Learning to play the tower: Oedipa's transformation from tourist to post-tourist in The Crying of Lot 49

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May 31, 1999
Learning to Play in the Tower:
Oedipa's Transformation from
Tourist to Post-Tourist
in The Crying of Lot 49

by

John Lennon Jr.

A Thesis
Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee
of Lehigh University
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in

The English Department

Lehigh University
May, 1999
THESIS SIGNATURE SHEET

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts.

5 May 1994
Date

Thesis Advisor

Graduate Advisor

Chairperson of Department
thank-you mom, dad, kathleen and maryellen
i am where i am because of your love and support
i owe you all everything

special thanks also to dr. maryjo haronian whose sunday afternoon phone-calls from rooftops in the village and repeated guidance through the course of this paper helped a romantic like myself find a comfortable space within the post-modern world of thomas pynchon.
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ABSTRACT

This paper employs the terminology of the tourist experience to re-examine the role that Oedipa Maas engages in *The Crying of Lot 49*. She is not simply a post-modern heroine—a term that includes the range of the nihilistic to the playful—rather she is a post-tourist, a woman who knows that there is no authentic experience and therefore plays in the texts that she finds herself trapped within.

She does become one all at once. In this paper, I track Oedipa’s transformation from the pie-eyed tourist, who believes in the authenticity of the system that she has just entered, to what I label the “Structural-Anthropologist” Oedipa, who believes that she can be objective and come to a conclusive understanding of the text that she is reading, to what I term the Humanist Oedipa, who after realizing that there is no objectivity, and staring into the pit of nihilistic post-modern thought, tries to cling to any romantic ideal of self that she can, to finally becoming a post-tourist in the last scenes of this chapter.

Through the lens of the tourist experience, *Lot 49* is not ultimately a novel that sinks into the mire that post-modernist thought could point to, rather, it is a novel that rises through play into the many possibilities of the post-tourist.
Patrick O’Donnell, in the introduction to *New Essays on The Crying of Lot 49*, explains that recent criticism has shifted focus from the “identity crisis” that plagues Oedipa Maas throughout this novel to a more concentrated look at such topics as the “conflation of epistemology, thermodynamics, and information theory.” It is generally accepted that Oedipa is Pynchon’s post-modern heroine and recent critics seem unconcerned to explain the ramifications of this vague statement. In my opinion, to discuss Oedipa as simply post-modern is to take a character in an extremely complex novel and to simplify her into overly safe, ambiguous terms. The term post-modern includes a range of reactions to the in-authenticity of language from playful to nihilistic. Thus, proclaiming Oedipa as post-modern would suggest the possibility that she has looked into the abyss of language and succumbed to despair. I think, therefore, that there is a need for criticism to re-examine Oedipa in new terms which can help us to locate her in relation to post-modernism and within the post-modern range, tracking her movement and transformation.

These new terms will also track the reader through the different stages of awareness in experiencing this text. We can, therefore, participate in a new reading; we can create a space within the text to examine ourselves as readers and our reactions to the ideas that are imposed (written) upon us by Pynchon. When *Lot 49* was first published in the mid sixties, Pynchon was reacting to the increasing commodification of culture and the absurdity that is directly related to this phenomena. Pynchon critiques this culture, not by condemning, but by celebrating one particular side of post-modernism. The reader who picks up this novel in the tail end of the twentieth
century—more than thirty years after it was first published—is situated within a system that is getting increasingly like the system of Pierce Inverarity, and reading Lot 49 forces the reader to examine (transform) his/her own definition of post-modernism. For while it is easy for us to consider ourselves as savvy post-modernists—we are aware of the absurdity of pop culture and can laugh at the on-going competition between Disney and the porn industry in Times Square in Manhattan—I think that we have become lazy with this label and we do not think of the bleakness one encounters when using this term for the first time. Pynchon forces us to actively think about what this term implies, offering us no easy escape from the text that we are entrenched within.

Pynchon invites the reader to peer through a new lens at his America. Five times in this novel the word “tourist” is used. While the tourist imagery may be quickly dismissed as insignificant in a text that is crammed with imaginative but ultimately frustrating sign systems, I think it is beneficial for us to look at this novel in tourist terminology. For when we look at Oedipa’s transformation through the lens of the tourist experience, we will see that Lot 49 is not ultimately a novel that sinks into the mire that post-modernist thought could point to, rather, it is a novel that rises through play into the many possibilities of the post-tourist.

John Urry, in his book, The Tourist Gaze, an extremely innovative look into the tourist industry in the post-modern world, builds on the term “post tourist”, an expression that was first introduced by M. Feifer. This term describes a person who is freely floating among the worn-down paths (systems) of our modern society. This knowledgeable creature “knows that there is no authentic tourist experience, that there
are only a series of games or texts to be played.” This is the Oedipa that we leave in the last few pages of the text, but who is quite different from the Oedipa that is seen throughout Lot 49. For the post tourist Oedipa is a world apart from the woman who, at the beginning of this novel, is a pie-eyed tourist believing in the authenticity of the system (San Narciso) that she has just entered. The post-tourist Oedipa is different from what I will label the “Structural-Anthropologist” Oedipa who believes that she can be objective, and can, through a conscientious decoding of signs, come to a conclusive understanding of the text that she is reading. The post-tourist Oedipa is also different from what I’ll call the “Humanistic” Oedipa, who, after realizing that there can be no objectivity, staring into the pit of post-modern thought, tries to cling onto any romantic idea of self that she can. Only through the Humanist and Structural-Anthropologist Oedipa’s does Pynchon create a post-tourist heroine who is playing with the absurdity of the system (representational reality) that she has found herself within.

While the transformation from tourist to structural anthropologist to humanist to post-tourist takes place throughout this whole novel, Oedipa realizes that her reality will be “changing” within the first chapter of Lot 49. In what I view as the key passage in this novel, Oedipa, while vacationing in Mexico City with Pierce Inverarity, stares at a painting done by Remidios Varo and has a feeling that she is trapped within a “tower” (21) and believes her assumed freedom has been a figment of her imagination from which “there’d been no escape”(21).

But what exactly is this tower and why is it impossible to escape? In this novel
about the desire to communicate and the futility of trying to do so, the Tower can be seen as the Tower of Language. For as Roland Barthes, a man who went through a few transformations himself in his career, states in *Pleasure of the Text*, "the inter-text is: the impossibility of living outside the infinite text." There is no escaping the Tower of Language because we are only able to think in linguistic terms and to try to circumvent this is impossible. Oedipa, no matter how hard she tries to legitimize the extraneous material that is presented to her--becoming a sleuth detective and "discovering" the plot, the characters, and the situations--will gradually come to believe that all choices (systems) lead nowhere because there is no "authentic" meaning. While texts come in all different shapes and sizes, they are still just texts (language), signifier's without any specified Signified, and to be present in the world means to read and be read as one. Pynchon has Oedipa (and consequently, the reader) locked within the ever-present Tower of Language, with her useless "knights of deliverance" (22) violently torn away from her, trying to use her "gut fear and female cunning" (21) to arrive at some understanding of the malignant force that has trapped her within its "formless magic" (21). Oedipa is on Barthes "inter-text" tread-mill of meaning-making, and no matter how many people she meets, or signs she witnesses, or systems she decodes, she is again and again disappointed with false promises of significance that only leads her to more people, more signs, and more systems. She moves from text to text and not only comes to the understanding that all texts that she encounters are only representations (which is alarming enough to her) but that they are only *just* representations--signifier's with no signified--and there is nothing "behind"
these texts. This leaves her frustrated, suicidal, and on the brink of insanity. In other words, Oedipa has realized the dark side of post-modern theory. "The tower is everywhere" (22), there is no escape, creation is an impossibility and Truth (with a capitol "T") is a fiction causing Oedipa to almost lose herself to desolation. Oedipa, however, begins to find pleasure in the absurdity of her surroundings and she allows herself to explore the possibilities, the choices, that language permits. In other words, she has begins to play. While "the tower is everywhere" (22) and may not allow her to escape, Oedipa’s playing with language allows her the freedom to explore within the tower, to move up and down the stairs and to “survive” within the space that she recognizes. Where play is the ideal within the tower, the only option for a woman who understands her position within the text is to become a type of post-tourist who revels in the absurdity of modern day culture.

Let us first examine Oedipa, however, as she first begins her transformation. Oedipa, when she leaves Kinneret for San Narciso, becomes what The International Union of Travel Organizations calls a “temporary visitor” or tourist.

**Oedipa as Tourist**

Oedipa comes home from a Tupperware party to the revelation that she has become a “executrix” (9) and that she is going to be thrust into the role of ordering an estate, of “projecting a world” (82) that is logical and regulated on a system that she finds out is illogical and chaotic. In the opening scene of *Lot 49*, we first encounter Oedipa as part of a gendered class that in the sixties seemed to be on the verge of extinction—she is a young suburban housewife who is barren of both career and
children. As Frank Kermode, in an essay on the theory of fiction, notes, "[Oedipa] stands in her living room before a blank television set (communication system without message) and considers the randomness she projects on the world; thoughts about God, a Mexican hotel, dawn at Cornell, a tune from Bartok, a Vivaldi concerto for the kazoo." It is this randomness that frightens her and she leaves Kinneret reluctantly, nervous of what she may find.

Oedipa thinks as she drives on the unidentified "singing highway" (25) that leads her straight to the guard towers of YOYODYNE, that she will only be a "temporary visitor" in the world of Pierce Inverarity. An old lover has died and, for some unknown reason, she has been chosen to be part of the "final" funeral arraignments. She is moving from a realm of "ordinary" life to a type of "non-ordinary" existence. She enters a carnivalesque text and her eyes are wide open trying to capture/experience all the sights. She is free from the structures of her routine of shopping, making dinner and listening to her husband complain about his daily defeat; Oedipa has entered a state of liminality where she attempts to be anonymous and to make sense (structure) of the randomness of the destructured (or at least she thinks so at first) state that she encounters. She is the tourist discovering the America of Pierce Inverarity.

Oedipa’s first entrance into this "new" America is her stop at the Echo Courts—a fascinating scene in terms of tourist practices. She stops at the motel because of its huge sign (marker) that catches Oedipa’s attention. The huge nymph is both erotic and unfamiliar and, Oedipa, nervous, enters the strange environment where “nothing
moved” (27) except for the very strange hotel manager. Oedipa immediately sizes up this native as a “drop-out” and classify's him in terms of a style that she is familiar with--“Beatle haircut”(27). Not only is she the consumer (she is paying for the room/experience), she is also being consumed and classified by the native inhabitant as one of the “older chick[s]” (28) type. Entering this new text, Oedipa is very much described in terms of a tourist who is trying to identify and understand the new schema that is presented to her.

The field of tourist studies sheds some light on the way we, as readers, can view Oedipa’s entrance (and consequently our own) into the text of Pierce’s America. Louis Turner and John Ash, whose book *The Golden Hordes* is an interesting look at tourist practices, write that the tourist is a sort of modern day pilgrim who enters a transitional (liminal) period as a way of leaving the structured certainties of daily experience in order to enter a state of ambiguity and uncertainty. The tourist is released from the structure that has bound her and because the new structure is not yet realized by the individual, she may feel as if she is voluntarily moving around a system, discovering the system, or, to express this in another way, creating the system. It is a “freeing” experience and once a tourist enters this state of liminality, this new found authorship should undermine the hold that the ordinary existence had on the individual. This state of chaos (Turner and Ash describe it as “expressive activities of leisure”) is a way to evaluate all of the individuals experiences--both past and future. Basically, the tourist takes a trip into a text that is very different from what she knows, and, therefore, begins to question the text that she left. The tourist, like Oedipa upon
her entrance to the Echo Courts, is drawn to the unknown, the non-routine, and more importantly, the act of being the explorer and discovering (authoring) that which had not been known.

But this, of course, is a fiction. The tourist does not discover or create anything. And therefore the tourist is viewed as a caricature by the text that the tourist has entered. He wears his loud Bermuda shorts stuffed with currency to be spent on tangible replica's of the places he "discovers." She has a large, expensive camera around her neck, ready for the "perfect" picture to capture the "authentic" experience which she will be able to take back home to show to family and neighbors. But the caricature, according to some researches of modern tourist practices, may not be fair (although it may be accurate). Dean MacCannell, another cultural critic, says that the problem a tourist faces is not based on being a bumbling tourist, rather, the problem is not being able to be more of a tourist. MacCannell writes, "The touristic critique of tourism is based on a desire to go beyond the other mere tourists to a greater appreciation of society and culture and it is by no means limited to intellectual statements. All tourists desire this deeper involvement with society and culture to some degree; it is a basic motivation for travel." The tourist wants to be accepted into a text as authentic; she does not want to be an outsider, rather, she wants to be incorporated into the text. The tourist, therefore, who has escaped her system of routine, and entered this perceived state of liminality, is not actually looking for a way to float unfettered from text to text, rather, she is looking for a way out of this perceived notion of the void and desires to attach herself onto a new system—one that
has been already established. To be more of a tourist is to be a part of the culture that she is consuming. The “appreciation” and “deeper involvement” is the need of the tourist to be part of a text that can be coherently read and that can also read her. So the honeymooning couple in Cancun will call their waiter by his first name and hope that the bartender will remember from the night before that they like their Margaretta’s shaken and not stirred.

The tourist, therefore, who leaves her home to be seen as an individual, to experience an authentic event that is outside of her range of perspective and to celebrate her individuality, actually desires to conform, to be part of the text that she is gazing at, to be incorporated while at the same time to be noticed and considered special (different). This duality, of course, is impossible and will leave the tourist frustrated, humiliated and eventually broke. It is only the post-tourist who realizes that this tour is futile because individuality is not authentic anywhere, and, as Barthes notes, one can derive a certain amount of pleasure “from a way of imagining oneself as an individual, of inventing a final fiction, the fictive identity.” But the tourist, however, still believes in the illusion of individuality and, realizing that the clock is ticking on her vacation, switches her consumption of cultural signifier’s into overdrive.

Societies and cultures, aware of this desire on the part of the tourist, set up representational spaces or, as P. L. Pearce, who studied tourist practices during the holidays, describes, “tourist environments.” These new locations at which tourists can go and see organized sights are set aside (and set up) for them to experience in an
inauthentic and contrived manner. The tourist buys into what D. J. Boorstein, who wrote a book on this idea, calls a "pseudo-event"\textsuperscript{12}, where the drama comes in a neat package with little reference to the "real" text that the tourist thinks she is trying to decode. Tourist guides, then, are needed to point the tourist in the "right" direction and to certify that the experience that she has just been a part of was "genuine" and "authentic." So the tourist in France will see a restaurant advertised in a \textit{Let's Go!} travel guide and consider that restaurant as an "authentic" and "real" \textit{French} restaurant because it was listed in the book (Bible?). The tourist who entered into this (perceived) state of liminality, needs her experience to be verified either by "experts" who set up the tours, or, if she dares to venture on her own, by markers that have been set up to explain a special attraction.\textsuperscript{13} These attractions, of course, are socially determined; the individual only follows the signs that are laid out and reproduces them (by film/models/stories) to show to others.

The tourist is an "anonymous amorphous mass\textsuperscript{14} who never fully becomes involved in the text she is trying to decode. And while there may be some limited recognition of individuality—the waiter may remember the honeymooner's names—the tourist never becomes an individual in the text that she is consuming. The tourist is a voyeur of a culture (text) who looks out, but is not part of, the text that she is consuming. The tourist, therefore, will eventually return back to the text that she escaped from—vacations, by definition, must end—and will re-enter the structured, ordered, routine environment of "ordinary" life with trinkets and models and pictures of her experience to prove to family and friends that she had discovered an "Other"—a
system that is different from what she knows. And while a tourist may have stories and pictures of wild, exotic sights, she will know that it was the differentness of the situation that made the sights wild and exotic and will have the old cliche ready, "It was a nice place to visit but . . ."

If we look at Oedipa in the first part of this novel through this lens of the tourist, we will be able to better understand her starting point as well as the distance she must cover to arrive at her post-tourist stance at the end of this novel. Oedipa, at first, enjoys the randomness of her liminal (tourist) state. It is different, unfamiliar and full of possibilities. She has escaped the system that is in place for her in Kinneret; her new system is different from her marriage, her Tupperware parties, her shrink and his experimental "bridges" (17) and her second-class status (she must wait for Mucho to explain why his day was a another defeat before being allowed to speak) within the familial system. Her co-executer is beautiful and bearing gifts of "a debonair bottle of French Beaujolais" (28) and she allows herself to be seduced by the child actor—Oedipa's only extramarital affair (change San Narciso to a villa in Southern Italy and a modern day tourist would pay exorbitant fee's for a pseudo-event like this). Oedipa is the center of Metzger's attention, something that is foreign, and at first, disarming to her. Her husband and shrink only relate to her in terms of themselves and what she can do for them. Even Pierce did not make her the focal point of his attention, preferring to stare at his stamp collection then to spend time with her. But Metzger is a man of knowledge/power who seems to have answers that she wants and he is willing (for a price) to give them to her. He is a man who sets up the exotic game of Strip Botticelli.
that is "non-ordinary" with a touch of danger associated with it. And, most important, he is a man who is both the dispenser of clues and the interpreter of them. Drunk, Oedipa appreciates Metzger as the tourist guide with a plethora of information who can explain the native world around her. Within the room of the Echo Courts, Oedipa is able to ask questions with a simple yes/no answer. Metzger has set up a binary system that Oedipa—-with only a little form of resistance involving layers of clothes and a can of hair spray--succumbs to.

It is important to note that her sexual climax (with the sound of The Paranoids playing in the background) happens at the exact time as Metzger’s and it “coincided with every light in the place, including the TV tube, suddenly going out, dead, black” (42). Oedipa has played the part of the tourist; she has traveled into a different culture, she has looked around and noticed the differences, and she has been purposely gullible in a situation that culminated in an exotic and intense experience. She reaches a climax (sexual) to a very interesting event that was staged for her.

It was only a climax, however, within the binary system that she feels uncomfortable living within, and not true jouissance in Barthean terms—this is left to the post-tourist to enjoy. The lights come back on in the motel room and many things begin to be revealed to Oedipa. Inverarity, she finds out, has told Metzger that she “wouldn’t be easy” (43). Inverarity, who is never seen but makes his presence felt throughout the novel, adds a new dimension to the package tour that Oedipa has become a part of, and understanding this, she begins to cry. Like the tourist spaces that P. L. Pearce describes, Oedipa has been set up from the beginning—how did Metzger
ever find out which motel she was staying in?—and entered a text that was created for her. She is faced with the realization that the experience that she thought she was enjoying has not been authentic; the seduction was only a "pseudo-event" that has been set up for her. Oedipa is the tourist who realizes that the wizard is not really a wizard at all and begins to feel curious enough to go checking behind the curtain. Her time as a tourist is over, and since "things then did not delay in turning curious" (44), Oedipa begins to see America as Pierce did, as "thousands of little colored windows into deep vistas of space and time" (45). With her new found understanding, Oedipa is faced with the choice of either heading home from her "vacation" with some stories to tell Mucho, heading deeper into the void of "space and time" (and language)—exploring the Tower—and try to analyze, to decode, and to find the origin of the text that she is situated within. Oedipa rejects the hat of the traveler, and places firmly on her head the cap of the Structural-Anthropologist who begins to study—without trying to get too involved with—the lives of her subjects. This closer reading of the texts, of course, brings her directly to W.A.S.T.E. system and all that this acronym stands (or doesn't stand) for.

**Oedipa as a Structural-Anthropologist**

_Anything having to do with human beings and their lives is grist for the anthropologist_  
-D. Nash

Turning again to the Tower imagery that Pynchon explores in the first chapter, for it is through this gazing at the Tower that Oedipa first glimpses into the post-modern abyss that seems to be waiting for her. During a flashback, Oedipa
remembers looking at a painting in Mexico City, “where a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower”(21) had been weaving together a tapestry of the world. Staring at the painting, Oedipa begins to cry because she realizes “that what she stood on had only been woven together a couple thousand miles away in her own tower, was only by accident known as Mexico, and so Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there’d been no escape” (21). And yet, Oedipa still does try to escape and she leaves Pierce and marries a “thin-skinned” (13) car salesman who believes (too much) in his job. Pierce, however, never disappeared fully and seems to have been watching from somewhere upon high, a combination of voices in the middle of the night, finally setting her up to be the executrix of his will. It is with Pierce that Oedipa first understands that she is trapped within her own tower and it is because of Pierce that she enters into the underbelly of California with its alternative subcultures/texts. As John Johnston explains accurately in his piece on semiotics and paranoia in Lot 49, “Pierce is not so much an interpreter but an emitter of signs.” 17 He is the guard, placed magically (metaphorically) up on high in the tower of Jeremy Bentham’s Panoptican18. He is “Big Brother” making sure that things are running smoothly in his San Narciso, or, to put it another way, he is the miracle that Jesus Arrabal proclaimed Pierce was, “another worlds intrusion into this one”(120). Like the prisoners in the cells of the Panoptican, Oedipa does not know who is in the guard tower and in order to exist in America, she must, like the prisoners, be “assumed full circle into some paranoia” (182). Pierce might be six feet under ground and not in the metaphorical Tower at all,
but this is of no consequence because the affects Oedipa feels are just as present. As
Harjo Berressem writes in her book Pynchon's Poetics, "Pierce is not an original
person but a cultural simulation . . . a return to the real Pierce is not possible; every
approach to his personality entails a deflection into cultural space . . . because every
meaning one might want to attach to Pierce is ultimately deferred." The deferral from
one signifier to another sets up a series of patterns, and, Oedipa, like a good structural-
anthropologist, tries to find the connections from the signs (or markers) to the signified
(or event/text).

Oedipa, when she first drives into San Narciso, remembers when she was
young and opened a transistor radio, looked at her first printed circuit, and saw in the
“outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of canceled meaning, of an intent to
communicate” (24). But what was being communicated in Pierce Inverarities system?
Like the city that Oedipa first enters, the people that she meets are more a “grouping of
concepts”(24), signifier’s to other signifier’s, then developed “real” characters.
Oedipa’s first aid is Metzeger whose description of himself highlights this idea. He is
a child actor who is a lawyer who becomes an actor when he is in a courtroom (or
trying to seduce his co-executrix), who has a pilot film made about him starring his
friend Manny DiPresso, who was a lawyer (who thus is an actor), who became an
actor (playing the part of an actor becoming a lawyer who periodically reverts back to
being an actor), who turns back to being a lawyer and sues the Inverarity estate for
non-payment of human bones and thus becomes an important
signifier/marker/information dispenser to the text that Oedipa is trying to decode.
Metzger, as we can see by this description, is not so much a character but an idea (representation) for a character (or characters). We, as readers, do not get attached to Metzger and when he runs away with the fifteen year old girlfriend of one of the Paranoids, we, much like Oedipa, do not miss him. He is a grouping of signifier’s, we as reader’s can not pin him down to understand (dissect) him, and, therefore, as a structural-anthropologist, Oedipa will not be able to step back and objectively analyze him. Another example of these floating signifier’s (characters) is the Fangoso Lagoons Security Force which is “a garrison against the night made up of one-time cowboy actors and L.A. motorcycle cops” (64). Again, they are not just a security force but a security force made up of other signifier’s (representations) pointing to other signifier’s (security force to actors to cowboys, and so on and so on). Mike Fallopian is a member of the Peter Pinguid Society turned revolutionary leader complete with “camp-followers” (167). Jesus Arrabel, one time revolutionary leader with no followers, becomes a short order cook. Randy Driblette, the actor/director/improviser of The Couriers Tragedy, gets “washed down the drain into the Pacific” (79). Mucho, her husband, the ex-car salesman turned disk jockey takes his program’s directors advice and becomes a “big brother” (15) to his listeners that turns him into a “walking assembly of man” (140). The “acne-fuzz-headed” (176) member of Inamorato Anonymous never gives her his name and dissolves into “dense crowds” (116) and becomes an empty dial tone to Oedipa’s frantic plea. Pynchon does not develop his male characters, instead, Oedipa meets signifier’s who enter the text, give their information, and then exit quickly. As a structural-anthropologist, Oedipa is faced with
the impossible task of trying to objectively study and decode the texts that she is reading. As Dennison Nash, an expert in the field of Anthropology, explains, anthropologists “observe what is going on while taking part in the lives of their subjects” and, therefore, are in danger of being “too sensitive to the human subject matter [and] one’s objectivity, as a scientist may be compromised or vice versa, which forces the anthropologist to carry out a delicate balancing act throughout the course of fieldwork and afterward.” For Dennison Nash, there is a possibility for the anthropologist to remain objective while being a participant-observer in the text that he/she is entrenched within. Pynchon, the post-structuralist, understands that this objectivity is farcical, and that “the delicate balancing act” will always result in the anthropologist falling--hard--on her face. Oedipa, while she may not be able to move the piston in Maxwell’s Daemon, is sensitized to “the human subject matter” and, of course, becomes compromised.

She continues, however, to resist and tries to find objective connections between the people that she meets. And like a good structural-anthropologist, she is able to find these connections that are hidden right below the surface, and she is able to link the clues that she finds back a certain distance. Each new day brings an added clue and while Oedipa is ultimately faced with the “symmetrical four” (171) choices, and cannot find the one authentic answer, she could still continue to make connections and to classify the texts that she is presented into binaries (hierarchies) such as “Trystero” or “Non-Trystero.” But to do so, she realizes, would be meaningless and her 24 hour search around San Francisco makes this fact abundantly clear. Realizing
that the reality that she has been trying to scientifically analyze has been set up—all reality is only just representation—Oedipa reacts to her glimpse into the post-modern abyss much the way that I did the first time I came into contact with post-modernism—by jumping head first to the polar opposite—Humanism.

**Oedipa as Humanist**

Oedipa can no longer be the voyeur, the “distanced” scientist who tries to analyze and decode the event (text) that was being preformed for/with her. Rather, she begins to desire to *take action*, to change the text that she is reading. In other words, she begins to move away from the structural-anthropologist role and enter the land of the Humanist. M. H. Abrams defines Humanists as “those thinkers who base truth on human experience and reason and base values on human nature and culture.”

Oedipa, therefore, begins to think of herself as a *subject*, a creating force that can affect change. This is, of course, in complete opposition of post-modern philosophical and critical theories which eliminate’s or de-centers the focus on human identity as the object of study. Pynchon, who has teased the reader (as well as Oedipa) with the idea of being an anthropologist before pulling the rug from underneath her—and in the process calling into question the whole idea of “objective” observation on the part of the anthropologist—now has the reader grasping frantically for some romantic ideal that would place meaning in simple human experience. The clearest example of this is Oedipa’s encounter with the sailor.

She meets the shaking, grieving old man and notices the post hom “tattooed in old ink now beginning to spread” on the back of his of his left hand. Like the
sailor, Oedipa is shaking and tired. Her defenses are down, she is no longer pretending to be objective, and she is no longer just looking for clues. She physically moves towards the old man and for the first time in the novel does not try to decode the text but instead asks, “Can I help you?” (125). She no longer is just classifying her subjects that she meets but is now attempting to communicate with them. But the sailor turns out to be just another signifier and instructs her (ambiguously) where she can find the W.A.S.T.E. mailbox. Oedipa, for the moment, forgets about her new clue and The Trystero puzzle and thinks about the sailor and “what rich soils had he turned, what concentric planets uncovered?”(126). She thinks about the old man as an individual, as a man whose mattress holds all that is expelled from his body, “the vestiges of every nightmare sweat, helpless overflowing bladder, viciously, tearfully consummated wet dream” (126). And with her defenses down, and as a reaction to the free-fall associated with post-modern thought, she “actually held him” (126) and comes into direct communication with the man. She does not use words, she is trying to escape the Tower of Language as she physically touches him. Consequently, however, she thinks about things that she could do to help him; she could “buy the sailor a new suit at Roos/Atkins, and shirt and shoes and give him the bus fare to Fresno after all” (127). She could try to affect a change, to create a space where the old man could escape, to “author” a new ending to his life. She has moved completely away from the language of the Structural-Anthropologist and into the language of the hopeless romantic. She is trying to have her passions, imaginations and humanistic impulses stand in for thought. But, as Roland Barthe inform us, we all “think[s] in
sentences” and once she tries to think of ways to help the sailor, she does so linguistically. There is no escape from the Tower of Language that encapsulates her and she knows that she cannot become the knight of deliverance to the sailor and any attempt would be futile. Oedipa, understanding that her Humanistic impulses were just a direct reaction to her introduction into post-modern ideology, announces that “He’s going to die” (128), and in a direct move to enter into post-modern discourse states “I can’t help” (126) to herself and allows Ramirez to take the sailor to his deathbed.

Oedipa is not the only one who is teased with the idea of humanism. Pynchon, throughout this novel, allows the reader to play with the idea of creation (authenticity) through the many images of pregnancy throughout this novel. *Lot 49*’s protagonist is a woman, a creator, a subject who can biologically “author” life. And, in fact, Oedipa feels as if she is pregnant late in the novel. Directly after she believes that there are four symmetrical possibilities and that there is no chance, no matter how much “gut fear and female cunning” (21) she employs to find an “authentic” answer, Oedipa begins to have morning sickness. “Waves of nausea, lasting five to ten minutes, would strike her at random, cause her deep misery, then vanish as if they had never been. There were headaches, nightmares, menstrual pains” (171). So she heads for Los Angeles and arranges for pregnancy tests. Pynchon is playing with the reader’s humanistic tendencies who want Oedipa, even in the understanding that there is no authentic, to still try to become pregnant. But she is not pregnant with Meaning, in fact, and does not actually conceive/create anything. She is the orifice where discourse is transmitted, not the mother/creator figure. Not only is Oedipa not pregnant herself,
but for her initial appointment, she gives the name of Grace Bortz as her own, the name of the woman who told Oedipa “Have you ever met an infanticide?” (148). Oedipa is not pregnant with the authentic and, instead, adopts the name of a woman who “kidded” about killing her own child. The post-tourist realizes that there is no “creation”, it is a romantic joke and Oedipa plays with this by adopting Grace’s name as her own for the doctor’s appointment.

There are other images of pregnancy (or in actuality, lack there of) that are the focal point of this novel. One of the most fascinating image relates to the Tower in the Remedios Varo painting. The tower, which is a distinctly phallic symbol, is femininized by Pynchon, thus toying with the reader romantic tendencies:

A number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. (21)

It is out of the “slit” in the “circular tower” that the world tries to fill the void. The Tower is spoken in terms of the female body out of which the world is expelled. Is the world given birth to and therefore created? If this is correct than there is a chance for authorship, a possibility to trace all of the signifier’s back to one concrete, essential signified creator—a mother figure. Has Pynchon allowed hopeless romantics to hold onto one small nugget of creativity? Of course not. Pynchon only teases the reader and plays with the language but in the end, is strictly in favor of the post-tourist. The tapestry/world that tries to fill the void is “hopeless” because the Tower is never
pregnant and conception never takes place. The malignant force that visited the Tower never fertilizes the Tower and the tapestry “spills” out of the slit in the window. It is not “pushed” out, it is not “forced” out, it is not released from the body/tower in any birthing terms but rather it is “spilled” from the body. The “anonymous and malignant” force that “visited” (21) the Tower, does not result in a pregnancy. The Tapestry that the world is embroidered on is described in Kleenex-like terms that cleans up after the “spill.” Thus, the reader, as well as Oedipa, arrive at the understanding that Humanism will not result in an authentic experience.

It is soon after her fleeting moment of Humanistic crisis with the old sailor that Oedipa comes into contact with Winthrop “Winner” Tremaine, the owner of the neighborhood army and navy store that has discount prices on swastika’s. Oedipa, free from the romantic impulses that caused her to touch the sailor, does not react impulsively (she does not yell/cry/scream/hit/react passionately) when offered a special discount on SS uniforms for women. This is the dark side of post-modernism, and as she does nothing, Oedipa realizes that “This is America, you live in it, you let it happen. Let it unfurl” (150). No more is Oedipa reaching out to try to communicate, wishing she could change or “author” a situation. But her glimpse into the negative side of post-modernism is short and Pynchon has her drive “savagely onto the freeway, hunting for Volkswagens” (150). Not only has she scourged the romantic impulses within her but she is now “hunting” for Volkswagens, which of course, is the car that epitomizes the hippie movement, the movement that celebrated the romantic ideal of the individual as a subject that could affect change in the text that they were
situated within. Pynchon through the humor of a scene (how, exactly, do you hunt a
car?) has Oedipa reject the idea of the hopeless romantic who can (affect change), bi-
passes the dark side of post-modernism and enters into the post-tourist stage.

**Oedipa as a Post-Tourist**

It is extremely important to note that only after Oedipa resigns any hope of
helping the sailor leave the text and return to Fresno, does she immediately think of
the play involved with language. She thinks about the DT’s that the man suffers from
and realizes that “behind the initials was a metaphor, a delirium tremens, a trembling
unfurrowing of the minds plowshare” (128). The metaphor is a way to play within the
Tower of Language, a place to roam, an act of choosing within the controlling realm of
linguistics. For there was “high magic to low puns” (129) and “the act of the
metaphor was a thrust at truth and a lie” that can “probe the ancient fetid shafts and
tunnels of truth” (129). The metaphor is, of course, fleeting and would not “preserve,
the sailor,” but it does create a space within language where “dt’s must give access to
dt’s of spectra beyond the known sun” (129). The metaphor allows for choice and
Oedipa, understanding this concept, no longer thinks in terms of binaries but now
begins to think of the range of possibilities that language permits.

I am reading, then, Oedipa as a post-tourist instead of the more general post-
modern heroine. The first term implies the Barthean idea of post-modernism where
play can lead to pleasure which can lead to bliss. The second term, however, in its
most base form, could be seen as nihilistic and smothering. Oedipa as post-tourist is
able to laugh at the absurdity of all that she see’s and to enjoy and play with the
possibility of choices that language allows. Oedipa as a post-modernist could see the uselessness and suffocating aspects of language and, like the disillusioned Driblette, sink to the bottom of the Pacific ocean.

The tourist, who is looking to form an identity, will ultimately become frustrated, while the post-tourist, knowing that there is no authentic tourist experience, is able to enjoy the fictive identity(ies) that she adopts. So while a tourist may be frustrated that the Cowboy hat that he was overcharged for does not actually make her a Texan, to the post-tourist, this in-authenticity is all a chance to play. The impossibility of one fixed identity allows the post-tourist to act (perform), to try on a variety of identities—much like Oedipa who puts on all of her clothes in the bathroom of her motel room—to layer one identity over another, always ready to add or subtract depending on what the situation allows. Therefore, the post-tourist can enjoy the sterility of Disneyland with its plastic trees and the absurdity of “The Wonders of the World” because she knows that in a sense all cultures are staged and “inauthentic” and if she actually went to France or Egypt or Africa, instead of just going on the “ride”, she would not get the “authentic” France or Egypt or Africa either. All cultures are, to a certain extent, glorified pit stops created for production and consumption. A carload of post-tourists know that as they drive on Route 95 and read the signs for “South of the Border”—the amusement park/gas station/restaurant/firework wholesale/restroom “wonderland”—they are not going to get an authentic “event”, rather, they are going to participate in a text that was created specifically for the tourist; they can delight in the realization that what they are consuming are signs and can enjoy the pleasure achieved
from the manipulation of these systems. To apply Barthe’s terminology to the post-tourist, she is comfortable with her understanding of reality and can begin to drift. Drifting, Barthe concludes, “occurs whenever I do not respect the whole, and whenever, by dint of seeming driven about by language’s illusions, seductions, and intimidations, like a cork on the waves, I remain motionless, pivoting on the intractable bliss that binds me to the text (to the world).” In other words, the post-tourist, understanding that she is stuck within the Tower of Linguistics, is smiling up at her jailor (whether there is anyone in the guard tower or not). The binary distinction between real and authentic is blurred (floating) to the point that there is no longer a distinction. The post-tourist, therefore, exults in the fact that she is a tourist and there are just a series of games to be discovered with no single “real” experience.

Pynchon creates with Oedipa the poster-child for the post-tourist. And, in fact, if we look closely at the text that he produced, Pynchon himself, or his narrator, pushes the reader into transforming herself into a post-tourist as well. The narrator in Lot 49 takes on a multitude of voices (much like Pierce) and, we, as readers, are never able to pin down the one “authorial voice.” We must float through this text, not respecting the whole (which does not lead to any solutions) and as Barthe states, “whenever social language, the sociolect, fails” the reader of the text, she must drift, and play (partake in pleasure) with the text. The major reason for the need of the reader to float through Lot 49 is that the narrator’s voice itself is a fragmentation of a conglomerate of voices. At some points in the text, it is inflated, “There was just this je ne sais quoi about The Scope crowd” and at other points, the voice is
sophomoric as in, “The father seemed to be up before a court-martial now” (41) describing Metzger taking off his pants.

The voice is also used in a way to force the reader to become an active decoder of the text as in, “On the doorsill the Paranoids, as we leave milk to propitiate the leprechaun, had set a fifth of Jack Daniels” (40), somehow suggesting that not only do we, as readers, believe in small, magical Irish midgets but that we also actively offer milk to them. Pynchon is doing more then joking with the reader here, he is subversively pushing the reader into the role of the post-tourist. The Brechtian wording of this particular scene alienates the reader who questions the “we” and makes that reader wonder if, in fact, it is not she that is wrong for not giving leprechaun’s a seemingly well needed drink. What happens if there really are leprechauns and it is just that the reader has never looked in the right places? Do we actually KNOW for certain that there are not leprechauns in our world? Much like Oedipa who feels the need to search for answers to the W.A.S.T.E. system, I felt the need to go to the store and buy milk because, well, “we” never do know, right?

Pynchon, therefore, through the use of the narrator, makes us aware that we are, like Oedipa, a part of the text, trapped within the Tower of Language. The slippery narrator alienates the reader in one scene and then smoothly shifts into the voice of bad made-for-TV movie as in this scene:

“The Paranoids cast off, backed the Godzilla II out from the pier, turned and with concentrated whoop took off like a bat out of hell, nearly sending DiPresso over the
fantail. Oedipa, looking back, could see their pursuer had been joined by another man about the same build. Both wore grey suits. She couldn’t see if they were holding anything like guns”(57).

“Like a bat out of hell?” The tired cliche is used by Pynchon to show the absurdity of the situation; he is calling attention to his words, and with a small mischievous wink to the reader, playing with them. In a post-modern world where the author, unable to “create” in a vacuum, is dead, Pynchon is using Jacques Derrida’s notion that words can be “the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation.” While post-modernism can lead to the nihilistic attitude of “nothing has any meaning”, Pynchon, by celebrating the post-tourist, like Derrida, can see this idea as a “freeing” experience. While the author may be dead and the writing subject just a point of convergence of outside sources, the writer still has infinite options of playing with language and “creating” characters like Oedipa, who, likewise, learns how to play within the tower.

What I find to be of paramount importance in distinguishing Oedipa as a post-tourist is that when she enters the closed system of the crying of lot 49, she does so with humor (play). Oedipa has not resigned herself to despair, she has not given up. She believes in the possibility that Inverarity might, in fact, have escaped death, through a highly organized plot, a conspiracy, a Word that has an infinite number of possibilities that would prove “too elaborate for the dark Angel to hold at once, in his humorless vice-president’s head, all the possibilities of” (emphases mine, 179). For it
is through play with language that possibilities are created and worlds unseen can be discovered—the high magic to low puns. So it is the seemingly inconsequential remark of Oedipa announcing to Gengis Cohen, “You’re fly is open” (183) that allows us a glimpse of the mental state of Oedipa which places her firmly within the post-tourist camp. For the last words that the reader leaves Oedipa in this novel, trapped within the pages of the text, are a joke. As Barthe states, “The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body (text) pursues its own ideas.”

Oedipa makes an idiosyncratic response to Cohen, a response that is sophomoric/sexual/funny/relates meaning; a response that is layered and has a variety of possibilities. Cohen, who, in his condescending manner, gives Oedipa the information of, “We say an auctioneer ‘cries’ a sale” (183). Cohen uses the term “we” as an exclusionary, binary term. Oedipa bypasses this with humor. She is not suffocating under the weight of post-modern thought but rather playing with language, moving around in the Tower that she has come to accept encapsulates her. And while she does not know what the future will bring, she is sitting there, within the enclosed room, surprising Lauren Passerine, the “finest auctioneer in the West” that she “actually came” (183). She is no longer passively accepting the information that is handed down to her, rather, she is playing with language and making surprising moves within the text that she is situated in a way that only the post-tourist is able to do.
NOTES


7. Ibid

8. There are many instances of characters in this story being drawn to the unknown, the non-routine. A perfect example of this is the puritanical sect of Scurvhamite’s who “found themselves looking out into the gaudy clockwork of the doomed with a certain sick and fascinating horror” and found themselves drawn to the “something blind” that promised “annihilation” (155); a destruction of the system of which they had been previously a part. The tourist, like the Scurvhamite, enters a world that he/she does not know and which therefore poses a danger/excitement because he/she does not know the system.


13. A common example of this is a marker hanging next to a moon rock. The rock itself is not extraordinary looking and to the casual observer, it is just a rock. But once the tourist reads the marker and engages in the text, the rock becomes special and deemed worthy as a sight. What is interesting is that when the camera comes out to take a replica of the sight, the marker must be included as evidence that it is an "authentic" rock. As Dean MacCannell writes in *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, "As the marker is turned into a sight, the sight turns into the marker and the esthetics of production are transformed into the esthetics of consumption and production" (120). There is a blurring of sight and marker, one is indistinguishable from the other.


15. After a bottle of tequila is pulled from Metzger's coat pocket, he accuses Oedipa of practicing "tourist" (33) techniques of drinking the Mexican liquor.

16. In "(De)Constructing the Image: Thomas Pynchon's Postmodern Woman" *Journal of Popular Culture*. Vol3, No.4, Spring 1997, pg.2, Patricia Bergh makes the valid point that there is no useful place for nostalgia in this novel. "In Lot 49, the past serves as an intermediary step to the present, functioning merely to explain it". This scene where Oedipa is staring at the painting by Remedios Varo is, as I have stated previously, the key scene in this novel and the one that informs Oedipa's journey throughout California.


18. Bentham's Panoptican was a revolutionary prison system in England in the late 18th century. As Michel Foucault writes in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, Bentham's Panoptican can be described as "A Perimeter building in the form of a ring. A the center of this, a tower, pierced by large windows opening onto the inner face of the ring . . . All that is then needed is to put an overseer in the tower and place in each of the cells a lunatic, a patient, a convict, a worker or a schoolboy" (147). This revolutionary system solved the problem of surveillance since the prisoners never knew when the guard was looking at him/her. All the prisoner knew was that he/she could be being watched and that was enough to keep the prisoner in line (and to make sure his/her fellow prisoners were also following the rules). But who exactly is this guard in the tower? Is it one single entity? One prime judge? Foucault writes, "As one reads [Bentham] one wonders who he is putting in the central tower. Is it the eye of God? But God is hardly present in the text: religion only plays a role of utility.
The who is it? In the last analysis one is forced to conclude that Bentham himself has no clear idea to whom power is to be entrusted.” (157) Bentham placed one central force in the tower to watch over all of that systems prisoners and *he did not know who or what that force was.* The prisoners were kept in order, they were passive individuals who followed the rules of a force (a magic?) that they did not understand. But the force might not have been there at all, they might have been blindly following a force that did not exist but as Foucault concludes in an open question, “Do you think it would be much better to have the prisoners operating the Panoptic apparatus and sitting in the central tower, instead of the guards?” (165)


20. Oedipa analyzes each one of these men but they are all “stripping away” (153) from her. Each signifier has a bit of knowledge or meaning, and each acts as a guide (she thinks) to The Trystero, and each disappears when his usefulness is finished. To continue the Panoptican metaphor that I have raised earlier, every one of these males is locked inside his particular cell with no contact with each other. The guard in the Tower (Pynchon? Pierce, chance?) makes sure that each male is completely separated. When two signifier’s are placed within close proximity of each other and have the opportunity to meet, there is always something that keeps them separated. In the only instance where two characters within this novel with information about the texts that Oedipa is trying to decode are in close proximity, Metzger opts to wait in the car instead of talking with Driblette (Metzger does meet Mike Fallopian in *The Scope* but they act rather as one signifier in this instance, playing off each other to deliver their message to Oedipa). The male character’s movements are limited and controlled. They realize that they are not free to maneuver around the Tower and after they give their information to Oedipa, they disappear. There is no release from the Tower and Oedipa is not allowed to give them their freedom (after a night of driving drunk on the freeway with no head lights on, Oedipa tells the member of the I.A. group that he is “free. Released” (177). But he replies that “It’s too late” (177) for him and he disappears back into the bar).


23. It is interesting to note that Pynchon uses the terminology of disease and the fact that it is *spreading.* Spreading to whom? She “could not hear” (125) the grief that
caused the old man to shake. Is she in danger of catching an understanding of the
sorrow that the old man has?

24. Communication, of course, is at the heart of this novel. And while
communication seems to be the key to understanding, it is the lack of communication
between characters (as I suggested earlier) that is the major problem that Oedipa
faces. All her men are kept in their separate cells and give her information and there
is no real communication between Oedipa and the other characters in the novel.
Conversations do not seem like real dialogue but “staged” monologues that seem to
anticipate Oedipa’s questions and be prepared for them in advance. The only time I
see where the dialogue does not have this type of feel is the last conversation that
Oedipa has with the member of I.A. who tells her that “it’s too late” for him. It was a
“surprise” question that did not seem to be anticipated and consequently leads to the
empty dial tone.

50-51.

26. Not only is Pynchon refusing to allow for the possibilities of Humanistic thought,
he also kills off the one character who seems to have any prolonged romantic
leanings. Randy Driblette, like Oedipa, realized that there is no escaping the Tower
of Language. And while Oedipa learns how to become a post-tourist, to enjoy these
possibilities, to play within the text, Driblette tries to avoid Words, to avoid the text
all together. And, therefore, he has delusions that he gives “the spirit flesh” (79), that
within the suspended head hidden within the shower-steam, is an authentic
experience. But he realizes that they are just delusions, that he is just projecting
Wharfinger’s words and yarn and that he never does touch the “truth”. As an artist, a
man who is supposed to create, this realization is too much. Pynchon has his
character who holds the most romantic ideals, take a “Brody” (153) into the Pacific
Ocean. Or does he? We hear from a grad student that “Randy walked into the Pacific
two nights ago” and that “he’s dead” (152). The reader, however, is never “shown” a
body. Are we supposed to, like Oedipa, trust the words of a grad student? Or is
Pynchon giving us a way out, has Driblette somehow found a way out of the Tower.
For if there is a possibility that Pierce to have escaped death by devising some highly
structured plot (179), then could Driblette also have escaped by faking his own
suicide? Is Pynchon throwing a bone to all the hopeless romantics reading his novel?
Or am I, in need for some semblance of possibility of escape, some need for a
glimmer of hope, trying to find something that is not there? And, if so, is Pynchon,
knowing these tendencies of some readers, playing with his words, allowing us to go
down the dark tunnel, grasping for hope that in the end, is just not there? He did
after all wish to “unload Lot 49 on some poor sucker” (http://pynchonfiles.com/lot49.htm). Does he see the reader with the romantic
idealism as the sucker and this book as a wake up call to him/her? Or by the very fact of writing this book and not just walking aimlessly through America, does Pynchon show his romantic tendencies and almost despite himself create a character, through Driblette who can escape?


29. Ibid.


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