

**Conspiracy or Delusion?: Paranoia in Thomas Pynchon's
*The Crying of Lot 49***

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Spring 2007

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Conspiracy or Delusion?: Paranoia in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*

Thomas Pynchon is one of the best known and most widely celebrated postmodern authors working today. For over forty years, the infamously reclusive, Cornell-educated writer has been publishing wildly imaginative yet highly challenging novels which continually show evidence of genius at work. The Crying of Lot 49, which first appeared in 1966, is perhaps Pynchon's most accessible and entertaining book to date. Unlike many of the other works in his canon such as *V* and Gravity's Rainbow, The Crying of Lot 49 is short, has a more or less linear narrative structure, and does not inundate the reader with obscure words or information. When compared to his more well known thousand-plus page novels, *The Crying of Lot 49* manages to give the best overview of Pynchon's major ideas through the story of Oedipa Maas, an innocent woman who leaves behind a comfortable and undisturbed existence in order to seek out the origins of a mysterious underground postal network known as the Tristero. The novel also provides a good introduction to Pynchon's unique writing style, which involves detailed literary treatment of complex concepts borrowed from science and philosophy, quickly moving narrative, and huge ensembles of strangely-named characters. Of the many issues and themes explored in The Crying of Lot 49, perhaps the most important and pervasive of all is paranoia. Paranoia, which can be defined as "a psychotic disorder characterized by delusions of persecution, with or without grandeur, often strenuously defended with apparent logic and reason"

("Paranoia"), influences the most important actions and thoughts of the characters in the novel, most importantly of Oedipa, who gradually loses her grip on reality as she struggles to uncover the true nature of the Tristero's existence, while interacting with a number of delusional individuals who are lost in the strange and sometimes hostile world of 1960s California.

The opening of the novel works to establish Oedipa as an average suburban woman living a simple and rather mundane life. She attends Tupperware parties (1), spends her time cooking and cleaning (2), and is idly making her way through a series of "more or less identical" (2) days. Oedipa is an unremarkable inhabitant of what is according to Molly Hite a "hyperbolically banalized world" (Hite 73), and she appears to be an unlikely candidate for an interesting protagonist. By presenting Oedipa as a painfully average modern individual, Pynchon is setting the stage for what Patricia Bergh calls her later "redefinition" (4) to be all the more dramatic. Perhaps the only unusual element of Oedipa's life, aside from her marriage to the "thin-skinned" (Pynchon 4) former used car dealer turned radio DJ Mucho Maas, is the relationship she once had with one Pierce Inverarity. Our first introduction to Pierce, whose world Oedipa is brought back in to when she is called upon to execute his estate after his unexpected death, occurs when Oedipa attempts to remember when her last conversation with her former boyfriend occurred and what it involved. We discover that Pierce most recently spoke to Oedipa when he called her on the phone at "three or so one morning" (2) and began

to ramble on in a series of comedic voices while discussing imaginary people and ideas (3). He is clearly exhibiting insane and paranoid behavior (One of Pierce's voices is convinced of a ridiculous murder conspiracy), and this behavior eerily foreshadows some of Oedipa's later paranoid ramblings

Oedipa's journey to the city of San Narciso, home to much of Pierce's vast business empire and a place which is to critic John Johnston a "relatively indistinct background" (Johnston 48) for her most important discoveries about the world, leads her to a series of encounters with a number of individuals who are highly suspicious of the motives and inquiries of those who confront them. It seems that even San Narciso's seemingly innocent inhabitants are caught up in some form of delusion or other. Immediately after arriving at her hotel, Oedipa encounters Miles, a young musician who represents the appropriately named rock group "The Paranoids" (Pynchon 15). A brief and seemingly pleasant conversation about music leads Miles to assert that Oedipa is somehow seeking sexual favors from him, and that she "hates [him] too" (16). Oedipa, who is in full command of her reasoning abilities, immediately identifies Miles as a paranoiac (15). While the role Miles plays in the novel is ultimately not terribly important, his initial interaction with Oedipa is vital in establishing what David Coward calls in "Pynchon and the Sixties" the "atmosphere of....distrust" (Coward 7) which Pynchon seeks to create. After Miles we are immediately introduced to Metzger, Pierce Inverarity's lawyer, who will help Oedipa settle the financial affairs of her former boyfriend. Metzger

inadvertently, or possibly deliberately, leads Oedipa to what William Gleason describes as "anxieties" (Gleason 12) which come to complement a growing suspicion that all may not be as it seems. When introducing himself, Metzger mentions in passing his career as a child actor. Immediately following this, the television in Oedipa's room is turned on, and the channel it has been tuned to just so happens to be playing a movie in which young Metzger had a starring role. While this may very well be nothing more than coincidence, Oedipa determines that it is more than coincidence, but is in actually "...all part of a plot, an elaborate, seduction *plot*." (Pynchon 18).

As readers come to see, this potential conspiracy is almost comically less sophisticated than those which Oedipa later believes to be uncovering. Furthermore, Metzger is the first individual who chooses to encourage "a frustrating [experience]" (Gleason 12) for Oedipa by hiding the truth from her and by being otherwise stubborn to tell her what she wishes to know. In this case, the data he refuses to give is rather trivial, and only has to do with what he knows will happen in the end of the movie in which he played the lead. Even after Oedipa agrees to play a sexual game in order to find out how the plot of the story resolves, Metzger is still not entirely forthcoming in his mostly ambiguous hints, and thus "things grow less and less clear" (Pynchon 26) for his interviewer. Through Metzger, Pynchon begins to show us a world which David Seed says contains both doubt and certainty in "virtually every piece of information" given (Seed 125). It is

difficult but intriguing for both Oedipa and readers alike. The jarring background music provided by The Paranoids during this vignette (Pynchon 27) highlights the uncomfortable nature of what is happening.

The scene which takes place in The Scope bar is one of the most important and revealing of the first half of the novel. Events get "seriously underway" (21) when Oedipa takes notice of odd, muted post-horn symbols in the bar's bathroom stall. These symbols seem like unimpressive graffiti, yet they have an air of mystery and importance about them which intrigues Oedipa enough that she hastily copies them down (34). The post-horn symbols continue to appear in greater and greater frequency throughout the novel, and they seem to demonstrate, as Frank Kermode suggests in his article "Decoding the Tristero," "an intent to communicate" (Kermode 164). Who is communicating with whom and what it is that they wish to say is quite uncertain at first. At the same time as the symbols appear, Oedipa is introduced to one of the bar's most interesting patrons, the extreme right-wing activist Mike Fallopian. Fallopian, perhaps more than any other individual in the novel, serves as a representative of those who share a "less imaginative paranoia" (Coward 7), a paranoia not concerned with grand global conspiracy but rather with a totally irrational fear of domestic cover-up. He proudly refuses to use the government postal service, which he claims exercises "systematic abuse" (Pynchon 35) on its supporters. When Fallopian readily explains his use of an alternate system of mail delivery, he inadvertently makes Oedipa curious and

sets her down the dark road of attempting to discover "the languid, sinister, blooming" (36) world of the Tristero, the shadowy organization possibly behind his alternate system which will alter her perception of how the world truly operates. It is important to note that Oedipa's first hints of what Petillion calls "just perceptible presences and general looming possibilities" (Petillion 14), things which later haunt and disturb her thinking are introduced to her by a paranoid individual in an unfamiliar environment. She accepts Fallopian's word as being unconditionally true, and by doing so, she has possibly taken a step towards adopting his mindset.

Nearly every minor character encountered after Oedipa visits The Scope seems to be displaying some form of paranoid thinking. As a perfect example of an individual who is lost in what Scott Sanders calls "conspiratorial vision" (Sanders 178), we have Metzger's friend Manny Di Presso, a lawyer who Metzger and Oedipa meet on a lake outing following their trip to the bar. Di Presso is convinced that the Mafia, or perhaps some other large but well-hidden organization, is keeping tabs on him wherever he goes. He is certain that "All the time, somebody listens in, snoops; they bug your apartment, they tap your phone...." (43). Metzger's particular conspiratorial vision is ambitious for sure, but it is not one which involves a universe-encompassing "paranoia grown cosmic" (Sanders 7) which other individuals in the book are inclined towards. It is no coincidence that Metzger seems to be in possession of a great deal of "insider" knowledge, which happens to be related to some of Pierce Inverarity's more questionable business ventures. In

fact, many of Pynchon's most knowledgeable characters are often overwhelmed, misled, or disturbed by information which seems to suggest what Richard Poirier refers to in "The Importance of Thomas Pynchon" as "the systematic conspiracy of reality" (28).

The Courier's Tragedy, an incredibly complex and involved play which Pynchon describes to us in detail while it is being viewed by Metzger and Oedipa, seems to offer us what J. Kerry Grant believes is an early "source of illumination" (Grant XV) for understanding the Tristero. In addition, Maurice Couturier notes in "The Death of the Real in *The Crying of Lot 49*" that it is, like the *Mousetrap* play within-a-play of *Hamlet*, an attempt to reflect the main plot of *The Crying of Lot 49* as well as a device "to quicken its pace" (17). In its simplest form, the story of *The Courier's Tragedy* is a 17th century Jacobean revenge drama which involves two warring Italian factions and tells of the various ways in which they attempt to destroy each other's kingdoms. The play makes a passing mention of a "once-knotted horn" symbol connected with an organization known as "Tristero" (Pynchon 52). This reference is a "message in the system" (Kermode 165) that seems to point back to the strange symbols drawn on The Scope bathroom walls which could potentially provide a needed clue, or a point of orientation, in the increasingly messy landscape in which Oedipa has found herself in in San Narciso. This strange bit of dialogue can even be viewed, as Edward Mendleson points out in "The Sacred, the Profane, and *The Crying of Lot 49*" a "sacred" bit of information (119) because of

this way in which it directs us to centuries-old knowledge. Even if Oedipa is to gain something from this Tristero reference, it is not likely to be explained to her by any outsiders. The director of the play, Randolph Dribbette, absolutely refuses to discuss the Tristero, or the fact that the Tristero is not included in the original 17th century text (Pynchon 56). Dribbette has created an "aura of ritual reluctance" (56) around the word, and further, mention of the Tristero reduces him to a paranoid state. He tells Oedipa that she can "hide a tape recorder in [his] bedroom, see what I talk about from wherever I am when I sleep" (56). He seems to be well on to the fact that Oedipa is, as Jon Simons describes, "attempting to create a projection of coherence on the world" (Simons 7) through what she has heard in his play, and he mocks and evades her inquiries by telling her that she could "waste her life...and never touch the truth" (Pynchon 56). Oedipa is so concerned with what the Tristero may be about that she seriously and openly considers following Dribbette's suggestion of probing in to his personal life and is even willing to attempt to "fall in love" (56) with him if that is what her quest necessitates. Fortunately, she never has to follow through with this offer.

The novel tells us that in the time following the viewing of *The Courier's Tragedy* and the encounter with Dribbette, everything which Oedipa "saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero" (58). When this preoccupation begins to dominate Oedipa's mind more and more, it becomes clear that her patterns of thinking change dramatically as well. As Patrick

O'Donnell explains, she seems to have established a suspicion that "she is part of something bigger" (O'Donnell 191) which threatens to engulf her life. Her initial responses to these thoughts seem thoroughly rational, yet they might be viewed avoidant as well. She reviews Inverarity's will once again to see if he might have attempted to "leave behind an organized *something after* his own annihilation" (58). If an "underlying logic" (Simons 5) can be found in anything important (in this case the directions for the execution of her ex-lover's estate), it can perhaps offset the frustrations which have come with being unable to solve the Tristero mystery immediately. Unfortunately, Oedipa has a "deep ignorance of law, of investment, of real estate, ultimately of the dead man himself (Pynchon 58), an ignorance which stands as a serious impediment to the possibly of completing any of her work. The only possible distractions from the Tristero, which might also be refuges of sanity, become unfortunate dead ends.

Oedipa appears to be left in a position where discovering the nature and origins of the Tristero will no longer be a quest of simple curiosity. She is in great need of a means by which to escape what Anne Mangel says is becoming a "closed system of perception" (Mangel 92) centered on something which may or may not exist. The Tristero case must be found in order to return to reality. After encounters with men such as Di Presso and Driblette, it is clear that there is far too much paranoia and suspicion in the external world to find any direct answers. This is why in her next encounter with someone who clearly knows something about the

Tristero, Oedipa is careful to avoid "blunt questions" (Pynchon 61) as "they would get her nowhere" (61). Stanley Koteks, a scientist at the formerly Inverarity-owned Yoyodine corporation, is caught by Oedipa drawing the post-horn symbol on some scratch paper. Although she is of course tempted to press him about the meaning of his drawing, she cleverly avoids direct inquiry. Even so, the slightest hint that she has interest in the symbol (she remarks that she had seen it before on a bathroom stall [63]) causes Koteks to suddenly order her to "forget" (63) the subject and to totally ignore her. If even a supposedly thoroughly rational scientist is prone to paranoid actions due to the mere mention of possible Tristero connections, it seems very unlikely that Oedipa will be able to handle full knowledge of the subject.

It is not surprising that hints of the Tristero begin to manifest themselves even more obviously throughout the city, even when Oedipa is not deliberately seeking them out. A bronze historical marker at a scenic lake which Oedipa visits commemorates a 19th century ambush of postal workers by "masked marauders" (64), a nursing home resident she encounters wears a signet ring with the post-horn symbol engraved on it (67), a stamp expert discovers the symbol hidden on a stamp out of Pierce's large collection (71). Oedipa is experiencing what Bernard Duyfhuizen in "Hushing Sick Transmissions" Disrupting Story in *The Crying of Lot 49* correctly asserts is "information overload" (88), and it is simply impossible for her to ignore how widespread the Tristero's influence must have been, and perhaps still is. She has encountered so many of its signs, but revelation as to the true

nature of what these signs are pointing to is "continually postponed" (Gleason 97). Because of this postponement, Oedipa is facing the pressing fear that "she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself (Pynchon 69). As readers, it does not seem that we can say with absolute confidence that Oedipa's concern is unwarranted. Pynchon has given us no more clues as to how we are to interpret events than he has to his protagonist. However, it is clear that Oedipa believes that there must be something more than mere coincidence at work, a sign that not all is right in her mind.

Although "coincidences blossom" (80) and it seems to become nearly undeniable that something of importance which once lay hidden is now being discovered, Oedipa is able to make one last attempt to rationalize the experience by holding on to the possibility that the Tristero is "nothing but a sound, a word" (80) which references nothing. Even as what seem to be reasonably established facts about the organization appear- that it had at one point opposed the most important postal system in Europe, that seems to be being used primarily by persons of "unorthodox sexual persuasion" (80), the possibility of it "being presumed, perhaps fantasized" (80) is not discounted. If the Tristero can be proven to be nothing more than a fantastic invention, then it would be possible to make it "go away and disintegrate quietly" (81) without further attention. The idea of the Tristero and its underlying reality cannot be wished away however, and because of this, Oedipa's position and duty change. Anne Mangel says that in the wake of discovering

incontrovertible evidence that the Tristero organization is, or was a part of the world, Oedipa's task has shifted from merely sorting through Pierce's estate and seeking clues which will help guide her understand the possible hidden worlds she has discovered to "distinguishing between reality and fantasy, the attempt to establish order having led to insane disorder" (Mangel 92).

Distinguishing between reality and fantasy is especially difficult in the crazed environment which Oedipa continues to explore. The world revealed to her in light of Tristero knowledge is far different from anything previously familiar to her. Petillion likens the California which Oedipa uncovers in her distressed and disturbed state to a "wilderness" (Petillion 155) in both its untamed nature and its danger. This wilderness, which consists of "drunks, bums, pedestrians, pederasts, [and the] walking psychotic" (Pynchon 96) gives both Oedipa and the reader a glimpse of a lost and decayed America which has been left to ruin. In the wake of this ruin it has somehow become, among many other things, "Tristero Territory" (Petillion 154). A one-night journey through the streets of San Francisco reveals the Tristero presence in nearly everyone and everything which Oedipa sees. In every location, from gay clubs to squatter's flats to bus terminals to Chinese herbalist shops, an abundance of Tristero post-horns make their appearance. Whether they are real or imagined by Oedipa is very uncertain. As she discovers these symbols, she seems to have clearly lost the sharp detective skills which have allowed her to get as far as she has in her pursuit of forbidden information. Like

many paranoiacs, she is inclined to view things in certain ways and thus he has lost her ability to "discern between what she sees in her mind what she witnesses with her eyes" (Bergh 5). For instance, while walking through Chinatown Oedipa believes she is seeing "a man, perhaps a man, in a black suit...watching her" (Pynchon 86). Later she watches children playing hopscotch and believes that their chalk hopscotch board possibly contains "dates from a secret history" (87). The experience of wandering through San Francisco forces Oedipa to the conclusion that her encounters have been orchestrated in some way. According to David Seed, the world has become "a kind of text which [Oedipa} struggles to read" (Seed 133), and she reads something sinister, or at least dangerous into it. Oedipa asks herself "for what, tonight, was chance?" (Pynchon 89). The Tristero is perhaps in control of the communications of "God knows how many citizens" (92), and its agents and messages seem to be out in full force to those who are aware of their possible existence.

Delusional and paranoid thinking do not work entirely against Oedipa, and in fact she finds relating to the chaotic world she is surrounded by slightly easier once she has become one of the "nutty broads" (92) who have, according to one of her peers, overrun the West coast. As Leo Braudy notes in ""Providence, Paranoia, and the Novel," the paranoid person feeds his or her paranoia by many means, but supporting a delusion is primarily accomplished when an individual deliberately "places himself in paranoid situations" (Braudy 632). It is possible then to confront

a dangerous and bizarre scenario fearlessly if being involved will reinforce certain ideas. A perfect example of Oedipa entering in to such a situation occurs in the fifth chapter of the novel, when she visits her psychiatrist in a possible attempt to reason her way through all she has witnessed and to be "talked out of a fantasy" (103). Ironically enough, Dr. Hilarious has succumbed to his own unusual fantasy thanks to the paranoid forces which have possessed seemingly all of Oedipa's male acquaintances. Hilarious has gone from being a respected experimental psychiatrist to becoming a terrifying example of how unbalanced a person who is not in touch with reality can become. He shows himself to be in possession of a mind which is "fragmented in the extreme" (Bergh 2). When he reveals that he thoroughly convinced that government agents who "walk through walls" and "replicate" (Pynchon 100) are coming after him. As he waves a rifle in Oedipa's face, he discusses his desire "to remain in relative paranoia" (101) and to escape the men he believes are about to capture him and try him for imagined war crimes. Here then is yet another of Pynchon's societal victims "lost in [his] own individual way in the suddenly unfamiliar frontier of America" (Bergh 2). Oedipa, who is absolutely unintimidated by Hilarious, manages to take control of the situation by apprehending his gun (Pynchon 102). Any rational individual would not have been able to show the initiative or courage she does in facing up to a fellow paranoiac. It is difficult to say whether or not such courage is always for the best, but it is critical in keeping Oedipa alive.

Even if Oedipa finds courage in facing certain dangers or absurdities, she cannot help but simultaneously be bothered by a lingering fear which has come over her as a result of being deserted by everyone she needs. Those individuals who are the most likely candidates for helping her to fully solve the Tristero mystery and to return to a normal state of mind are virtually all more lost than she is. Her own husband, whom she left at home without any worries when she left to settle the will, loses possession of his personality and, thanks to the powerful effects of LSD experimentation, becomes what all of his friends describe as "a whole room full of people" (106), none of whom will answer any of Oedipa's questions or even engage in any type of meaningful conversation. Randolph Wharfinger the playwright commits suicide, and Oedipa of course suspects that he took his own life as a result of something which could possibly have "[had] to do with the Tristero" (121). Metzger, who was once Oedipa's close aide, runs off "with a depraved 15 year old" (114). Oedipa enters into a state of panic once she comes to the full realization that she is hopelessly alone, and she feels as if she is "fluttering out over an abyss" (117) which has swallowed all that she once knew. We do not know what to make of the fact that all of these men have simultaneously abandoned Oedipa when she needs them the most. Perhaps they are truly "victims of sinister global machinations stretching across millennium" (O'Donnell 191) who have been deliberately led astray in order to keep Oedipa from recovering her sanity. Oedipa herself seems to take this position, as she "fears for [the] security" (Pynchon 120) of anyone she may meet in

the future who might come to her assistance, and later thinks to her self that "*they* got rid of Hilarous and Mucho and Metzger" (Pynchon 121). B.C. Dougherty believes that such a theory exemplifies yet another attempt "to resort to paranoia to explain inconsistencies and coincidences in the external world" (Dougherty 2).

Whatever is going on does seem highly suspect, but we still have no way of knowing for certain whether or not these coincidences are the result of unfortunate luck, or if Oedipa is right in assuming that something far more sinister is at work.

While she continues to pursue the Tristero through seeking out its history in various museum and university archives, Oedipa's research ultimately amounts to very little. For "beyond its origins, the libraries told her nothing" (Pynchon 122). It seems that she has been both in pursuit of and clearly threatened by what Georgianna Colville says are "unknown evil forces which never quite come in to being" (Colville 65) yet which appear to have been present in the world for some time. Oedipa becomes "reluctant to follow up anything" (Pynchon 124) and, desperate to escape these evil forces and to relieve her troubled mind, she begins to seriously contemplate suicide. She goes driving along the freeway at night with her lights turned off "to see what would happen" (132), and when fate prevents her from collision she vows to "be more deliberate" (133) next time. Suicide seems to be the only option she feels will allow her to escape her problems. Her attempts to impose a "desperate rationality" (Dougherty 2) on the situation and to get to the root of all that has troubled her have thus far been in vain. To frame her dilemma more

explicitly, her choice becomes either to continue to relate to the "real, hostile" (Colville 100) world through paranoia, or to depart from it. In the end Oedipa chooses to continue her life, but in full knowledge that she has an obvious condition, and whatever it is "they'll call it paranoia" (Pynchon 128).

Oedipa is ultimately left in complete bewilderment, having never come to a satisfying end to her quest. She reasons out what has become of the world and what she has discovered to the best of her ability. Thus the novel ends with the Tristero mystery remaining unsolved, and Oedipa is left lost and frustrated, completely without answers. In "Unfinished Business- Thomas Pynchon and the Quest for Revolution," Paul Coates argues that this ending is necessary, for "the fact that no revelation concludes the book...fits [its] thematic design (87). An absolute "answer" would end the flow of uncertain information which has been continuous since the opening pages. As Richard Pearce explains in "'Pynchon's Endings," what we have been left with is the possibility that Oedipa "may have become paranoiac *and* discovered the totalitarian underpinnings of Western democracy" (150). It could however very well be that only the former of these possibilities is reasonable. Oedipa herself wonders exactly what has happened to her and what she may have become the victim of during her journey. Thinking in the second person, she attempts to discern whether

...you have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream! onto a

network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst reserving their lies...or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you...so labyrinthine that it must have meaning beyond j Just a practical joke. Or you are fantasizing some such plot, in which case you are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull (Pynchon 128).

Pynchon gives us no way of discerning the complete truth. Without any definite answers, it seems reasonable to take Pearce's position that "while Oedipa develops, and while she goes about as far as it is possible to go in her quest for the secret of the Tristero, she goes nowhere" (Pearce 147). We can be certain that she is a changed person, and that her quest has led her to discoveries which she would likely rather not have made.

The paranoia present in The Crying of Lot 49 plays an important role in helping us to understand and appreciate other thematic ideas and structures which can be examined in the novel. For example, more recent criticism of The Crying of Lot 49 has begun to explore the religious framework of the story. While religious ideas may not be immediately apparent to the casual reader of the book, they do exist. The argument has been made for instance that "everything in The Crying of Lot 49 participates in either the sacred or the profane" (Mendelson 112). The banal suburban life Oedipa is shown to be living at the beginning of the book is of a profane nature, whereas her later discoveries, or "revelations" (113) concerning the Tristero are sacred. In uncovering what is sacred, she develops a paranoia which "is

a secular form of the Puritan consciousness" (Sanders 181). This conception points to the idea that the paranoiac, like the Puritan, seeks to find an ultimate source from which all things are governed or determined. The Puritan or otherwise religious will find this source in God, but the secular paranoiac finds the same source in "...conspiracy, governed by shadowy figures whose powers approach omniscience and omnipotence" (177). Paranoia can in this sense be likened to a non-theistic faith, a faith which accepts that there is someone who is controlling "levers behind the scene" (Braudy 632). If the paranoid individual is a religious figure, then Oedipa could perhaps be a saint.

It has been said that "we don't know much about Thomas Pynchon. We don't know how he writes. We don't know what he has in mind" (Pearce 1). While this is indeed true, and it is a fact which has made Pynchon a notoriously difficult writer to understand, we do know that through his complex and very learned prose, he is capable of presenting the modern world with all of its strangeness, chaos, and difficulties in great detail. Furthermore he appears to possess a clear understanding of how unfamiliar environments can change individuals and their perception. Of the literally hundreds of characters which Pynchon has created in his novels, Oedipa Maas is perhaps the most interesting and best developed, at least among his females. In a rather short number of pages we watch her progression from a quiet and naive housewife to a woman who has become both uncomfortably aware of and quite possibly permanently damaged by a

once hidden reality that seems to have been waiting for her to discover it.

Beginning with the account of Oedipa's innocent quest to settle the estate of an ex-lover, The Crying of Lot 49 becomes an often dark and mysterious exploration of possible conspiracy, and most importantly of an all-encompassing paranoia.

Becoming a paranoiac may be the only reasonable way for Oedipa to survive and to accept what she has seen and heard.

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