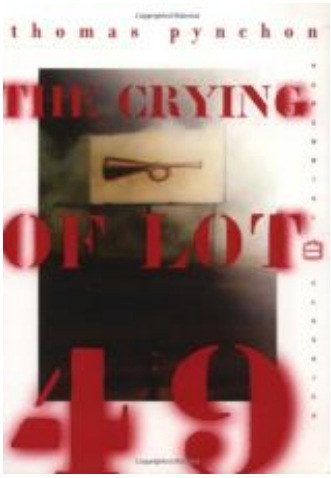
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The Crying of Lot 49

by Thomas Pynchon



About the Book

"So began, for Oedipa, the languid, sinister blooming of The Tristero."

Returning home one fine summer afternoon from a particularlydisappointing Tupperware party, Mrs. Oedipa Maas--ofKinneret-Among-The-Pines, California--opens a letter from the Los Angeles law firm of Warpe, Wistfull, Kubitschek and McMingus anddiscovers that she has been named executor of the estate of PierceInverarity, late Southern California real-estate mogul, entrepreneur, andOedipa's former lover. Things then did not delay in turning curious. Totally in the dark about what an executor does, Oedipa leaves her disk-jockey husband Wendell ("Mucho") to cope by himself with his "regular crises ofconscience about his profession," and sets off for Los Angeles and a meeting with lawyer Metzgar, her designated co-executor. Thus begins herOedipa-in-Wonderland journey through the rococo spider's-web tangle ofher late lover's leavings and her last-frontier, reality-check confrontationswith the Paranoids (an anglicized rock band), Yoyodyne Corporation ("one of the giants of the aerospace industry"), an off-the-cybernetic-wall inventor(Nefastis by name) attempting to defeat the Second Law of Thermodynamics, stamp collector Genghis Cohen, and "all manner of revelations" concerning herself and the mysterious, centuries-old Tristero.

This subversive, underground mail-delivery system--with its drop boxeslabeled W.A.S.T.E. ("We Await Silent Tristero's Empire") and its alienatedcarriers--appears to be a worldwide conspiracy of mind-boggling reach.Oedipa has never before had to deal with a worldwide conspiracy.Especially one whose existence and nefarious goals are hinted at in acollection of forged U.S. postage stamps, a collection that Pierce Inverarityhas left to be auctioned. That collection of Tristero stamps gives Oedipanightmares, and Pynchon's fascinating novel its title. There is also a resurrected Restoration revenge tragedy, The Courier's Tragedy, with lines long suppressed by the Vatican. Not to mention a group of anti-love dropouts called the Inamorati Anonymous. Oedipa uncovers clue after clue after clue, only to reach uncertainty. Does The Tristero exist? Do weneed another postal service? Are there vast conspiracies ruling our lives? Or are we hallucinating it all? At last, Oedipa sits in the auction room, with only herself and America to rely on.

Discussion Guide

1. Oedipa's search for The Tristero takes her through several labyrinths--the search itself, several buildings, night-time San Francisco, the Los Angeles freeway system. To what extent are we aware of the layout and purpose of each labyrinth? Is Oedipa's progress through each determined by her own choices? What does she discover in each?

2. How may we interpret Oedipa's endeavors as an attempt to impose order on a chaotic universe? What potential world-ordering systems and ideologies, including Inverarity's estate, must she contend with in the course of her quest? What potential systems and ideologies would she contend with today?

3. What does Oedipa learn about The Tristero through her own observations, and what through her own and others' conjecture? What conclusions does she draw? What do you think The Tristero represents? What are the implications of the acronym, W.A.S.T.E.?

4. Why does Pynchon leave Oedipa's quest unresolved? What more might she learn at the crying of lot 49?

5. What does Pierce Inverarity--with all his voices and all his possessions (while alive)--come to represent?

6.What societal outcasts, derelicts, and renegades appear in the novel, and to what purpose? What are the conditions of their lives? Do you think Pynchon would present the same examples in the same way today?

7. How are the Nefastis Machine and what it represents related to the "two distinct kinds" of entropy--the entropy posited by the Second Law of Thermodynamics (the inevitable deterioration of any system to a state of disorder and zero energy or meaning) and that of information systems (a tendency to discard excess meanings and approach certainty and predictability)? How, in turn, are the two kinds of entropy related to Oedipa's search?

8. What conclusions can we draw from Pynchon's exploration of the various technologies in American culture--television, radio, the telephone, electronics, the automobile, and others? What impact do these technologies have on the lives of Oedipa and others?

9. Pynchon writes that "Oedipa had believed, long before leaving Kinneret, in some principle of the sea as redemption for Southern California." Does she maintain that belief? Does she find other principles or sources of belief in redemption? What religious images and concepts does Pynchon present, and to what purpose?

10. After speaking with Driblette's mother and with the neo-fascist ""Winner" Tremaine, the troubled Oedipa thinks, "This is America, you live in it, you let it happen." What are the implications of that thought?

Author Bio

Thomas Pynchon is the author of V.; THE CRYING OF LOT 49; GRAVITY'S RAINBOW; SLOW LEARNER, a collection of short stories; VINELAND; MASON & DIXON; AGAINST THE DAY; INHERENT VICE; BLEEDING EDGE; and SHADOW TICKET. He received the National Book Award for GRAVITY'S RAINBOW in 1974.

Critical Praise

" Mr. Pynchon's satirical eye doesn't miss a thing, including rock `n' roll singers right wing extremists, and the general subculture of Southern California. "

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