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Oedipa's Revelatory Journey through America in The Crying of Lot 49

"This is America, you live in it, you let it happen. Let it unfurl."

INTRODUCTION[1]

This essay reflects group H's discussion on *The Crying of Lot 49* and America. Approaching "the legacy of America" by using the motif of *revelation* as a guide, we explore Oedipa's developing perceptions of society (and the country as a whole) as she gradually transforms from a middle-class housewife to a detective in search of the Tristero. Though Oedipa's transformation starts with becoming executor/executrix of Pierce's will, we emphasis the *intrusion* of an "Other" America as shown in W.A.S.T.E and the events during her night walk. Her encounters with "hidden" people and groups, marked by their marginalization from the mainstream, act *revelatory* and complicate her view of society, class, and the city. This eventually leads Oedipa to understand Pierce's legacy (once perceived uniquely) to be something synonymous with the condition of America *itself*: the "prevailing winds of affluence" that cause the "storm-systems of group suffering and need" *across the country* (135). The "tear gas in the margins" of this novel lies in this sentiment of revelation and Oedipa's actionable response.

Without a clear answer, this group simultaneously questions the ethical implications surrounding Oedipa's exploration of "Other" America. How does Oedipa's new perceptions of America tangible benefit the marginalized she has "used" to revitalize her own "system"? Are her new perceptions enough to fundamentally distinguish her from "Middle-class women coming in from Suburbia on a rare trip catch the merest glimpse of the other America on the way to an evening in the theater," or must she do something else with her newly formed knowledge?

[1] All references to Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, (1965; resi., Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975) are included with in-text page number citations.

FROM TUPPERWARE TO W.A.S.T.E

The idea of revelation in this novel refers to the *miraculous* "intrusion from outside of some form of knowledge."[2] In the words of Jesús Arrabalas, this "outside" can be understood as "another world" that invades one's pre-existing world, further rejuvenating it.[3] Oedipa Maas starts the novel desperately in need of experiencing such a revelation. As a middle-class Republican in her late 20s who lives a suburban American life,[4] she gets drunk at a Tupperware party, gardens, cooks, and mixes whiskey sours all while waiting for her husband to come home (1). As Diana Blaine notes, Oedipa's life at this point seemingly epitomizes the image of a "mid-century bourgeois domestic" housewife with "no real role in her culture and way too much time on her hands."[5] Nevertheless, as she is appointed the position of executor/executrix for Pierce's estate, she begins a journey of revitalization marked by her search for the Tristero.

As Oedipa dives further into the world of the Tristero, she finds herself experiencing an "Other" America previously unknown to her in suburban California. One hidden network in this "Other" that shocks her sense of reality is W.A.S.T.E. As a non-mainstream form of communication used by many who distrust the monopolistic U.S. Mail system, W.A.S.T.E represents a "calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery" (94). Those involved with W.A.S.T.E have often been dismissed out of "hate" or "indifference" from mainstream America – sentiments quite literally manifested in the name ("waste") itself. Though this system marks a moment of empowerment and refusal to give up on their own desires for communication, it also draws attention to their disenfranchisement. They are what can be seemingly disregarded or thrown out by consumeristic America. The more Oedipa sees the intruding world of these "thrown out" people, the easier it is for her to question Pierce's legacy and privilege, tying it to a system of marginalization across the country.

Oedipa's growing sense of division between the affluent and marginalized across America develops most significantly during her night out walking the streets as a "voyeur and listener" (93).

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[2] J. Kerry Grant, *A Companion to The Crying of Lot 49*, 2nd ed. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press), 121. The term "miraculous" – related to Jesús Arrabalas' theory of miracles – will be used synonymously with revelation. In this context, neither revelation nor miracle inherently entails spirituality; the "intrusion of another world" can still be read secularly.

[3] Just as in thermodynamics (an analogy central to this novel); as a system's entropy increases (resulting in higher levels of sameness and stagnation) an external agent can be used to revitalize it.

[4] See Grant, 51. Suggests Oedipa is 28 based on 1964 timeline.

[5] Diana Blaine, "Death and *The Crying of Lot 49*," quoted in Grant, 6.

Notably different from her earlier lack of attention towards Mucho's description of poor peoples' lives as seen in their car trade-ins, Oedipa sees the economically "exhausted busful of Negroes going on to graveyard shifts all over the city" (91), the "facially-deformed welder, who cherished his ugliness" (93), and an overwhelming profusion of post horn signs that ultimately signify the intrusion of this "Other" world into her own (the revelation or miracle). While she was just beginning to believe this newly located "underground [Other] world" only belonged to a small network across California, each revelatory experience from this night reveals the system's ubiquity: it is deeply ingrained across the country in an American legacy of class inequality. Her previous conception of America as a suburban housewife is no longer available to her as the "Other" America (simply becoming America by now) intrudes upon her world.

ARE REVELATIONS ENOUGH? DEPICTIONS OF ACTIVE REVOLT

The dramatic and emotional language used most visibly during Oedipa's night out with "Other" America might easily be read as the "tear gas in the margins" of this novel. In one sense, it serves as a call to become aware of those marginalized in American society. Nevertheless, we see a sense of revolution most clearly in Oedipa's interaction with the sailor. During the miraculous instance of intrusion of her world by the Sailor's world, we are importantly given an image of Oedipa actively participating in W.A.S.T.E on the Sailors' behalf – it is s*he* who drops the mail off in the bin for him (98). In essence, Oedipa is no longer simply learning from "Other" America but participating in it. As Kolodny and Peters note, "Oedipa has at once embraced the dreams, hallucinations, and sufferings of another human being and simultaneously committed herself to the possibilities of other realities."[6] This praxis-oriented development shows a simple but significant commitment to *physically* take action.

This sense of revolt might be a possible answer to our question about exploitation in revitalizing oneself via the "Other." Whether this act is genuine support for the Sailor or simply Oedipa hoping to discover more about the world of Tristero is up for debate. This author upholds it is a developing sense of physical revolt fundamentally connected to any *true* revelation experienced at this point. With her experiences during that night, Oedipa can no longer simply be a "voyeur and listener" further distinguishing herself as a new ally to "Other" America.

[6] Annette Kolodny and Daniel James Peters, "Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*: The Novel as Subversive Experience," (*Modern Fiction Studies, 1973*), quoted in Grant, 136.

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