



A Haunted Journey by Specter—Oedipa’s Paranoiac Quest in The Crying of Lot 49

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ABSTRACT

As a well-known writer of American postmodernism, Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* have received extensive attention and multi-dimensions interpretations from the critics. This paper will focus the various paranoid behaviors that Oedipa displayed in the quest of the mysterious mail system Trystero through the trace of the origin of “paranoia”. It will explore the alienation of individuals and even American society hidden beneath Oedipa’s quest from the perspective of alienation proposed by Fromm.

KEYWORDS: Thomas Pynchon; *The Crying of Lot 49*; paranoia; quest; alienation

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Pynchon is one of the most influential writers in contemporary American principally based on his obscure and dense style, labyrinth narrative and daunting complexity, among which the deep concern about human existence hidden beneath the text receive tremendous attention from critics. He has been considered as “the most exciting and original novelist since James Joyce and as the most interesting American novelist since William Faulkner.” (Nicholson and Stevenson, 1986). Pynchon delivers his concern about the material and spiritual predicaments of the American masses in the contemporary society in his works. Critics have noticed the hominological concern in his writings. For instance, Ye Huanian, the critic who firstly translates his *The Crying of Lot 49* into Chinese, once discussed the humanistic care Pynchon addresses in his first five novels. In his writings, Pynchon often applies the thermodynamic term “entropy” as a metaphor of the deteriorating tendency of postmodern America. This humanistic concern is intertwined with Pynchon’s historical representation. As Richard Poirier says, ‘eventually we get to wonder at almost every point if perhaps we are being given not fiction at all, but history’ (Poirier, 1986). It is not excessive to read Pynchon as a historical novelist who is concerned about the human conditions in his time.

Published in 1966, *The Crying of Lot 49* is the second book written by Thomas Pynchon, in which he traces the protagonist, Oedipa Mass’s quest for a secret and mysterious underground postal system “Trystero” confronting with the official one in San Narciso. Oedipa, a disgruntled American housewife in 20th century who perceives intolerably emptiness and meaninglessness in her daily life, decides to

conduct her ex-boyfriend Pierce Inverarity’s will. During her pursuit, she uncovers clues that lead her to that anti-government conspiracy of mail carriers, and she encounters many people as well as different marginalized social groups, each of whom gives her various interpretations of Trystero. She is gradually surprised to find that other fellow individuals are caught in the similar dilemma in one way or another. Eventually, Oedipa realizes that she might have become a paranoid, stepping into a huge conspiracy set up by Pierce to pursue a fantasy without concrete reference in reality. Along with her quest for truth, the alienation of almost every corner of the city even of the whole America is gradually presented. The novel depicts a picture of a disordered post-industrial society, and the mysterious mail system Trystero becomes a symbol of an alternative America that offers another method to communicate so as to achieve a sense of unity. Oedipa even begins to suspect that she is paranoid in the latter part of her journey. At the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*, the mystery which puzzles Oedipa as well as readers, still remains unsolved.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pynchon, as one the most outstanding postwar fiction writers in contemporary America, “has become the object of a worldwide critical interest.” (Abrams, 1964) The existing comments on Thomas Pynchon are mainly through the theories of postmodernism, structuralism, linguistics, existentialism, entropy, narratology, feminism, etc. The thematic studies on *The Crying of Lot 49* also include multi-dimensional exploration and interpretations. Critics principally approach this novel from the perspective of Oedipa’s quest, features of postmodernism in the works, including its uncertainty, entropy, narrative way, science and



technology, and Pynchon's historic and political views, as well as the racial and gender issues.

To begin with, the notion of "entropy" in thermodynamics appears in Pynchon's work repeatedly, which has been often employed by sociologists and literary critics to describe society in a metaphorical way. According to critics, *The Crying of Lot 49* illustrates that people at that time are living in a world where the "entropy" is constantly increasing and it will eventually move towards "heat death" or complete disorder unless human beings make effort to change. For instance, Richard Pearce distinguishes Pynchon's use of two kinds of entropies indicates a possibility of diversity and vitality as the counteraction against the final stillness in the heat death (Pearce, 1981). Similarly, Liu Xuelan explores the origin of entropy theory and suggests that *The Crying of Lot 49* is the most representative work that employs the notion as its central issue to reveal the writer's concern about humanity (Liu, 1998). Chen Shidan discusses the ambiguity and uncertainty in the novel from the perspective of entropy, indicating that Pynchon compares the chaotic postmodern society to an entropic one, which may deflect the complexity of our contemporary world as well (Chen, 2004).

Besides, some critics explore the ambiguity and indeterminacy of language, considering that Pynchon has presented a labyrinth of signs in the novel. Dan Hansong analyzes the names of people and places in the novel, and points out that the name "Oedipa" is the female counterpart of "Oedipus" in Greek myths, which indicates the prototype of "pursuit" because both of them acting as a mysterious lover on their quests respectively. He explains that the referential meaning of Mucho, Pierce, Dr. Hilarius and even place names all convey the features of characters or the social background (Dan, 2004). Joseph Slade regards the plot as a process of solving puzzles because these numerous clues and keys Oedipa discovered would lead her to more unsolved signs until the end in her quest (Slade, 1974).

When it comes to the theme of paranoia, critics tend to explore it mainly from the aspect of its cultural and sociological connotations delivered in *Gravity's Rainbow* for Pynchon's own definition of "paranoia" in it. Stephen Donadio and Mile Burrows are two of the first critics to the paranoia theme, especially the latter, who compares Oedipa's journey to a paranoid one (Burrows, 1967). Timothy Melly proposes that the social control in America portrayed in Pynchon's work resulted in the "conspiracy mania." (Melly, 57-81). This paper will trace the origin of paranoia proposed by psychologists and critics, and explains Oedipa's paranoid symptoms throughout her whole quest to explore and present the alienation hidden beneath it with the theory of alienation proposed by Fromm.

ANALYSIS OF THE QUEST AND ALIENATION

The Paranoid Quest of Oedipa

Many psychologists and critics have explored the phenomenon

of paranoia appeared in various fields. Psychologically speaking, paranoia is originally seen as a kind of psychological disorder. People who suffered from it may over-estimate his own importance and tend to believe that someone is planning to persecute him. Freud and Lacan thoroughly analyze the causes and mental mechanism of the paranoid (Freud, 1961). They distinguish the paranoid thinking between patients and normal people in terms of degree (Lacan, 2002). World War Two witnesses the extension of the connotative meaning of paranoia into culture, politics and literature. Richard Hofstadter in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* analyzes the paranoid way of thinking in American politics, proposing that its origin can be traced back to the colonial era (Hofstadter, 1965). Through examining the prevalence of paranoia in Western culture, John Farrell explains paranoia in two senses: its psychiatric origins and connotations after the Second World War. According to him, the second sense is "a metaphorical extension" of the former one, which indicates that people with a paranoid way of thinking may be morbidly preoccupied with autonomy and control for finding hostile motives in other people's behavior. This "metaphorical extension" emerges as a "satiric application of madness" in literature (Farrell, 1996).

Thomas Pynchon himself defines paranoia as: "like other sorts of paranoia, it is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that everything is connected" in *Gravity's Rainbow* (Pynchon, 1973). Besides, according to the psychologist Ernest Becker, paranoia is the reaction to "meaningless mechanical accident that takes such a heavy toll of beautifully live and pulsating, complex natural organism" (Becker, 1969). The paranoid tends to discover or even make connections between unrelated vents when facing a chaotic or disordered world so as to provide this world with "a focus, a center, with lines running from others to oneself and to one's objects and loved ones" in an unconscious way. O' Donnell concludes that "paranoia is a kind of logical desire: an attempt to make order out of chaos, to make or see connections" (O' Donnell, 1992). The creations of connections and discovery of connections are two stages for the paranoid's view towards the chaotic world. In a word, the paranoid people will become more sensitive to the outer world and create some connections between things for their own sake based on their suspicions unconsciously because connections, to some extent, mean comprehensibility.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa creates numerous connections between events in her quest of the mysterious Trystero. It seems that everything she discovers is, to some extent, connecting to the secret system because each clue may lead her to a new one: "With coincidences blossoming these days wherever she looked, she had nothing but a sound, a word, Trystero, to hold them together" (Pynchon, 1973). However, some connections may merely be her inventions because of her paranoid way of thinking, which can explain her uneasiness and sorrow when there is no connection. Therefore, she is more acute to every detailed clue she can get, and she tends to over-read whatever materials she has.

Primarily, Oedipa doesn't show much interest at the beginning when she receives the letter which announces that she has been named as the executor of the estate of Pierce, even though her life as a typical housewife is filled with emptiness. She looks down the whole city when she arrives San Narciso, thinking that "there'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out)" (Pynchon, 1973). Therefore, the "revelation" she has when she arrives at the city is all her own creation because of her expectation to find out something in the city based on her need for connections. When she watches a film on TV with Metzger, Metzger tell her that these commercial breaks are "of Inverarity's interest", which leads to her suspicion of the hidden message that Pierce tries to convey. When she goes to watch a play named *The Courier's Tragedy* for the reason of the possible resemblance to a lawsuit which involves Pierce and bone charcoal, she also shows her preoccupations of finding, or even creating connections. She asks Metzger to accompany her to "talk to Driblette" and feels "uneasy" for there seems to be some connections between the play and the bones which are unknown to her, and she says, "I want to see if there's a connection. I'm curious.", which suggests that she cannot tolerate that the reality doesn't match her conjecture about connections between these clues. Besides, when Oedipa goes to Berkeley to trace the origin of the materials about Trystero in *The Courier's Tragedy*, and finds some lines which have been shown in the play but there is nowhere to find the word Trystero in it, she says "No" and protests aloud. According to Becker, the paranoids' strong need for connections is resulted from their fear of chaos and disorder. Oedipa's creation of connections between things indicates her yearning for order as well as her intolerance of the conflict between her assumptions and the truth. Coincidentally, Pynchon explains the unbearable feeling resulted from unconnected things in *Gravity's Rainbow*: "If there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long" (Pynchon, 1973). Therefore, Oedipa is the representative of "paranoia" and tries to solve the puzzle of Trystero by discovering and creating connections from the play and even more clues and connections since then.

Patrick O' Donnell holds that paranoia is a way of thinking that "the multiple stratifications of reality, virtual and material" are "interconnected or networked". The paranoid tends to understand the world as a place where everything is related (O'Donnell, 1992). Oedipa decides to explore the play *The Courier's Tragedy* because of its similarity to bone suit, and she knows nothing about Trystero. However, she establishes the connection between the bone charcoal legend and Trystero shown in the play. During the conversation with Driblette, Oedipa again creates connections and asks about the smile of the actors "whenever the subject of the Trystero assassins came up" (Pynchon, 1966). After Driblette's response, even Oedipa herself realizes that she

plans to explore bones, whereas they talk about the Trystero instead. This plot indicates that Oedipa keeps collecting new clues between unconnected things, and assumes that these clue she found have inner relevance, as well as to the secret mail system Trystero. Moreover, Fallopian in *The Crying of Lot 49* depicts her quest of Trystero as "there's no way to trace it, unless you want to follow up an accidental correlation". O' Donnell comments on her journey as a quest of reduplication instead of subversion, and states that the quest is "the oedipal desire for an origin to the order of things" (O' Donnell, 1992). Therefore, Oedipa's various paranoid behaviors in the process of unfolding the mystery of Trystero are based on her subjective conjectures and inferences, and even herself gradually falls into the vast illusion woven by these created connections. Moreover, the paranoid tends to over-read the world for their preoccupied goal of creating connections between things. According to Terry Eagleton, they "discern an oppressively systematic signification in every detail, 'over-reading' the world", which suggests that they interpret the message more serious and thorough than others (Eagleton, 1986). In a word, the made-up relevance is the consequence of "over-reading". In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa copies the address and symbol when she firstly sees the mute horn symbol and a mail address in the bar, thinking that this symbol has message to communicate with her.

Thomas Pynchon characterizes Oedipa as a typical housewife who is inclined to assume the inner relevance between clues or establish connections everywhere in order to interpret the world in a paranoiac way. In fact, many writers of postmodernism depict paranoia or the paranoid in their works with the purpose of disclosing the reality which "has undermined pathologization of paranoia" according to Melly (Melly, 2007). He claims that the reality seems more to be a construct, and paranoia is a rhetoric employed by writers to indicate the deep concern of contemporary society. In a nutshell, the analysis of Oedipa's paranoia is not to deny her quest, but to indicate the ambiguity and alienation, as well as Pynchon's concern about the masses in the postmodern society.

The Alienation in Postmodern America

The depiction of the paranoiac way of thinking of Oedipa not only indicates the intellectual stance of postmodern writers, but also exposes the alienation of America as a whole. Pynchon depicts Oedipa as a paranoid who explores the world in a way of creating connections. However, the crux is not that all connections are false or invalid, but to indicate the essence of alienated individuals at that time, and to further explore the alienation and nothingness of the whole society in the United States which haunts Oedipa even everyone.

Erich Fromm defines "alienation" as "the fact that man does not experience himself as the active bearer of his own powers and richness, but as an impoverished 'thing', dependent on powers outside of himself, unto whom he has projected his living substance" (Fromm, 1955). He claims that the multi-

dimensional factors including philosophical, industrial, psychological are important in exploring the phenomenon of "alienation" in postmodern society, as well as the inner-relationship and their inner interaction. In a word, Fromm takes the functioning of modern society as well as individual experiences into consideration in theory of alienation. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, San Narciso, as the miniature of the whole America that Oedipa runs into, reveals a panorama of postmodern society which permeates into different aspects.

To begin with, Pierce's estate indicates that he is the representative of his own strata, because his impact prevails in the miniature of America and Oedipa's quest. In Pierce's Yoyodyne, scientists' research life has become a routine, and employees have even been trained as expressionless automatons. Staff in such a sophisticatedly managed corporation are forced to "sign away the patent rights to any inventions" they come up with, which may lead to the obliteration of creativity and individuality. Pynchon depicts it as "a symptom of the gutlessness of the whole city" in the novel. The forced routine serves the avoidance of daring to be special, which conceals the productivity and innovation. Under the mask of "team", they gradually tend to be homogenized, "nobody wants them to invent—only perform their little role in a design ritual, already set down for them in some procedures handbook" (Pynchon, 1966). Therefore, the engineers of Yoyodyne are alienated from what they invent. The staff work is given priority in such a capitalist society, and individuals are in a desolate condition when they are under control of the overwhelming machine production and the rigid regulations. The pattern of Yoyodyne is the deflection of the relationship between monopolistic government and individuality in reality. However, not only the small and unimportant are alienated for the real products, but also the stockholders represented by Oedipa, Metzger and Pierce because the plant in Yoyodyne is a piece of paper instead of a concrete existence. Although Oedipa is the witness of Pierce's kingdom as the executor, Pierce himself is a formless specter without a concrete body as mentioned before. Oedipa cannot even remember his concrete image, and there is no his own voices in various voices when she gets a call from "where she would never know". Pierce becomes "the shadow", which he calls himself (Pynchon, 1966).

Ironically, Pierce's estate and enterprises are tangible compared to his abstract existence. He is described as a mogul who has lost "two million dollars" in his spare time but still has numerous assets. Fromm proposes that there exists "an almost exclusive reference to the abstract qualities of things and people, and to a neglect of relating oneself to their concreteness and uniqueness" in contemporary western society. He even compares such abstractions to "ghosts that embody different quantities but not different qualities" (Fromm, 1955). Therefore, Pierce Inverarity is the representative of such an abstraction driven by his passion for power and wealth, and is completely alienated in postmodern society.

In a word, the owner and the staff are alienated in the mass production in Yoyodyne. With cutting off the connections between the products and themselves, people are stepping into meaninglessness and emptiness where the things they create are by no means concrete but abstract concepts, which at the meantime indicates that they are trapped in the capitalist society and lost the essence of life.

In *The Sane Society*, Fromm takes person's relationship into consideration when discussing the existence of alienation. According to him, it mainly consists of "the superficiality in comradeship, the lack of love in sexuality and that the disconnection between individuals and their social environment" (Fromm, 1955). Primarily, the relationships between man and woman indicates such kind of alienation. the unhappy marriage between Oedipa and Mucho assumes the sex liberation mainly based on the pleasure principle in later plots. As a middle-class suburban housewife living in the 1960s of America, she has to face the odds and ends of daily life without any changes. Mucho also complains a lot about his job and life. They share the similar spiritual alienation. After the night with Metzger, he abandons her and run away with another girl. even Pierce pays more attention to his wealth, estates and stamp collection than Oedipa. During her quest for Trystero, all her fellows including Dr. Hilarius, Metzger, Mucho, Driblette leave her and refuse to provide help. Besides, the relationship of man towards himself is alienated as well because man tends to see himself as a commodity instead of a human in postmodern society with its most salient feature—functions of market, which refers to that the evaluation of people is based on their exchange value, and leads to the loss of human dignity. Mucho's name is similar to the word "macho", which indicates that he is anxious to show his masculinity (Dan, 2007). He holds that it is "malicious" when someone uses "creampuff" at a party. Mucho also cares much about his appearance, shaving every morning three times with and three times against till blood comes out, and he intentionally imitates the hairstyle of Jack Lemmon, a popular film star at that time. However, he still fails to live up to the ideal image of American hetero white man. As Oedipa's husband, he consistently complains about everything in his life to his wife. He is sick of his first job in a car lot, and in his second job as a disc jockey he becomes self-estranged, loses his identity in the end, and becoming "a walking assembly of man", losing his uniqueness (Pynchon, 1966). Mucho's final destruction is a representative of a similar occasions of masculinity crisis in the conformed postmodern America. He finally confesses to Oedipa that he is taking some hallucinogenic drugs, which free him to feel that everything in the real world no longer matters, including Oedipa. Coincidentally, Dr. Hilarius, Oedipa's eccentric therapist, is a former Nazi doctor who performed psychological experiments on Holocaust victims. He generally sticks to Freudian psychoanalysis in his sessions, and enjoys making faces at his patients, which considered to be a useful but misunderstood therapeutic procedure. Eventually, he

becomes paranoid as well, and locks himself in his office, starts shooting at everything that approaches. He tries to escape from the reality, and refuses to carry his social responsibilities. During that process, Dr. Hilarius gradually loses connection with the outside world, his fellows, as well as himself.

Therefore, the isolates represented by Oedipa, Mucho, and Dr. Hilarius who may choose to keep paranoia or to resort to other supports are prevailed by the sense of exhaustion all the time. It is the consequence of living an “entropic” society in America. Pynchon elaborates the notion in his short story *Entropy*, in which he applies the notion to present the alienated society. He claims that American consumer culture is the inner cause, and American culture is in ultimate silence, absolute entropy, heat death. Entropy is a metaphor for the status quo and the extreme form of an alienated society, where the essence of information explosion is null and effective communication dies out. The phenomenon of alienation exists in almost every corner of modern people's life in *The Crying of Lot 49*.

At the end of the voyage, Oedipa realizes that “the legacy was America”, which suggests that the alienation of themselves results from the conspired suppression from American government as well as American heritage and culture. The essence of wars is covered up and glorified by the invisible anonymous authority. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa recalls the famous poster in wartime of Uncle Tom, which says “I Want You For U.S. Army” hanging over her bed (Pynchon, 1966). The image of Uncle Tom is twisted in Oedipa's view, “his eyes gleaming unhealthily, his sunken yellow cheeks most violently roughed, his finger pointing between her eyes” (Pynchon, 1966). The value of wars delivered by American government is that to be a soldier is to be patriotic and respectful even heroic. Soldiers obtain a sense of strength of unity and mission, which covered the truth that they are trained to kill and to be killed for the sake of the authority. The secret and mysterious mail system Trystero reflects the frustration of American Dream as well. According to the plot, Trystero lost its legitimate place in Europe in the 1849 reaction, and sought refuge in America “full of high hopes”, only to find that they were trapped in trouble. Around 1845 in the American postal reform movement, all the independent carriers that tried to compete with the official system were eliminated immediately. Trystero loses the chance of retuning to Europe nor operating without fetters in the Newfound Land. Numerous immigrants come to America for freedom and gradually begin to be assimilated by the melting pot, whereas Trystero is still the representative of anarchists. The United States is an extension of the old Europe in a new form, but its essence remains the same. The pattern of ideology in Europe still exists and keeps smothering people's dreams of freedom and justness in a secret way.

Pierce's collection of stamps haunted by the specter of Trystero records the history of ideological control from the

day the United States was founded. For instance, the stamp Columbian Exposition Issue presents the scene of Columbus announcing the discovery of the new land, with its style being changed into uncontrollable fear. It is undoubtedly that the discovery is a tremendous disaster for American Indians, who were slaughtered to the point of being almost exterminated. The other three stamps mentioned in the text indicate that Trystero subverts the mainstream and redefines motherhood, liberty and justness. In the stamp commemorating the centenary of the Stagecoach Express, the rider's head is twisted into a bizarre shape, which indicates a mockery of the history of the Westward Movement. On the stamp with the American painter Whistler's famous painting “Mother” as the background, the flowers are replaced with highly poisonous herbs such as rope grass, belladonna, poison lacquer. On the 1954 “Statue of Liberty” stamp, the goddess is depicted as hideous and murderous, implying the murder of vulnerable groups in the United States under the guise of freedom and democracy. On the Capitol Hill commemorative stamp, the statue of the goddess is stolen and replaced with a statue of an Indian with outstretched arms wearing a black uniform, which is the traditional attire of the Trystero postman. In a word, the images on these stamps originally used to commemorate the cultural identity, historical process and imperial mission of the United States have been completely changed from the perspective of victims, forming a powerful subversive discourse, thereby presenting the long-term alienation in the United States.

CONCLUSION

The Crying of Lot 49 mainly depicts a story about Oedipa's quest of the mysterious mail system Trystero. Pynchon manages to present the paranoid thoughts of the heroine as well as other characters. Oedipa, who seems to be haunted by specter, paranoidly creates connections between clues whereas still trapped in the puzzle till the end. She has been subjected to the paranoid. Pynchon's application of paranoia has actually deflected the postmodern society and its citizens' living condition. Paranoia in that world becomes a way to fight against the disorder and chaos of the postmodern America. He provides an unsolved ending to imply that people may not be able to approach the truth or reality, and also indicates the uncertainty and ambiguity.

The paranoia indicates the alienation of individuals and the whole America. Pynchon connects this deteriorating issue of human experience with the influence of post-capitalism, which emphasizes the development of material but ignores the individual spirituality. The significance of Pynchon's social exposition lies in that it inspires the audience to fight against with suppression, and self-conscious rebellion against authority is a manifestation of human life force.

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