

Is it a real Conspiracy or just a Paranoia? : *The Crying of Lot 49*

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실제 음모인가 아니면 단순한 환각인가? - 『제49호 품목의 경매』를 중심으로

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Abstract The Crying of Lot 49 presents the writer's major ideas through Oedipa Maas who tries to seek out the truth of a mysterious underground postal network, Tristero. Of the many themes inherent in The Crying of Lot 49, probably the most important and widespread of all is 'paranoia', which plays a major role in helping us to comprehend and appreciate other thematic ideas. The other main motif in this novel is a conspiracy. However, it is really difficult to distinguish between reality and fantasy in the crazed environment. Therefore, it is uncertain that the existence of Tristero is a real conspiracy or just a paranoia. The world revealed to her after considering Tristero's knowledge is totally different from the world previously familiar to Oedipa and she discovers that the nature and origins of Tristero will not be a quest of simple curiosity any longer and she greatly needs to escape from the closed system of perception. The secret of the Tristero case should be found in order to return to reality. In addition, accepting what Oedipa has seen and heard may be a reasonable way for her to become a paranoid.

요약 『제49호 품목의 경매』는 ‘트리스테로’라는 미스터리한 우편조직의 진실을 찾아가는 오이디파 마스를 통해 작가의 의도를 우리에게 보여주고 있다. 많은 주제 중에서 아마도 가장 중요하고 만연되어 있는 것은 ‘환각’이라고 할 수 있고, 이는 이 작품의 다른 주제들을 이해하는데 도움을 준다. 이 작품에 내재하는 또 다른 중요한 주제는 바로 ‘음모’이다. 하지만, 제정신이 아닌 세계에서 현실과 환상을 구별하는 것은 정말로 어려운 일이다. 따라서 트리스테로에 대한 존재가 실제 음모인지 아니면 단순한 환각인지는 확실하지 않다. 트리스테로에 대한 정보가 드러난 이후의 세계는 오이디파에게 친숙했던 세계와는 전혀 다른 세계였고, 트리스테로에 대한 그녀의 탐색은 더 이상 단순한 호기심이 아니었고 그녀는 어떻게든 그 닫혀있는 세계에서 벗어나야만 했다. 그녀가 현실로 돌아가기 위해서는 트리스테로의 비밀을 발견해야만 했었고, 그녀가 보고 들은 것들을 받아들이기 위해서 그녀가 환각 증세를 가지게 되는 것은 아마도 그 상황에 합당한 것이라고 할 수 있다.

Keywords : Conspiracy, Entropy, Paranoia, Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49

1. Introduction

Thomas Pynchon is a widely celebrated postmodern author and his *The Crying of Lot 49* first appeared in 1966. It is perhaps Pynchon's most approachable and entertaining book to date. *The Crying of Lot 49* gives

us his major ideas through Oedipa Maas who tries to seek out the truth of a mysterious underground postal network, the Tristero. We also find out Pynchon's unique writing style and his knowledge of science and philosophy through his novel. Of the many themes inherited in *The Crying of Lot 49*, probably the most

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important and widespread of all is 'paranoia'. Paranoia, which can be defined as "a thought process believed to be heavily influenced by anxiety or fear, often to the point of irrationality and delusion"[1], influences the most of the characters in the novel, especially of Oedipa. Paranoia affects Oedipa to lose her sense of reality and struggle to find the true nature of the Tristero's existence.

One of the most politically and socially turbulent decades in U.S. history. "The decade saw the rise of the drug culture, the Vietnam War, as well as the birth of numerous social welfare programs after the Democrats swept Congress in the 1964 elections. This was also the decade of John F. Kennedy's assassination, Martin Luther King's assassination, Civil Rights, and, to some extent, women's rights"[2]. The death of those leaders was shocking to the public and it has not been explained completely since that time. Those circumstances produced various theories of conspiracy. We can state that conspiracy was a very characteristic feature of that time. This kind of conspiracy is another main motif of *The Crying of Lot 49*. Oedipa returns to her house from a party and finds a letter which says that she became the executor of the estate of Pierce Inverarity, her former boyfriend who was very rich. The message seems to be very clear but not for her as she thought that she did not have qualifications for that task. However, she is ready to take the challenge and execute the estate. We can say that the conspiracy has begun from that moment.

2. Paranoia in Characters

The opening of the novel makes an innocent woman, Oedipa, who is an average suburban woman living a simple and boring life. She attends Tupperware parties and usually spends her time cooking. By presenting Oedipa as an average modern individual, Pynchon is setting the stage for her later to be more dramatic. "Perhaps the only unusual element of Oedipa's life, aside from her marriage to the former

used car dealer turned radio DJ Mucho Maas, is the relationship she once had with one Pierce Inverarity"[3]. This makes Oedipa to remember her last conversation with her former boyfriend. Before Pierce died, he spoke to Oedipa on the phone and began to ramble on in comedic voices. He is clearly exhibiting insane and paranoid behavior, and this behavior forecasts some of Oedipa's paranoid ramblings.

Oedipa's trip to San Narciso is the most important discoveries about the world and it leads her to a series of encounters with many individuals who are suspicious of the motives.

She drove into San Narciso on a Sunday, in a rented Impala. Nothing was happening. She looked down a slope, needing to squint for the sunlight, onto a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth, and she thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. 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.[4](68-69)

It seems that even San Narciso's inhabitants are caught up in some form of delusion. Immediately after arriving at her hotel, Oedipa meets Miles, a young musician who is one of the members of rock group named "The Paranoids". After brief conversation about music, Miles thinks that Oedipa is seeking sexual favors from him. Oedipa immediately identifies Miles as a paranoiac. Although the role of Miles in the novel is not important, his first interaction with Oedipa is essential in establishing the atmosphere of 'distrust'. After Miles, we are introduced the lawyer of Pierce Inverarity, Metzger, and he helps Oedipa arrange the financial affairs of her former boyfriend. Metzger inadvertently, or possibly deliberately, leads Oedipa to

anxieties of suspicion. When introducing himself, Metzger mentions his career as a child actor. After this, the television is turned on, and the channel is 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"[3].

This potential conspiracy is almost comically less sophisticated than those which Oedipa later believes to be uncovering. "Metzger is the first individual who chooses to encourage a frustrating experience for Oedipa by hiding the truth from her and by being otherwise stubborn to tell her what she wishes to know"[3]. He refuses to give her the right information about the movie and even though Oedipa agrees to play a sexual game to find out the plot of the movie. Metzger still gives ambiguous hints, and thus things grow more unclear.

One of the most important scenes takes place in 'The Scope' bar. Oedipa first finds odd, muted post-horn symbols in that bar's bathroom stall. These symbols look like just a simple graffiti and does not seem impressive, but they seem to have some mysteries and look like very important. It intrigues Oedipa to hastily copy them down. The post-horn symbols continue to appear throughout the novel. At first it is quite uncertain that who is communicating with whom and furthermore what is that they wish to say. After she finds the symbols, Oedipa is introduced to Mike Fallopian, one of the bar's most interesting patrons. He refuses to use the government postal service. When Fallopian explains his use of an alternate system of mail delivery, he makes Oedipa curious of that mail system, and leads her to the sinister world of the Tristero. "It is important to note that Oedipa's first hints of things which later haunt and disturb her thinking are introduced to her by a paranoid individual in an unfamiliar environment"[3].

All of the characters, even though there are minors, who visit 'The Scope' seem to be expressing some paranoid thinking. We are introduced to Metzger's friend

Manny Di Presso, a lawyer. Di Presso thinks that the Mafia is chasing him wherever he goes. He is certain that "All the time, somebody listens in, snoops; they bug your apartment, they tap your phone ..." [4](112). In fact, many of Pynchon's characters are frequently overwhelmed, deceived, or disturbed by information and they often make the story more ambiguous and systematically conspiratorial.

3. Mysterious Code: WASTE

Oedipa becomes involved with a conspiracy in the mail system. Letters are obvious forms of written communication, and make her to involve in the conspiracy. Throughout the novel, complications of the written message exist in both individual words and entire texts, ultimately creating multiple meanings for Oedipa and the reader alike. When Oedipa first encounters a reference to the postal conspiracy, she reads the name of the underground group as WASTE. The acronym W.A.S.T.E. stands for "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire" [4](227, 233). It pronounces like "waste"(garbage), at the same time, it refers to the mysterious underground postal system. In the society, human nature is treated as rubbish. "People always exist in a state of loneliness, anxiety, pain, confusion, and fear. Like the characters described in the novel, they rely on alcoholism, drug addiction, madness, and watching endlessly meaningless TV programs to get themselves intoxicated so as to escape from the social reality. Most ironically, even the psychiatrist Dr. Hilarius becomes insane" [5]. We can infer that the author's purpose is to expose the underside of American dream.

Since Oedipa had only seen the organization referenced in writing, she managed to interpret it much differently than its members intended. More ambiguity is created when she has to mail a letter by the system. Also, she must look closely to check the periods between the letters on the mailbox, which could easily

be mistaken for a garbage can. Oedipa encounters another abbreviation concerning WASTE, this one spelling out DEATH. Fortunately, she notices that someone has penciled in the true interpretation this time: Don't Ever Antagonize The Horn.

Riding among an exhausted busful of Negroes going on to graveyard shifts all over the city, she saw scratched on the back of a seat, shining for her in the brilliant smoky interior, the post horn with the legend DEATH. But unlike WASTE, somebody had troubled to write in , in pencil: DON'T EVER ANTAGONIZE THE HORN.[4](176)

4. *The Courier's Tragedy*

The Courier's Tragedy is an incredibly complex play. Through this play Pynchon tries to provide some source of understanding the Tristero. The story of *The Courier's Tragedy* is a Jacobean revenge drama in 17th century. There are two warring Italian factions and they attempt many ways to destroy each other's kingdoms. The play roughly refers a 'once-knotted horn' symbol and its connection of an organization known as Tristero. This reference is connected with the strange symbols drawn 'The Scope' bathroom walls that could potentially provide a needed clue in the messy landscape in which Oedipa has found herself in San Narciso. Even if Oedipa gains something from this Tristero reference, she cannot obtain further information about that. The director of the play, Randolph Dribbette, refuses to discuss the Tristero, also he does not want to inform whether the Tristero is included in the original 17th century text or not. Dribbette has created an "aura of ritual reluctance"[4](129) around the word. He tells Oedipa that "you can hide a tape recorder in my bedroom, see what I talk about from wherever I am when I sleep"[4](130). He seems to know that Oedipa is attempting to get more information through what she has heard in his play. Actually, Oedipa is so concerned

with what the Tristero is about that she considers Dribbette's suggestion of exploring his personal life. She is even attempting to fall in love with him. Fortunately, she does not have to follow through with this offer.

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"[4](132). "When this preoccupation begins to dominate Oedipa's mind more and more, it becomes clear that her patterns of thinking change dramatically as well"[3]. She seems to have made a suspicion that perhaps she is a part of something bigger that can threatens her life. She reexamines Inverarity's will once again to see whether he might have attempted to "leave behind an organized something after his own annihilation"[4](132).

5. Conspiracy against Tristero

Oedipa discovers that the nature and origins of the Tristero will not be a quest of simple curiosity any longer. She is in great need to escape from the closed system of perception. The secret of the Tristero case should be found in order to return to reality. After meeting Di Presso and Dribbette, she has confidence that there is too much paranoia and suspicion to find out clear answers. Therefore, Oedipa is very careful to ask about the Tristero from her next encounter with someone who knows the Tristero. Oedipa meets Stanley Kotecks who is a scientist at the previously Inverarity-owned Yoyodine corporation, and notices that he is drawing the post-horn symbol on some paper. Although she wants to find the exact meaning of his drawing, she intentionally avoids direct questions. Even so, her interest of the symbol causes Kotecks to suddenly order her to forget 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"[3].

It is not surprising that hints of the Tristero begin to manifest themselves even more obviously throughout the city. "A bronze historical marker at a scenic lake which Oedipa visits commemorates a 19th century ambush of postal workers by "masked marauders"[4](141), a nursing home resident she encounters wears a signet ring with the post-horn symbol engraved on it, a stamp expert discovers the symbol hidden on a stamp out of Pierce's large collection"[3]. Oedipa is slowly aware of that the Tristero's influence is widespread in this society. She has searched many signs of it, but the true nature of these signs is not revealed easily. Because of this, Oedipa is afraid of that "she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself"[4](147). 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"[3].

It is really difficult to distinguish between reality and fantasy in the crazed environment. The world revealed to her after considering Tristero knowledge is totally different from the world previously familiar to her. The city is wild and there are drunks, bums, pederasts and the walking psychotic. This seems to show both Oedipa and the reader the lost and decayed America. In every location in San Francisco, we can notice the Tristero post-horns. It is unclear whether they are real things or imagined ones by Oedipa. Therefore, she seems to have lost the sharp detective skills as she discovers these symbols. This makes her difficult to pursue the forbidden information. Like many paranoiacs, she is inclined to consider things in certain ways and thus she has lost her ability to distinguish between what she sees in her mind and what she witnesses with her eyes. For instance, while walking through Chinatown Oedipa believes she is seeing "a man, perhaps a man, in a black suit, was

standing in a doorway half a block away, watching her"[4](171). Later she has a chance to watch children who are playing hopscotch and she believes that their chalk hopscotch board may have relevance to "dates from a secret history"[4](171). The experience of wandering through San Francisco makes Oedipa to the conclusion that all of her encounters have been organized in somehow. Maybe the Tristero controls the communications of "God knows how many citizens"[4](179).

Delusional and paranoid thinking could not master Oedipa. Ironically enough, Dr. Hilarious, her psychiatrist, has surrendered to his unusual fantasy thanks to the paranoid forces. Hilarious is a good example of how unbalanced a person who is ignorant of reality can become paranoid. He shows himself who possesses an extremely fragmented mind. As he aims a rifle at Oedipa's face, he considers his desire "to remain in relative paranoia"[4](192). Oedipa manages to take control of the situation by disarming Hilarious of his gun. "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"[3].

Even if Oedipa takes courage to face dangers, she cannot avoid a lingering fear which has come over her after being deserted by everyone she needs. Those individuals can help her to solve the Tristero mystery and to go back to a normal state of mind. Her husband loses possession of his character and thanks to the effects of LSD experimentation, he becomes "a whole room full of people"[4](199). However, none of whom will answer Oedipa's inquiries or even engage in a meaningful conversation. Randolph Wharfinger, the playwright, commits suicide, and Oedipa suspects that he took his own life because something has to do with the Tristero. Metzger who was once Oedipa's close aide, disappears with a depraved 15 year old girl. Oedipa enters into a state of panic, and she feels like she is "fluttering out over an abyss"[4](214) which has swallowed all that she once knew. We do not know

why all of these men have simultaneously abandoned Oedipa when she needs them the most. "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"[3].

Although she continually pursues the Tristero, the amounts of Oedipa's research ultimately is very little. It seems that she has been threatened by unknown evil forces. Oedipa becomes "reluctant to follow up anything"[4](224), and is desperate to get away from these evil forces and to alleviate her troubled mind. As a result, she begins to seriously consider suicide. She goes driving at night with her lights turned off to expect something would happen. When fate prevents her from collision, she decides to be more deliberate next time. It seems that suicide is the only solution to escape her problems. Her attempts to impose a desperate rationality on the situation. She is in her dilemma. Her choice becomes either to maintain to relate to this hostile world through paranoia, or to depart from it. In the end, Oedipa chooses to continue her life, but whatever it is "they'll call it paranoia"[4](229).

For it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless. Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth. ... Ones and zeroes. So did the couples arrange themselves. At Vesperhaven House either an accommodation reached, in some kind of dignity, with the Angel of Death, or only death and the daily, tedious preparations for it. Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed

full circle into some paranoia.[4](242-243)

Oedipa is ultimately left in complete bewilderment, without having a satisfying answer to her quest. Therefore the novel ends with the mystery of Tristero unsolved, and Oedipa remains lost and frustrated without any clear answers. Pynchon does not give us no way of discerning the complete truth.

6. Entropy and Information

One of Pynchon's central metaphors is the concept of entropy, which has two clinical definitions. In thermodynamics, entropy corresponds to the unavailable (wasted) energy when mechanical work is derived from the heat energy of a closed system (any system for which there can be no gain or loss of energy from its surroundings). In communication theory, entropy is analogous to audio or visual static, any outside influence that inhibits communication and, possibly, distorts the message for the receiver. In each field, entropy is expressed by a similar equation. "Pynchon plays upon this coincidence, using the term to represent a measure of the degree of disorder or chaos in the universe, and in any system within the universe. This chaos becomes the adversary to Oedipa's quest"[6]. By using entropy as a metaphor, Pynchon describes a fundamentally negative view of life. "The second law of thermodynamics dictates a universal heat death, and a deterioration of all closed systems; if we follow its linear indication. But a human being is not a closed system, and neither is a societal institution, in each there is a constant energy exchange outside itself"[6].

Writing itself must be an organizational process, if it is to communicate information, and is therefore an anti-entropic gesture. If our chaotic opponent is the rational concept of entropy, this mode of thought may be a positive, constructive alternative for circumventing it. "Pynchon's use of humor, puns, coincidence exemplify this alternative, and result in a positive

answer to the apparent "exitlessness" of American life"[6].

The law of entropy was slowly spread out observe and describe social phenomena in the 20th century. "According to the theory, in an isolated and closed system, the entropy value will only increase, and the matter and energy will dissipate irreversibly from the available to unavailable, from the valid to invalid, and from the orderly to disorderly. The entropy of the world always tends to the maximum, and eventually the effective energy which can be used to do work does not exist on the earth. The temperature everywhere will reach equilibrium, so the whole universe will be in the state of "heat death", that is, the eternal silence of death"[5].

While the novel is nominally a mystery about the relationship between the death of our protagonist's former boyfriend and a secret mail-carrying operation known as Tristero, the subtext is concerned with how we sort and interpret information in highly entropic systems. When we talk about a highly entropic system as it relates to communication theory, we're really talking about the correlation between chaos and information. As chaos increases, more and more information is produced, but it also becomes more and more difficult to understand. As the degree of information increases, the likelihood of successfully interpreting the meaning of it decreases. Thus, the more signs she discovers and understands the more situation complicates.

7. Oedipus Myth

Many critics focus on symbolism and meanings behind Oedipa's name. "Even her name is a part of her identify, as "Oedipa" references the Greek myth of Oedipus who tries to find his identity because he was abandoned at birth. Like Oedipus, Oedipa search for answers to the mysteries of the Tristero[7]". In this, it is possible that two kinds of reading can be performed. We can focus on the Greek tragedy based on Freud's

interpretation or just follow Greek Oedipus reading. "Some attempt to link Oedipa's actions throughout the novel with ideas expressed in the actual diegesis of Sophocles' tragedy directly. While there is a sense of reconciliation between the Oedipus myth and Oedipa's tendencies within the novel, they are not based in psychoanalysis, rather the strongest correlation"[8]. In each case, this kind of problem is occurred by someone's unexpected death. Both of the characters have to manage death through inquiry while performing constant searches in which they are, and there is an implication of the problem they are attempting to solve. It is here that we can find the strongest connection between Pynchon's Oedipa and Sophocles' Oedipus.

In fact, there are classic elements of detective fiction in Pynchon's novel. Oedipus acts as a detective through her search for the Tristero. She assumes that she finds the mystery of the Tristero through Inverarity's death, however, it is not necessarily linked to the Tristero. The readers are not given just cause to believe that the Tristero caused it although she finds the Tristero. "For both Oedipa and the reader, the Tristero represents some clandestine entity that a threat through sheer obscurity, and she must uncover this polluted actor, in all of its political potentiality, in order to find what it means. There is an equation between the detective's process of unearthing the culprit and Oedipa learning the meaning behind the Tristero, although Oedipa does not care for removing the so called polluted actor from society. Both Oedipa and Oedipus question witnesses in attempts at reaching a conclusion about their respective mysteries, thereby gaining a greater sense of epistemology that both realize they lacked in regard to the given situation"[8].

8. Conclusion

The paranoia is the key word of *The Crying of Lot 49* and it plays a major role in helping us to comprehend and appreciate other thematic ideas. It also helps us to figure out the structures which can be

examined in the novel. In the end, Oedipa finds herself alone and alienated from that society, having lost touch with the life she used to lead before she began her attempt to uncover the mystery of the Tristero. The drug culture plays a big part in this sense of isolation. The world around Oedipa seems to be a world perpetually on drugs, manic and full of conspiracies and illusions. And though that world is exciting and new, it is also dangerous: drugs contribute to the destruction of Oedipa's marriage, and drugs cause Hilarius to go insane. Oedipa hallucinates so often that she seems to be constantly high, and ultimately, this brings her nothing but a sense of chaotic alienation.

While Thomas Pynchon is a notoriously difficult writer to understand, he is able to present the modern world which has strange, chaotic and difficult features. Furthermore he clearly understands how unfamiliar environments can affect individuals and also their perception. Of many characters that Pynchon has created in his novels, maybe Oedipa Maas is the most interesting and best developed character. We watch that she is a very quiet and naive housewife from short number of pages, however, she becomes a woman who has uncomfortably aware of and very possibly permanently damaged by a hidden reality. This novel simply starts with Oedipa's innocent quest of her former boyfriend, and it develops into a dark and mysterious exploration of conspiracy and paranoia. To accept what Oedipa has seen and heard, it may be a reasonable way for her to become a paranoiac.

Pynchon's literary creation is ingenious, and it is a big challenge to the traditional novel. His symbolism provides readers more space of imagination and interpretation. Therefore, we can easily understand the American society after reading his novel. Besides, "his postmodern narrative techniques and black humor bring inspiration to the reading public. When interpreting his works, we should keep an open mind and recognize that the purpose of the subversion expressed in postmodern novels is not to destroy the existing world, but to liberate the repressed personality, to dispel the

hierarchical social order, and to release more free space for humanity"[5].

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