritative, pure, original version of the play that is more "real" than the others—indeed, the footnotes she finds explicitly point out the way past versions of the play have been intentionally altered. Secondly, these old editions seem to be trying to erase the word "Trystero," which naturally raises suspicion about whether* The Courier's Tragedy *has perhaps been carefully edited throughout history in order to hide the existence of this Trystero organization. As with so many of Oedipa's other clues, the discrepancies in these versions of* The Courier's Tragedy *either provide evidence against the existence of the conspiracy* or *show how far the conspirators have gone to hide their actions. In other words, as the evidence against it piles up, the conspiracy continues to grow larger and larger.*

Oedipa goes to inquire with Professor Emory Bortz, the author of the book's introduction, who supposedly teaches at the University of California nearby. When she arrives, the department informs her that Bortz has left and moved to—of all places—San Narciso. Oedipa walks through the Berkeley campus feeling insecure and irrelevant, as she went to college in an era of conformity, not protest and freethinking. She wonders how her peculiar, random path through life led her to this moment—where her life revolves around figuring out one word from an obscure 17th-century play.

When Oedipa learns that Bortz is teaching back in San Narciso, the bitter irony bothers her, but it does not at all surprise her. By this point, bizarre coincidences have become commonplace. Walking through the University of California, Berkeley—a famous hotbed of student activism in the 1960s—Oedipa realizes that she is utterly boring and conservative. Seeing how much one's generation shapes one's character, she starts to admit that she has had virtually no control over the person she has become.

Oedipa looks up John Nefastis in the phone book and visits him at his apartment. He starts by offhandedly mentioning his interest in underage girls; then, he shows Oedipa his **machine** and explains the balance between heat and communication entropy in a complicated way that Oedipa does not completely understand. Nefastis believes that the demon in the box is real and that it communicates with "sensitive" people. Oedipa stares at the picture of Maxwell and wonders if he even believed in the demon. After most of an hour, the box still hasn't moved, and Oedipa starts breaking down in frustration. Nefastis holds her and proposes that they have sex while listening to the evening news, but Oedipa promptly runs outside and **drives** away.

Curiously, Nefastis's machine has absolutely nothing to do with W.A.S.T.E. or Tristero. Rather, it merely shows Oedipa that Nefastis's strange magic will not cure her stagnation and inability to communicate with others. The closed system of Nefastis's box can only function if it is connected to some outside source—in other words, if it is not truly closed at all. Indeed, Nefastis clearly forgets that Maxwell's Demon is a thought experiment, not a real being, which suggests that he has lost track of the rational thinking that is supposed to be the foundation of science. Nefastis's sexuality also points to social breakdown: his sexual interest in young girls immediately associates him with Mucho, and his clumsy proposition to Oedipa at the end of her visit shows that, like the rest of the book's male characters, he only sees her as a sexual object. He has no genuine interest in communication with her, as shown by his desire to have sex with her while paying attention to the news—much like Oedipa and Metzger's relationship is initially based entirely on his old movie. In short, Nefastis wants Oedipa to help him play out the escapism he seeks through television.

Oedipa suddenly realizes that she is crossing the Bay Bridge into **hazy** San Francisco, and she starts to try and connect the web of evidence she has assembled around Trystero. She knows it functioned in parallel to Thurn and Taxis, battled Wells, Fargo and the Pony Express, and is still being used to communicate by several people around her. But she could also be imagining it.

Oedipa starts to question the entire conspiracy theory she has spent the last two chapters weaving: the larger her conspiracy gets, the more she begins to realize that it could simply be a figment of her imagination. Like San Narciso's smog, San Francisco's haze is a visual representation of Oedipa's sense of disconnection from the world. As the result of automobile pollution, it makes a clear metaphorical connection between consumer capitalism, the spiritually empty world it creates, and Oedipa's sense of despair.

Oedipa decides to spend the rest of the day in San Francisco and see if she can totally forget Trystero for awhile. While she is walking around, a man gets off a tourist party bus and sticks his nametag on her chest. It says "HI! MY NAMEIS *Arnold Snarb*! AND I'M LOOKIN' FOR A GOOD TIME!" Oedipa gets caught up in the crowd of revelers and swept into The Greek Way, a gay bar, where the tour guide excitedly tells the group that they are about to see an authentic slice of San Francisco's famous gay culture.

Oedipa realizes that her thirst for conspiracy is just one of various reasonable perspectives on all the clues she has encountered. Therefore, she makes a conscious effort to change her perspective and see if she can make herself interpret things in a different way. When she tries to take this fresh perspective, she even gets a new identity, ending up on a tour that essentially turns other people's identities into a tourist attraction. Like Fangoso Lagoons, The Greek Way becomes prized for the concept it represents to people—not what it actually is.

In The Greek Way, Oedipa ends up with a **drink**, chatting with a man who is wearing a lapel pin of the Trystero **horn symbol**. She asks him about Thurn and Taxis and the U.S. **Mail** service, but he asks her why she is named Arnold Snarb and promises that he is not gay. Eventually, Oedipa just tells him everything she has found out about Trystero so far, and the man reveals that his muted horn pin means he is a member of the Inamorati Anonymous, a support group for people who want to cure their addiction to love. Their mission is to help people avoid falling in love or learn not to pursue it. Accordingly, they have to do everything over the phone and can never talk to the same person twice—lest they fall in love.

Oedipa's effort to distance herself from the Trystero conspiracy lasts all of 15 minutes. She can barely contain her suffocating curiosity, and this leads her to overlook the obvious possibility that some of the horn symbols she has found so far are really from the Inamorati Anonymous, not from Tristero. (Kirby's message soliciting sex on the bathroom wall and Stanley Koteks's scribbles in his journal most likely to relate to Inamorati Anonymous.) Oedipa also overlooks the oddity of meeting a straight man hanging out in a gay bar, which is part of the situation's ridiculous humor. The Inamorati Anonymous represent the logical conclusion of the attitudes toward sex and romance that all of this novel's men display to some extent. Everyone in The Crying of Lot 49 *is emotionally and romantically isolated from others, usually because their own fantasies and psychological fixations prevent them from empathizing with others. Inamorati Anonymous twists this loneliness into a virtue, as though there are no benefits to falling in love that could make up for the risk of heartbreak and rejection.*

The founder of the Inamorati Anonymous is a high-ranking Yoyodyne executive who did not know what to do when he lost his job. Unable to make decisions for himself, he put out a newspaper ad asking for advice about whether to kill himself. He got several letters expressing pity and several more from people who tried and failed to kill themselves, including a number delivered personally by a hook-handed bum. But he still couldn't decide until he learned about a Vietnamese monk who burned himself to death in protest. The executive decided to do the same thing, so doused himself in gasoline in his kitchen.

It is not surprising that the Inamorati Anonymous has its roots in Yoyodyne: not only are such coincidences already commonplace in this novel, but Yoyodyne embodies the same ruthlessness worldview that the Inamorati Anonymous is based on. In short, these groups treat emotions as a mere obstacle to success, but they never get around to figuring out what success actually is. The founder was unable to identify himself except through the corporation that employed him and, evidently, did not at all care about his individuality or continued survival. His fate is a parable about the way in which capitalism and corporations devalue people in the quest for profit and efficiency—Yoyodyne's ideal worker is a computer, not a human being. By reaching out through the mail, the executive ensured that any communication he received would stay anonymous and impersonal. And although he planned to self-immolate in protest, he never seems to have figured out what he was trying to say.

Right before lighting himself on fire, the Inamorati Anonymous founder heard his wife entering the house with the man who fired him and having sex with him on the living room rug. When they met the founder in the kitchen, he maniacally laughed and then took his suit off. He saw that the stamps on the gasoline-doused **letters** in his pocket showed the **horn** watermark, and he decided that this was a sign that he had to give up on love for the rest of his life and create a "society of isolates" who would do the same.

The founder appears to have discovered a sense of purpose—his "society of isolates"—only after giving up on his planned act of protest. In fact, the empty relationships among the novel's characters suggest that such a society is already forming without the Inamorati Anonymous's help. Here, it also becomes clear why the Inamorati Anonymous uses the same muted horn symbol as W.A.S.T.E.: just like Oedipa, the founder simply decided that this symbol was an important sign and incorporated it into his worldview. In fact, he seemingly never learned the symbol's original meaning or realized that many people mailed in their responses to his newspaper ad through W.A.S.T.E.

The Inamorati Anonymous member admits that nobody knows who this founder is, but he proposes that Oedipa try to contact the man by means of W.A.S.T.E. He wonders aloud about what W.A.S.T.E. users even have to say to one another. He goes to the bathroom but never comes back, and Oedipa looks at the gay men around her while she contemplates the indifference that all the men in her life seem to feel for her.

The man's question about why people would use W.A.S.T.E. directly recalls Mike Fallopian's underground mail system and implicitly raises the question of whether they might be one and the same. The man's disappearance shows that he is taking his vow of isolation to heart, and Oedipa explicitly connects this to the way that all of the men in the novel—most of all her lovers, Mucho and Metzger—seem to have lost their capacity for human connection.

Oedipa leaves the bar and spends the evening searching San Francisco for any sign of the Trystero **horn symbol**. She sees one on the sidewalk but notices a man in a suit staring at her, so she runs away and boards a bus. Oedipa spends most of the night on buses, slipping in and out of consciousness, but she eventually decides that she will definitely be safe and finally begins to enjoy the sensation of risk. She starts walking again and wonders if her clues will lead her anywhere, or if they are the whole message.

For the first time in the book, Oedipa moves through the world in public spaces—the sidewalk and the bus—rather than in the sealed-off privacy of her car. Caught between hope and paranoia, Oedipa is unsure whether to see the city as a source of salvation or a source of danger. But she recognizes that her sense of safety is within her control, as is her interpretation of all the Trystero clues.

Oedipa meets a group of children in the park who say that they are dreaming, but also that dreaming and being awake are the same thing. Oedipa asks them about the Trystero **symbol**, and they explain that they jump rope in the different parts of the symbol while singing, "*Tristoe, Tristoe, one, two, three, / Turning taxi from across the sea…*"

*Oedipa's dreams and her waking life begin to blend together, showing how her unconscious mind literally shapes her sense of reality. But when she realizes that she is dreaming, this suggests that she is adapting to the knowledge that her perceptions are not the same as absolute reality. Although the Trystero symbol shows up in her dream, it takes a radically different form that is only loosely associated with the W.A.S.T.E. conspiracy. Nevertheless, the children's song has an obvious buried meaning: "*Turning taxis*" is "Thurn and Taxis," and Oedipa will soon learn about Trystero migrating "*from across the sea."

Next, Oedipa meets an old acquaintance, the Mexican activist Jesús Arrabal, who used to run an anarchist group conveniently called the CIA but is now living in exile and running a restaurant. Jesús asks Oedipa about Inverarity, whom he remembers seeing as the perfect enemy. Jesús saw this as a miracle: "another world's intrusion into this one," showing him exactly what he had to destroy. Oedipa wonders whether Jesús would have given up on anarchism had he not met Inverarity, who is really the person linking her and Jesús together. She notices an old anarchist newspaper from 1904 with the post horn **symbol** on it, and Jesús comments that this paper has somehow made it to him 60 years after it was first **mailed** out.

Even though Inverarity is dead, his massive footprint of investments and properties in San Narciso makes it easy to see why he would inspire Arrabal to recommit to overthrowing capitalism. Arrabal's name actually embodies the very theory of miracles that he presents. The name "Jesús" undeniably aligns him with Christ, whose "intrusion into this [world]" is a way of saving it. And an "Arrabal" is a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of the city—a place on the geographical and socioeconomic margins. If salvation comes from the margins, or if miracles are really about the entrance of something that seemed out-of-this-world because it was out of our sight, then Jesús Arrabal suggests that the miracle Oedipa is waiting for will come from the place she is not looking.

Oedipa she sees a group of hoodlums with **the horn symbol** stitched into their jackets at the beach. She sees it scratched into the back of a bus seat with a caption: "DEATH [...] Don't Ever Antagonize The Horn." Oedipa also finds it on the front of an empty laundromat, on a sign promising that anyone who knows the symbol will "know where to find out more." A girl traces out the shape of the horn on the bus, and a man with the symbol in his balance-book loses money in a poker game. Even the Alameda County Death Cult features the horn next to its bathroom-stall ad for a monthly ritual murder. Oedipa dreams of a boy planning to negotiate humankind's transfer of power to the dolphins, asking his mother to write to him through W.A.S.T.E. She sees the symbol several more times throughout the night.

The horn starts appearing in so many places, so conspicuously and so inexplicably, that Oedipa starts to seriously question whether it is as significant as it first appeared. Not only is it impossible to reconcile all these different versions of the horn—it would also be exhausting to do so. And it seems impossible that someone would not have done it before, that its existence would not be common knowledge. Oedipa is again left to wonder: is she missing some interpretive key that explains the whole thing?

In the morning, Oedipa feels defeated, paralyzed by the sheer quantity of clues and the popularity of W.A.S.T.E. Downtown, she sees an elderly sailor with the **symbol** tattooed on his hand crying inside a building. She approaches him, and he gives her a **letter** for his wife, whom he abandoned many years ago. He tells Oedipa to take it under the bridge, and she embraces him. Another old man asks Oedipa to bring the sailor up the stairs, and she does. The other man explains that the sailor went looking for his wife and, as usual, disappeared. Oedipa leads the sailor to his room and imagines helping him finally get to his wife, but the sailor tells her to send the letter. The stamp on it has a small black figure added on.

At first, when Oedipa only had a few clues to fit together, she felt that she was piecing together something significant. But now, as the clues multiply, no one theory holds together. Oedipa is therefore lucky to run into the sailor, whose heartfelt desire to reconnect with his wife shocks Oedipa back into reality. The sailor reminds Oedipa that the world is made of a web of normal relationships among people, even if she is busy looking for a deep conspiracy behind it all. In a way, he shows Oedipa that, although she might be projecting her world, she is still projecting it onto real people. The sailor also represents some fleeting hope for the novel's male characters: in the past, the sailor abandoned his wife (just like so many other men in the novel treat women as disposable). But now, he genuinely regrets what he did—although it is not clear whether this is out of love or mere loneliness.

Oedipa gives the sailor $10, but he complains that he'll spend it on **alcohol**. He asks for a cigarette, and Oedipa imagines him lighting his mattress on fire—and forever erasing all the memories it holds. She sees that the man has delirium tremens, which means he is hallucinating, but this is just another way of saying seeing the world through metaphors. In a split second, Oedipa scans through her own memories and realizes that this man must see things that nobody else ever can.

Although the sailor turns out to be an unruly alcoholic with a sour attitude, Oedipa still sees him as a sort of savior figure (and not only because his letter will connect her to W.A.S.T.E.). Oedipa sees the man's mattress as a metaphor for his memory: while it is soaked through with waste, this waste is proof that the man lived, the mark of his totally individual and irreplaceable existence. Whereas Inverarity leaves behind things but few meaningful memories, Oedipa views the sailor's legacy in terms of his experience and, above all, his story.

Oedipa runs outside and finds the bridge that the sailor told her to seek out. Once she arrives, it takes her an hour to find the green can marked "W.A.S.T.E." She sees someone else leave some **letters** inside, adds her own, and then waits. When a raggedy man picks the letters up, she follows him downtown, where he trades letters with another courier. Oedipa continues following the man across the bay to Oakland, where he passes through a nondescript neighborhood and then ends up, of all places, back at John Nefastis's house.

Oedipa finally gets a chance to confirm the existence of W.A.S.T.E. The system's bins are cleverly disguised to be indistinguishable from ordinary trash cans. And its mail carriers appear to be homeless people, whose social marginalization acts as a perfect disguise. In other words, W.A.S.T.E. is fully coexistent with mainstream America—it is just that people who do not use it do not bother to take notice of it. When Oedipa returns to Nefastis's house in Berkeley, this chapter closes back in on itself. While she desperately yearned for clarity when she first left Nefastis's house, now she has solid evidence of W.A.S.T.E. when she returns to it.

Oedipa goes back to her hotel, where she gets lost in a crowd of **drunk** deaf-mute people. They drag her into a ballroom where couples are dancing "whatever [is] in the fellow's head." She dances with someone for a half hour, then the group mysteriously stops dancing all at once, which gives her the opportunity to go back to her room.

In the hotel, Oedipa confronts a pattern of communication that is totally unfamiliar to her. As with the references to Trystero during The Courier's Tragedy, *everyone else seems to know what is going on, except for her. But this encounter with a radically different kind of perception and communication intrigues her, and it clearly points back to Jesús Arrabal's definition of a miracle as one world entering into another.*

In the morning, Oedipa decides to return to Kinneret-Among-The-Pines and visit her therapist Dr. Hilarius on the way. Although she has seen clear evidence that the **horn** and W.A.S.T.E. are all over the Bay Area, she hopes that Hilarius will convince her that she imagined the whole thing. When she arrives, Hilarius's office looks empty—and then a bullet flies past her head. Oedipa runs to the office door, where Hilarius's assistant lets her inside and explains that Hilarius has locked himself in his office with a gun and is shooting at anyone who approaches. He thinks that three armed terrorists are coming after him. The assistant suggests that maybe this is because of the miserable housewives that Hilarius treats.

By switching the roles of mental patient and healer, Pynchon gives Oedipa and Hilarius a taste of what their normal roles feel like from the other side. But Pynchon is going for more than just zany irony when he depicts an insane psychotherapist fighting off figments of his own paranoid imagination: this fight is also a metaphor for the way psychoanalysts explain individuals' personal struggles as tensions between their conscious and unconscious selves. As Hilarius's assistant points out, Hilarius's insanity seems to be connected to a breakdown in communication: he has to listen to people's problems all day, but he never gets to resolve his own unconscious conflicts.

Oedipa reluctantly approaches Hilarius's office and introduces herself. Through the door, Hilarius accuses her of working with the plot against him, and then embarks on a diatribe about his waning faith in Sigmund Freud: he no longer believes that therapy can help people tame the unconscious. Police sirens approach, but Hilarius says that it is pointless to try and stop the Israeli "fanatics" who are after him, because they can pass straight through the walls of his office and clone themselves. He also does not trust the police, who may be in danger too.

The Israeli "fanatics" sound an awful lot like the black-clad Trystero bandits from The Courier's Tragedy, *which again forces the reader to ask whether Trystero might be a figment of Oedipa's imagination (just like the Israelis are for Hilarius). When Hilarius says that he has given up on Freud (the founder of psychoanalysis) because the conscious mind cannot tame the unconscious, what he really means is that the unconscious has totally taken over. Oedipa went through a similar episode in San Francisco when she could not distinguish between dreams, memories, fantasies, and real experiences. While it is difficult to explain* why *the unconscious is so powerful in* The Crying of Lot 49, *it is easy to speculate: perhaps it's due to the generalized repression and emotional isolation of suburban American life, or perhaps it's due to the effects of alcohol and drugs.*

As the police approach, Dr. Hilarius reveals to Oedipa that there is a special, secret face that makes people go insane, and he warns that he will make it for the police. The police break into Hilarius's office, and Hilarius pulls Oedipa inside. He expected someone else but notes that his patients on **drugs** like LSD can't distinguish between other people either. Hilarius asks Oedipa what she is supposed to tell him, and she begs him to surrender to the police. But Hilarius keeps talking about the face, which he says he only made once, at Buchenwald.

Hilarius's breakdown takes on a much more sinister tone when he reveals that he is an ex-Nazi (Buchenwald was a German concentration camp during World War II). Though Pynchon is also pointing out the similarities between Nazi psychological experiments during the Holocaust and American ones after World War II (like the famous MK-Ultra mind control experiment, which tested drugs like LSD). Although Hilarius does not reveal whether he *is on LSD like his patients are, he clearly does lose a sense of others' identities. This is jarring to Oedipa, who realizes that her relationship with Hilarius has become valueless to him, since he cannot even distinguish her from anyone else. In short, even though Hilarius's breakdown is a response to his lack of human connection with his patients, the breakdown ironically only worsens his capacity for such connection.*

The police talk to Oedipa through the door and ask if she can distract Dr. Hilarius so that the TV news crew can film them. Hilarius reveals that he was helping the Nazis look for a way to drive Jews insane by making faces at them. He insists that he always tried to avoid confronting his past by analyzing it like Freud: by analyzing it, he thought that he could neutralize the evil, but he's realized that he will never be able to. Oedipa gets ahold of Hilarius's rifle and threatens to kill him, and then mentions that she wanted him to help her cure a fantasy. On the contrary, Hilarius tells her to "cherish" her fantasy, which is all she has, and he urges her to shoot him.

The fact that the police are more interested in filming the standoff than ending it goes to show how the norms and demands of mass media—including people's appetite for sensational content—transform the ways people relate to one another. Hilarius explains his therapy career as an attempt to overcome his own guilt from the past, but he evidently now sees that this theory of the situation is really just a fantasy he used to cling to, until it was no longer viable. In turn, by telling Oedipa to "cherish" her own fantasies, Hilarius suggests that there may not be a sharp division between reality and fantasy at all—instead, what seems like reality today might look like fantasy in retrospect.

Oedipa lets the police inside Dr. Hilarius's office and then goes outside. She finds Mucho in the KCUF radio truck, covering the standoff. He gives her the microphone and asks her to summarize the day's events, then thanks her, calling her "Mrs. Edna Mosh." He promises that the radio's distortion will correct her name. After they briefly chat with the police, Oedipa and Mucho go to the KCUF radio station, where Mucho's boss, Caesar Funch, reveals that Mucho seems to be "losing his identity," gradually becoming "generic." Although Oedipa tells Funch that he's overreacting, she soon notices that Mucho is calmer than usual.

When Oedipa and Mucho finally reunite, they do not seem to have missed each other—they share no affection. In fact, they reencounter each other not as husband and wife, but rather as journalist and interviewee. Unable to summon any genuine feeling for each other, it seems, they just relay everything through the radio instead. Mucho overcorrecting for the radio's distortions, mangling Oedipa's name in the process, points out how new media technologies change people's identities. Indeed, this seems to partially explain why he is "losing his [own] identity." This pattern of people becoming "generic" is, of course, the same trend that Oedipa sees everywhere in the society of mass-produced things that surrounds her: people increasingly do, own, and like exactly the same things. This makes them interchangeable and destroys their humanity—like the Yoyodyne executive who got replaced by a computer.

Oedipa and Mucho go to a restaurant to get pizza. Mucho asks about Oedipa's relationship with Metzger, and then he starts commenting on the background music in the restaurant: one of the violins is slightly out of tune. He declares that it would be wonderful to deduce everything about the violinist from one note—just as he can break a chord, or a person's voice, down into all its component parts.

Although Mucho is a radio DJ, his bizarre interest in the music is still out of character: he seems to be perceiving the world in a different way than others do. This is similar to how, in San Francisco, Oedipa started seeing everything she encountered as a possible clue to the Tristero. However, there is a crucial difference: Mucho is learning to break down unity into individuality, turning a unified chord into its constituent parts. But Oedipa goes in the other direction: she learned to see the apparent connections between seemingly separate phenomena. This difference is significant because Oedipa's quest is about overcoming isolation, or finding interconnection, whereas Mucho's new perceptions actually accelerate the opposite process of alienation that she is seeking to combat.

Mucho asks Oedipa to say, "rich, chocolaty goodness." She does, and after a long pause, Mucho explains that people who say the same words become the same people, even if they say them at different points in time. Oedipa suddenly understands what Funch was saying, and Mucho pulls out a bottle of **LSD** and explains that Dr. Hilarius is running his drug experiments on men too, now.

The phrase "rich, chocolaty goodness" is a marketing slogan: it is a fantasy designed to deceive people into buying a product, not a literal or socially relevant message worth sending in any real-life situation. By asking Oedipa to say it to him, Mucho makes it all the more clear that their relationship is just a formality—he would rather her be one member of the consumerist masses than the unique person he married. It seems paradoxical that Mucho was just separating out musical notes, but he is now saying that different people become one and the same. This is actually the same paradox that Oedipa sees all around her in contemporary America: as people become more and more separate from one another, they also become more and more similar to one another.

Mucho gladly proclaims that he feels like an antenna sending and receiving messages from the world, and that he is sleeping better. It's not that he's found a girl—he's just not scared anymore, not even of his worst dreams, like the one in which he saw a sign saying "NADA" (the National Automobile Dealers' Association) at the **car** lot where he used to work. Oedipa realizes that she has lost Mucho, and she returns to San Narciso that same night.

Crucially, Mucho uses a metaphor from media technology—the radio antenna that transmits his broadcasts—in order to explain his new self-image. Not only does he define this self-image through the same technologies that seem to be cutting him off from other human beings, but he also specifically talks about the technology his job depends on. Now, he is only satisfied at work because he has lost self-awareness—not because his work has gotten any more interesting, fulfilling, or dignified. His dream about "NADA" ("nothing") is even more of a reason to believe that Dr. Hilarius's drugs are emptying out his brain and destroying his individual personality. Pynchon seems to be suggesting that drugs like LSD actually turn people into passive participants in an oppressive society, rather than showing them how to resist it.

CHAPTER 6

Oedipa returns to Echo Courts in San Narciso, where she finds the Paranoids sitting motionless with their instruments next to the swimming pool, as though frozen in time. Serge, one of the Paranoids, explains that his girlfriend left him for Metzger, and then he sings a song about copying the ways of older men by dating far younger women—in his case, an eight-year-old at the playground. Metzger has left Oedipa a note explaining that one of his colleagues at the law firm is taking his place as her co-executor, which doesn't bother Oedipa at all.

The Paranoids' frozenness is another offhand reference to entropy (which results in homogeneity and motionlessness) and the myth of Narcissus and Echo (because Narcissus ended up staring at his own reflection forever). Metzger's disappearance does not faze Oedipa, who is perfectly used to men being emotionally distant and treating women as sexual objects. Metzger's preference for younger women recalls Mucho's and John Nefastis's—but Serge takes this to an exaggerated, ridiculous, frightening next level. Of course, he is so offhandedly proud of his pedophilia that he seems to be following a media trend (hearkening to Vladimir Nabokov's popular novel Lolita) without understanding the implications of his actions—must like his band formed as a cheap imitation of the Beatles.

Oedipa calls Randolph Driblette, but Driblette's mother picks up the phone and says that they will have a statement ready from their attorney tomorrow. Confused, Oedipa calls Professor Emory Bortz, whose wife picks up and explains that, although Professor Bortz is busy getting **drunk** and throwing beer bottles at passing birds with his students, Oedipa is free to visit.

Like Metzger, Driblette suddenly disappears, getting in the way of Oedipa's plans. Although she wants all the people involved in her conspiracy to stay put so that she can fit them together into a complete vision of Tristero, they go on living their lives. Meanwhile, Bortz defies all stereotypes of a reserved, introverted, refined professor—his boisterous drunkenness is jarring because it undermines his sense of expertise, and Oedipa needs this expertise to make sense of The Courier's Tragedy.

On her way to Emory Bortz's house, Oedipa passes Zapf's Used Books, which has completely burnt down. At the store next door, a clerk explains that Zapf burned down his store for the insurance money. This clerk, Winthrop ("Winner") Tremaine, is a virulent racist who sells government surplus weapons and replica Nazi military gear. Oedipa is disgusted and leaves, but she regrets not killing Winthrop on her way out.

With the arson at Zapf's, it seems like all the clues from Oedipa's search for Tristero are consciously self-destructing. Like Yoyodyne's childish songs about its missile technology, Winthrop Tremaine's nonchalance about selling the tools for hate and violence is unsettling because it shows how, when Americans see an opportunity to profit, they seem to throw all other values out the window. Oedipa, on the other hand, retains the basic sense of human decency that everyone else seems to have lost.

At Bortz's house, one of the Professor's belligerent children meets Oedipa at the door. Bortz's wife is surprised that Oedipa, who looks "harassed" like most mothers do, does not have children. In the backyard, Bortz and his **drunken** graduate students make fun of Oedipa's question about "the historical Wharfinger," because they say that there are nothing but words left from him. Oedipa quotes the line about the "tryst with Trystero," and a stunned Bortz asks if she has been in the Vatican library. Oedipa shows Bortz the anthology with this line in it, and after looking through it and complaining about its errors, Bortz announces that this line has been added from the pornographic edition of *The Courier's Tragedy* that is hidden in the Vatican.

Face to face with Bortz's wife, Oedipa sees what her life might become like if she and Mucho have children. This reminds her that things can get far worse—she is bored, but many other women are "harassed" and crushed because they are expected to spend their lives at home, raising children. Bortz's attitude about Wharfinger's play is the opposite of Driblette's: while Driblette thought that the truth of the play lay in his performance of it, Bortz insists that the truth is contained in the very text of his plays, and nothing else. Of course, the "tryst with Trystero" just happens to be in an adulterated version. This poses a fundamental dilemma for Oedipa: does she actually need to find the correct or original version of the play in order to figure out what Tristero is?

In contrast, Bortz continues, Driblette's version lightened the play in an attempt to capture its spirit. But, one of the students tells Oedipa, Driblette committed suicide two days ago by drowning himself in the Pacific Ocean. Just before, Bortz explains, "they" attacked the play's set. Oedipa does not ask what he means—she only thinks about how all the men in her life (Hilarius, Mucho, Metzger, and Driblette) are disappearing or losing their minds.

Bortz admits that Driblette's version has a different kind of truth to it than the words left behind by Wharfinger. Ultimately, even though he does believe that Wharfinger's work speaks for itself, he does not seem to rule out the idea that there can be various, equally valid versions of a story—just as there can be various, equally valid interpretations of a novel. Driblette's suicide is jarring, and Bortz clearly implies that the "they" who attacked him is Trystero, the same group of bandits who killed Niccolò during the play. Again, Trystero seems to jump the boundary between fact and fiction, and Bortz seems to know more than he is letting on. The disappearance of all Oedipa's male lovers and acquaintances again suggests some generalized societal procession toward isolation and disconnection. Indeed, all of these men drop out of Oedipa's life when they become emotionally unavailable to her.

Bortz explains that Driblette was following Bortz's own version, which did not include the couplet about Trystero. Oedipa insists that this couplet was spoken, but Bortz says that Driblette, who spoke the line as Gennaro, must have been familiar with all the versions of the play and just made a decision to say the line on that day. Oedipa suggests that some event in Driblette's personal life would have triggered this change, but Bortz says that it's impossible to know.

Not even Bortz, the foremost expert on the play, can fully explain why Driblette chose to say the Trystero line. Oedipa can theorize all she wants, but ultimately, there is no single truth for her to measure her theories against. Oedipa's assumption that Driblette said the line for some sinister, conspiratorial reason is just as plausible as Bortz's guess that Driblette said the line randomly, for no good reason at all.

Bortz invites Oedipa and his graduate students inside and shows them copies of the pornographic woodcut illustrations from the corrupted Vatican edition that he attributes to the Scurvhamites, a Puritan sect that was so intrigued by sin that they gave themselves over to it entirely. Bortz thinks that they might have written this pornographic version of the play in order to make a point about the story's moral repulsiveness. Furthermore, he argues that the line about God redeeming nobody who has had a "tryst with Trystero" was a way of talking about something morally irredeemable. Trystero must have stood for whatever the "Other" of God was—whatever force orchestrated the world of those who were not the chosen ones.

Just like Mucho went from despising his work to passively accepting it once he started taking LSD, the Scurvhamites also underwent a total moral inversion: from studying sin in an attempt to banish it, they turned to indulging in it completely. These inversions are significant because they suggest that people's beliefs may not be as stable or lasting as they expect. It is very easy to give up one interpretation of the world in favor of another, and Oedipa clearly seems to be at risk of doing this with her views about Trystero. The association between Trystero and absolute evil is totally consistent with the group's depiction as a shadowy secret force that only surfaces to perform dastardly acts of evil. But it also recalls Jesús Arrabal's theory that a miracle is "another world's intrusion into this one." This intrusion by an "Other" is quite similar to Trystero's strange attacks, and there is no question that Oedipa's search for Trystero is at least in part a search for the kind of "Other" that can intrude on and change her stagnant, unsatisfying world.

Oedipa asks Bortz what Trystero was, and Bortz explains that it's an ongoing question he addresses in his next book, which will come out the following year. He pulls out an old book entitled *An Account of the Singular Peregrinations of Dr. Diocletian Blobb among the Italians, Illuminated with Exemplary Tales from the True History of that Outlandish and Fantastical Race* and tells Oedipa to check out Chapter Seven. She finds what she's looking for in Chapter Eight, in which Dr. Blobb is crossing the mountains in a Thurn and Taxis **mail** coach and gets attacked by black-clad horsemen on the shores of "the Lake of Piety." The men killed everybody but Blobb, whom they warned of "the wrath of Trystero" and asked to spread the news back to England.

As if The Courier's Tragedy *were not outlandishly satirical enough, Pynchon takes it even further with Dr. Blobb's inconceivably pompous memoir. Bortz is implying that Wharfinger might have somehow based* The Courier's Tragedy *on reading Dr. Blobb, but this does not tell Oedipa much more about whether Trystero is real or not—in fact, it would be impossible to confirm if the events in Blobb's memoir actually occurred. The Lake of Piety in Blobb's memoir is clearly the Lago di Pietà where Tony Jaguar allegedly dug up the American soldiers' bones, so there is no question that the attacks are connected. The question is simply how to explain this connection: Manny Di Presso could have adopted the story after hearing it in the play (which, in turn, borrowed it from Blobb), or Tristero could be repeating itself throughout history. Regardless, as Oedipa learns more details about Tristero and starts to fill in the gaps in her story, she still does not find any absolute proof that this story is true.*

As Oedipa continues investigating Trystero over the next several days, she pieces together enough fragmentary information to get a basic idea of its history. During a period of political turmoil in central Europe during the late 1500s, a new government kicked the Baron of Taxis and the nobleman who ran the Thurn and Taxis **postal** monopoly out of their official positions. They replaced the latter with a nobleman named Jan Hinckart, but a mentally unstable Spanish man named Hernando Joaquín de Tristero y Calavera started claiming that he was the true heir to Hinckart's lordship. Hinckart lost control of Thurn and Taxis, and sensing an opportunity to take revenge for his alleged disinheritance, Tristero decided to start a rival mail-carrying operation and have his couriers wear all black.

At long last, Oedipa finally puts together a coherent story about Trystero (which turns out to actually be "Tristero"). It truly is the sinister "Other" of Thurn and Taxis, haunting it from the margins of society in order to try and upend the social order. Tristero y Calavera's emphasis on disinheritance recalls not only the plot of The Courier's Tragedy, *but also Oedipa's ostensible task throughout the novel: securing the inheritance of Pierce Inverarity. Similarly, while Tristero y Calavera's dedicated his life and legacy to fighting a monopoly, Inverarity has a monopolistic hold on San Narciso. This strengthens the theory that Oedipa's search for Tristero has really been a search for an alternative to the model of American society that Inverarity's capitalist endeavors represent (and that she herself is suffering from at the beginning of the book).*

The next day, Oedipa goes to Driblette's funeral with Bortz, his wife, and his graduate students. She contemplates the disappearance of identity and the vanishing of the self, and she begs Driblette's spirit to send her some clues from the last moments of his life. Oedipa wants to know if his death had something to do with Tristero, if she could have saved him, and why he added the last two lines to his act the night she saw the play.

Oedipa searches desperately for some theory or story that can give meaning to Driblette's death, but she finds nothing. Even if Driblette did have a solid, singular motivation for including the Trystero line, Oedipa will never discover it. Her concern with his disappearance and worry that this constitutes a permanent loss for the universe directly points back to her encounter with the alcoholic sailor in San Francisco—in fact, staring at his mattress, she had the same worries about him. The surplus that these men have left behind—their memories and stories, the imprints they left on the world—have now been completely erased.

Oedipa cannot find any more information about Tristero, but Bortz speculates about its history. During a weak period for Thurn and Taxis in the mid-1600s, Bortz thinks that Tristero's leaders would have debated what to do. He imagines Thurn and Taxis not fully understanding Tristero and believing that some mystical force was haunting them. Bortz even speculates that Tristero caused the French Revolution, but he admits that he's making all of this up.

Bortz's grand story about Tristero is appealing, but Oedipa (and the novel's readers) should not be tempted to take it too seriously. It is pure speculation, of the same sort as the conjecture that led Oedipa to Tristero in the first place. If Tristero really operated as the devilish "Other" to the Thurn and Taxis monopoly—just as W.A.S.T.E. operates as an "Other" to the conventional postal system today—then this redeems Oedipa's entire quest, because it shows that she has really come across the alternative to normalcy that she has been seeking throughout the book.

Oedipa gradually gives up on the Tristero story. She does not follow up with Genghis Cohen, Mr. Thoth, or the publisher of *The Courier's Tragedy*. She also tries not to talk about Driblette and ignores Bortz's offer to introduce her to another Wharfinger expert. However, she does meet Mike Fallopian again at The Scope. She explains all her findings and asks why his **mail** club does not use W.A.S.T.E. Mike replies that maybe they just haven't found the right opportunity yet, and that maybe Oedipa is really caught up in a complex hoax designed for her by Inverarity. He tells her to seriously double-check her evidence. Oedipa accuses Mike of hating her and recommends that he visit Winthrop Tremaine's store.

Why would Oedipa lose interest in the mysterious Tristero as soon as she hears a plausible story about it? Pynchon seems to be suggesting that, in situations like Oedipa's, simply having a story about the world is enough. Oedipa's curiosity is satiated, and she has no more to gain from continuing to investigate. (In fact, she has been pulling back, a little at a time, ever since her meeting with John Nefastis.) Still, Fallopian's suggestion that Inverarity could have faked the whole Tristero conspiracy just to mess with Oedipa provides another perfectly coherent, equally probable explanation as Bortz's. (There is also yet another alternative, which is that Fallopian's system actually is *W.A.S.T.E. and that he is also in on the conspiracy.)*

One day, Genghis Cohen calls Oedipa and asks her to visit. He shows her an old stamp with the **muted horn symbol** that reveals the true meaning of W.A.S.T.E.: "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire." This stamp is not in Cohen's catalogue, but it appears on a mysterious a piece of paper glued into the beginning of the book. Oedipa notices that the catalogue was from Zapf's Used Books, so she goes to San Narciso to investigate.

At last, Oedipa can explicitly connect the W.A.S.T.E. system to Tristero. But curiously, W.A.S.T.E. appears to be both a descendent of the original Tristero and a predecessor of the "Empire" that it is "Await[ing]." This act of faith is, after all, very similar to many religions' belief in the coming of a messiah or the arrival of a judgment day.

Oedipa is not surprised to learn that Inverarity owned the building where Zapf's Used Books was located and the theater where Driblette put on *The Courier's Tragedy*. Inverarity is the common denominator in every aspect of the Tristero story—he even funded the college where Professor Bortz teaches. Oedipa wonders whether Inverarity could have paid or persuaded everyone she has met so far to participate in his scheme. In fact, she realizes, Tristero could be a dream, a real secret **mail** network, an insane hallucination, or an unbelievably elaborate conspiracy created by Inverarity. Given these "symmetrical four" alternatives, Oedipa hopes that she is insane. She spends the night frozen in terror, realizing that nobody can save her from her paranoia.

After largely ignoring Pierce Inverarity since Chapter 1, the book finally takes a serious look at his character: the silent, absent figure who hangs over the entire plot, possibly as its mastermind. The reader knows almost nothing about him, but quite a lot about the things he owned. He is clearly symbolic of American capitalism, a way of life that has become corrupt and monopolistic in Pynchon's view. But Inverarity has other, more complicated personal associations for Oedipa, who largely leaves the reader in the dark about the nature of her relationship with him. Perhaps most curiously of all, Oedipa never reveals what is actually in Inverarity's will. All of her "symmetrical four" explanations are equally plausible theories that connect all the clues she has uncovered. To an extent, she knows that any of them could be true: she dreamed about Tristero during her night in San Francisco, has seen several other characters hallucinating (which means that she could be hallucinating too), knows that Inverarity had some power over virtually everything in San Narciso, and has finally pieced together a historical explanation for Tristero.

Oedipa grows mysteriously ill over the next few days—she visits a random doctor, who suggests that she is pregnant. Genghis Cohen calls with new clues, including an article about Tristero splitting up during the French Revolution. Many of Tristero's patrons despised the Revolution and decided to support Thurn and Taxis because it was an aristocratic institution. After they were outvoted, they abandoned Tristero, whose remaining members mostly immigrated to the United States in 1849 and 1850. Oedipa tells Professor Bortz, who suggests that Tristero would have been crushed by the American government's postal reform, and that maybe its members disguised themselves as Native Americans to deliver **mail**. This explains all the imperceptibly modified, counterfeited stamps that Genghis Cohen has found.

Genghis Cohen's article fills in the last missing historical link: the connection between the European Tristero and the American W.A.S.T.E. In fact, this history is also a comment on the colonization of North America, which was led by immigrants who were cast out of mainstream life in Europe. In a sense, according to the most traditional narratives about its history, America is actually a country built out of second chances for the marginalized, or evidence that waste can lead to rebirth. In the mid-1800s, Bortz's history flows into Mike Fallopian's study of private postal systems and Mr. Thoth's strange recollection that his racist grandfather killed bandits with "a Mexican name."

Genghis Cohen calls Oedipa to explain that Pierce Inverarity's stamps will soon be auctioned off, and some secretive party has signed up to bid on the collection remotely, by **mail**. The "super-secretive" bidder has hired C. Morris Schrift, a well-known agent. They want to examine Inverarity's stamps, the auction's lot #49, but the auction house has refused. Cohen wonders if this secret bidder might work for Tristero and want to cover up the evidence of its existence.

Oedipa finally gets a shot at confronting Tristero, even though she now wants to put it behind her. Similarly, the reader finally gets a hint of where the novel's title comes from. The number 49 has two parallel religious meanings: it is the number of days between Easter and the Pentecost in the Christian tradition and the number of days a person waits in the transitional state between death and rebirth in many Buddhist traditions. Notably, both these traditions connect the number 49 with a period of waiting or reflection, with the expectation that some salvation or rebirth will follow. Oedipa is literally waiting to hear from Tristero, of course, as are the W.A.S.T.E. members whose name literally means "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire." But the book as a whole can also be interpreted as such a period of waiting—whether in Oedipa's life, American culture, Inverarity's afterlife, or Tristero's rebirth.

That night, Oedipa gets **drunk** at Echo Courts and then recklessly goes driving on the **freeway**. Soon, she is calling The Greek Way from a phone booth and asking for the man from the Inamorati Anonymous. She introduces herself as Arnold Snarb, and she tells the man everything she has learned about Tristero since she met him in San Francisco. She asks if their meeting was arranged by Tristero and pleads with him to tell the truth. But the man says that "It's too late […] For me," and he hangs up.

Oedipa's drunken desperation suggests that the uncertainty around Tristero is pushing her to a dangerous breaking point. It is telling that she calls the Inamorati Anonymous member—he is the only man genuinely interested in listening to her, even though he has effectively sworn off all human relationships. While Oedipa is clearly asking the man if he is part of a conspiracy against her, his response is ambiguous: it could mean that he is, or it could mean that he has fallen in love with her and broken his vow.

Oedipa looks around and realizes that San Narciso is no longer special: it is just one more part of "the American continuity of crust and mantle." Walking by the railroad tracks, she decides that Pierce Inverarity might have owned the whole city, but he was just part of the broader pattern of American life and inequality. His "legacy was America," and Oedipa has inherited this legacy, even though she is not named in his will. She remembers Pierce's insatiable desire to grow his business but wonders how he felt writing his will, knowing that it would all end one day. Did he really make her his executor just to pester her, to take revenge? Did he want to pass on the secret of Tristero? Or is he just dead, and is it a total coincidence that he led Oedipa to the Tristero?

This passage recalls the beginning of Chapter 2, when Oedipa first arrived in San Narciso and struggled to make sense of its endless, homogeneous sprawl. Now, she sees San Narciso's decentralized, barren landscape as evidence of its connection to the rest of the nation. Again, she refers back to Remedios Varo's painting ("Embroidering the Earth's Mantle") in her recognition that everything around her is part of a "continuity of crust and mantle." As she starts to think systematically, she realizes that Inverarity's excesses and absurdities—like his obsessive accumulation of wealth and power—were actually connected to broader social forces. And now, even though Oedipa is not actually inheriting his estate as his executor, she has a great power to shape his legacy. Whether intentionally or not, Tristero is one of the things Inverarity left behind for Oedipa, and she has to make sense of it without knowing the innermost truth of Inverarity's intentions.

Oedipa thinks about how these railroad tracks connect with so many other ones throughout the country. The squatters living in the abandoned trains and delivering **mail** for Tristero probably don't even know what Tristero was supposed to inherit. So many Americans are forced to live in the shadows, Oedipa realizes: they live in a world parallel to, but also inseparable from, Inverarity's country of profit and consumerism. They wander around, waiting for a miracle, embodying the legacy of Tristero. Oedipa wishes that she could give them all a share in Inverarity's estate, but she knows that the lawyers would stop her.

Oedipa specifically asks how profound inequality can coexist with profound interconnectedness in America. She has started to see the power of marginalized people, most of all through her search for Tristero, but she has also seen the absurdity of the systems of power and control that marginalize them. As Pierce Inverarity's executor, she has power over a sizable part of these systems, at least in San Narciso. But she is not free to use this power—she has to execute the will within the strict limits laid out by Inverarity and his lawyers. This sense of simultaneous power and entrapment is one of the economic system's most powerful tools: workers and business owners alike lock themselves into cycles of ever-greater production and consumption because they want to get ahead, or at least maintain what they have. If Inverarity prioritized the social good, he would have lost his business and someone else would have done what he chose not to—similarly, Oedipa feels that she has no choice but to execute the will, despite knowing that it will give Inverarity's resources to the people who need them least of anyone.

Oedipa yearns to join Tristero, because she, too, is waiting for a new version of the world. There must be something better than the binary choice between the mainstream and the underground, which she feels hanging over her head like a computer's ones and zeros. Everything can be part of the conspiracy (one) or meaningless (zero). Maybe the disinherited Tristero lurks behind the legacy of America, or maybe there is only America, which invites paranoia but doesn't mean anything.

In her last moment of reflection, Oedipa makes the connection between Tristero and the rebirth of the world explicit. But her metaphor based on a computer also suggests that her current understanding is squarely based in the world she lives in—including all its new technologies, for better or for worse. Oedipa's feeling that the world is divided into binary opposites is another way of expressing her realization that different, mutually exclusive, but complete theories about the world can produce equally valid perspectives on it. Clues do not decide their own interpretations, and now, for the first time, she is fully aware that those interpretations are completely up to her. *The Tristero theory gives her a new perspective, but it cannot fully convince her becuase she can always see the alternative.*

Oedipa calls C. Morris Schrift, the auction agent, who explains that his client has changed his mind and will be going to the auction. At the auction house, Oedipa meets Genghis Cohen, who admits that he wants to bid on some of the stamps himself. Cohen is also excited that the prominent auctioneer Loren Passerine is going to be "crying"—or selling off the day's items. Oedipa briefly thinks about making a scene to unmask the secret bidder, but instead she goes to her seat and look out at the crowd. The auctioneer smiles at Oedipa and moves his arms like an exotic priest or "descending angel." The book ends with Oedipa "await[ing] the crying of lot 49."

Given the association between the number 49 and periods of waiting in Christianity and Buddhism, it makes sense that the novel ends on the brink of revelation. The auctioneer stands for God, or a "descending angel," about to provide the miracle that Oedipa has been waiting for all along. Of course, just like Oedipa has to make sense of Tristero without ever seeing it, readers have to interpret this conclusion without ever learning if Oedipa gets her miracle or not. Tristero is left anonymous, although Oedipa will never run out of good theories about who it may be—even Genghis Cohen himself is a candidate. By ending on its own title, the book reminds its readers of what they were doing before the cracked it open: awaiting The Crying of Lot 49.

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