J. Kerry Grant’s *A Companion to* The Crying Lot of 49

**Introduction**

* “Even after a number of readings, the novel resists interpretation to an extraordinary degree, especially if “interpretation” is taken to mean the effort to tease out a unitary and more or less comprehensive account of the novel’s message from the tangled network of metaphor and allusion that is Pynchon’s trademark.” (x)
* “As Oedipa discovers, too much information can leave the individual just as powerless as too little.” (xiv)

**Chapter 1**

* *“Mrs Oedipa Maas”* 🡪 There are some key and interesting points made about this name. One is that hearing “Oedipa” one might think of “Oedipal” … In doing so, it “exposes the dangers of our willingness to read meaning into them” (1). Looking back at the idea of signifiers either giving too much or too little, this can be seen in the names. Some give too much meaning (Such as Oedipa, which makes us read Oedipa in light of Oedipal” or too little… Discussion of how this relates to Lacan who talks about how we are named even before we can speak (are at the mercy of language)… Additionally though, some see a relationship between Oedipus and Oedipa that expands beyond simply displaying a question of language; some see a direct relationship between the paths of the two (including the idea that both are “riddle solvers”) ; “Oed” is what Mucho calls her (notably OED – Oxford English Dictionary).
* *“Executor/Executrix”* 🡪 Richards: “This is the first uncertainty [raised] about her sex.”
* *“Sorting it all out”* 🡪 “It is worth noting, however, that Oedipa’s engagement with the ‘tangled’ assets of Pierce’s estate is frequently said to be equivalent to the reader’s engagement with the novel.” … “Sorting implies clear categories, and categories suggest some kind of sure epistemological methodology; but there is no such certainty here, not even the suggestion of one.” … “Pynchon we are reminded again and again, is acutely conscious of the fact that we live in an age of uncertainty, an age in which indeterminacy is a fundamental component of our understanding of matter. Sorting, therefore, is inevitably a problematic activity.” (8)
* *“Metzger”* 🡪 Name that actually came to signify “temporary postman” in Middle Ages Germany because butchers (its literal translation) were known to carry meat across areas and people’s notes with them. (12)
* *“To buy ricotta and listen to the Muzak”* 🡪 discussion of the “profusion of empty commodity-signs, signs that mark an absence rather than a presence – an absence of art, of history, of myth – and therefore require no existential engagement.” (Muzak as empty signifier) (14)
* “*A voice beginning”* 🡪 “Pierce is not an original person but a cultural simulacrum” … “Osterhaus sees the ‘multiple impersonation’ that follows as the beginning of ‘ the broadening process whereby Pierce’s legacy is seen near the end of the novel to involve all of multi-cultural America.” (16)
* *“People poorer than him”* 🡪 “The first of many references to those members of contemporary American society who have been passed over, those to whom its promise of prosperity and security have not been kept.” (19)
* *“What things have been truly refused”* 🡪 “Difficulty of distinguishing between trash and what has simply been mislabeled” … Think of WASTE … “throw-away mentality”
* *“Credit Cards for a shim”* 🡪 Pierce described as using a “capitalist approach” to “entry of her tower” (28).

**Chapter 2**

* *“San Narciso”* 🡪 “The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image. The nymph Echo tried to win his love with fragments of his own speech, but it vain. He we numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and have become a closed system. Abernethy’s concern is with the contribution this image of enclosure makes to the novel’s vision of entropic decline. Note the linking of narcissism and closed systems that has already been hinted at in Mucho’s feelings about the “convoluted incest” of the car lot.” (33-34)
* *“Nothing was happening”* 🡪 “From the beginning, San Narciso is portrayed as a community in which life is stagnant, in which intellectual exchange has ceased to take place. The portrayal is entirely consistent with the novel’s development of images associated with entropy.” (35)
* *“A revelation also trembled”* 🡪 Could have religious connotation… Also: “Seed seems to favor a more secular interpretation: ‘The repeated use of the term “revelation” could … be taken in a non-transcendental sense, to refer to her discovery of a California (and hence an America) which she did not know existed.’” (36)
* *“YOYODYNE”* 🡪 Look back at this one
* *“Founding Father”* 🡪 Pierce and “Legacy” of America (39)
* *“Some promise of hierophany”* 🡪 Note on revelation being the word used to suggest “the possibility of meanings other than those we are accustomed to.” (43)
* *“Bones of What?”* 🡪 Human bones commodified into products used to help feed desire (nicotine) (46)
* *“Propelling the can swiftly about the bathroom”* 🡪 “In the spray can caroming off the walls of the motel bathroom we have both an image of entropy – a region of fast molecules with the can exhausting itself within the confines of the bathroom – and an image of human life threatened, albeit comically, by the systems it has created.” (48)
* *“A moment of nearly pure terror”* 🡪 Imaginary Order vs Symbolic Order (Lacan) (50)
* *“I’ll be 35”* 🡪 makes her 28 in 1964 (Pynchon’s age)
* *“She began to cry”* 🡪 “Because she realizes that her ‘very resistance has been anticipated and programmed into the system.’” (52)

**Chapter 3**

* *“Tristero”* 🡪 “For Madsen, the Tristero represents for Oedipa everything that does not fit within ‘the explanatory reach of her sense of meaning.’ It is ‘a sign of an alternative world view, or in allegoric terms, a pretextual alternative to Oedipa’s orthodox interpretation of her world.” (54) … Question: Is the Tristero a negative or positive influence on Oedipa/Society? Mendelson believes positive because it “provides Oedipa with the means to perceive a degree of coherence in her world that has hitherto been hidden from her.” (55) … Note on Revelation: “Revelation, we will come to see, constitutes the intrusion into one world of information that originates in a different world. Whether these ‘worlds’ can be identified in purely religious terms – that is, as sacred and secular – is a matter of interpretation, but the fundamental equation of revelation with renewal is not affected either way.” (55) … “There are two requirements for regenerating a system: the energy must come from an Outside, and it must be different from the energy present Inside. This is the importance of Tristero; for it represents the possible infusion from the outside of an organized ‘difference’ reinstating opposition. The success of Oedipa’s sorting rests directly on the uncertainty over the source of the information she accumulates and organized into the Tristero; for if these clues do not originate in a system or culture outside the one Oedipa seeks to redeem, then they are only part of the inside system that is running down.” (55-56).
* *“The stillness of the pool”* 🡪 Think of closed system entropy
* *“WASTE”* 🡪 “Tristero […] [takes] the silent human ‘waste’ left by social entropy and [uses] it with the energy of vital exchange. Thus, the old sailor can write to his wife, the mother to her son, with a candor and power that must otherwise be suppressed.” (62) … “The other side of the gnostic opposition, however, is invoked by the ‘Empire’ aspect of Tristero, implying as it does that the ominously ‘Silent’ oppressed ‘Await’ their turn to institute their own system of absolute control.” (62) … “Once a culture founded on mobility came into being[,] … it became possible to dream of leaving one’s waste behind; and this is what happens in the United States, a culture that throws away things rather than repairing them, replicating thereby the initial gesture of departure from the native land.” (63)
* *“Crushed, plastic foam”* 🡪 Styrofoam; think about its connection to waste. (68)
* *“Senator McCarthy”* 🡪 Pay attention to see if there are any mentions we can use to show Pynchon’s revolt.
* *“The colorless administrator”* 🡪 “These symbolic closed systems are familiar images in Pynchon’s work, and they are part of the continuum of his preoccupation with the tendency of our culture to exhaust its potential beyond the capacity for renewal.” (75)
* *“A Young Republican”* 🡪 “A reminder of the middle-class orientation with which Oedipa is approaching these early stages of her quest – entirely consistent with Tupperware parties, fondue, and whiskey sours.” (75)

**Chapter 4**

* *“Woven into the Tristero”* 🡪 “Again, the reference to the Varo painting is clear and serves to suggest that everything that Oedipa will ‘learn’ may in fact fail to free her from the tower of her own imagination, just as Pierce had failed to liberate her from her buffered life in Kinneret.” (79)
* *“Shall I project a world?”* 🡪 “Notice that Oedipa is unsure whether she is likely to be *creating* an order or simply discovering a preexisting one.” (79)
* *“Panic Growing”* 🡪 “An odd response, if one were to suppose that it is simply the result of being separated from the rest of the stockholders. Oedipa could very easily ask for directions. Her panic is presumably rooted in the unnerving sameness of everything in the office, in the uncommunicative states of the engineers engaged in their undeviating routine. Oedipa is growing more and more sensitive to instances of stagnation in her environment.” (81)
* *“Stifles your really creative engineer”* 🡪 “The patent clause is part of the stultifying nature of the conglomerate Koteks works for, one of those companies that ‘subsume originality and initiative under a suffocating cloak of self-perpetuation.’ Individuality means difference, and difference constitutes a culture’s best defense against stagnation, encouraging as it does the free flow of ideas or intellectual energy.” (81)
* *“James Clark Maxwell”* 🡪 “What the demon prevents is the gradual reduction of all the molecules to a single energy level, a state which would resemble the ‘unvarying gray sickness’ of Mucho’s car-lot world, and the ‘colorless’ world presided over by Gennaro at the end of *The Courier’s Tragedy*. In such a state, no energy would be available to perform useful work. // The difficulty for the reader lies in the fact that the demon scenario asks for counterintuitive identification of disorder with uniformity. ‘Disorder and chaos… do not mean a random jumble of things but rather uniformity, a lack of distinction, a sameness, a lack of individuality, a tendency toward complete conformity. It is a “steady-state” in which “matter and energy” are evenly distributed.’ Organization depends on the perceptions of difference – the demon must be able to tell the difference between fast-moving and slow-moving molecules, for example; postal workers must be able to tell the difference between one zip code and another. In a system in which no such perception is possible, no organization can be arrived at. ‘Sorting,’ therefore, becomes an absolutely central metaphor, and the fact that Oedipa singles this concept out for objection is an indication of her intuitive grasp of her own predicament.”
* *“She would give them order, she would create constellations”* 🡪 “Kotek’s brief lesson on Maxwell’s Demon has given us another metaphor to apply to Oedipa, one that seems to allow her to serve a more valuable function that that of the rather wistful discerner of compensatory patterns in the arbitrary distribution of the stars. As demon/sorter, perhaps, Oedipa will attempt to preserve the energy potential of Pierce’s legacy, ensuring that its component parts are not subsumed into some massive, uniform structure that is as destructive of individual uniqueness as the engineering department of Yoyodyne. Of course, for many readers, skepticism about the capacity for redemption of capitalistic enterprises such as Pierce’s runs high, and it may be that we can hardly feel optimistic about Oedipa’s chances at this point in the novel. However, at least the demon’s aim is to create an order that translates into the production of useful energy, and we may be happier with this image of Oedipa than with the earlier one.” (86)
* *“Filthy Machines”* 🡪 “Lot 49 follows the colonization and contamination of the subject’s dreams via the *media,* especially television, which … not only *intrudes* intro dreams” but “actually *produces* and *simulates* them, in a feedback that ultimately conflates psychic and televised space.” (88)

**Chapter 5**

* *“Wanting to feel relevant”* 🡪 Note on the nose to nose intellectual exchange happening on Berkley’s campus; a moment where “ prevailing norms have not become stultifying.” (96)
* *“Two distinct kinds of this entropy”* 🡪 Perspective 1 (thermodynamic theory): “Entropy measures the availability of the energy in a system to do useful work.” (98) …Wiener: “As entropy increases, the universe, and all closed systems in the universe, tend naturally to deteriorate and lose their distinctiveness, to move from the least to the most probable state, from a state of organization and differentiation in which distinctions and forms exist, to a state of chaos and sameness.” (99) … Pynchon: “Entropy, or the measure of disorganization for a closed system.” (99) … Perspective 2 (information theory): “Entropy as the measure of the likelihood of the system’s arriving at the state in which we find it at any given moment.” (103) … Information defined in communication theory: “relates not so much to what you do say, as to what you could say.” An indication of the “capacity of a transmission system to transmit meaning, not to something that might loosely be called an ‘amount of meaning.’” (104)… Information and Thermodynamic entropy moving in different directions as Oedipa moves deeper into the Tristero (see page 110).
* *“Another world’s intrusion”* 🡪 “Politics and thermodynamics come together in Jesus’s theory of miracles. The intrusion from outside of some form of knowledge – elsewhere referred to as revelation, the Word – constitutes the necessary infusion of new energy into a potentially closed system. In this sense, at least, the Tristero an be regarded as ‘miraculous’ – that is, insofar as it intrudes into Oedipa’s solipsistic existence.” (121)
* *“Without the miracle of Pierce to reassure him”* 🡪 “Pierce, Oedipa speculates, is the external energy source that sustains Jesus in his exiled opposition to the majority politics of his homeland. […] The lesson is a pertinent one for Oedipa, who needs the Tristero as Jesus needs Pierce.” (121)
* *“Was the Horn so dedicated?”* 🡪 Reread this section
* *“God knew how many citizens”* 🡪 Discussion of poverty and the “Other” America. Oedipa learns from Other America, but must be careful not to suggest that entering poverty-stricken American to escape the banality of Suburban American is a good answer (or the answer Pynchon is giving). (125)
* *“Not an act of treason”* 🡪 Discussion of revolutionary power in “other America” (125-126).
* *“A picture of a saint”* 🡪 Narcissism vs. Miracles
* *“High magic to low puns”* 🡪 “‘Instead of attempting to enter the sailor’s world[,]… Oedipa integrates the sailor’s world into a metaphoric scheme of her own. She becomes a Levi-Straussian bricoleur, gathering elements from different orders of being and, by virtue of a similarity in their previously unrelated characteristics, integrating them into a new order.” (134)
* *“She had to look closely”* 🡪 “‘If previously she had only sought out the Tristero, now she has actively participated in it. And, in so doing, Oedipa has at once embraced the dreams, hallucinations, and sufferings of another human being and simultaneously committed herself to the possibilities of other realities and to the viability of other modes of consciousness.” (136)
* *“Infected by its gray”* 🡪 “The Civic Center, the representative of mainstream culture, appears to emanate a kind of sickness.” (136)
* *“There would have to be collisions”* 🡪 “Oedipa still clings to her old-order ways of thinking about the world. Her vision of the way things are does not admit of the possibility that other orders of being might exist, in which – as in fact turns out to be the case – collisions would not “have” to happen.” (136)

**Chapter 6**

* *“That afternoon’s vanity mirror”* 🡪 Oedipa’s fear of either becoming Narcissus (“mistaking the creations of her own confused perceptions for external reality”) in believing in Tristero, or having it become an Echo (“Discovering that it is […] a real warning from an all-too-real creature which she … fails to heed.”) (154)
* *“Her isolation complete”* 🡪 “Oedipa’s search for a transcendent meaning for the Tristero has caused her to become completely isolated [and] shut off from the natural world of becoming through her search for the being of a transcendental signified.” (158-159)
* *“She’d lost her bearings”* 🡪 “San Narciso is no longer unique in its projection of all this is awry in Oedipa’s world. The accompanying sense of loss, communicated with a poignant intensity by the description of the chime, is presumably occasioned by Oedipa’s recognition, reiterated on the following page, that everything that San Narciso stands for is to be found in the rest of America also. Perhaps, too, whatever love may have been contained in the name of Pierce’s city, whatever slight distinction may have been afforded by its association with her love, has gone. Pierce is ‘really dead,’ and she is left only with the bitter insights achieved through her quest.” (159)
* “*Storm-systems… prevailing winds”* 🡪 “The extended metaphor continues Oedipa’s insight of the previous page, her discovery of San Narciso’s lack of uniqueness in a society where the weather patterns are driven by the ‘prevailing winds of affluence,’ which generate the story systems of group suffering and need that Oedipa has more and more become exposed to. The ‘tornado’s touchdown’ that is the city takes us back to her very first glimpse of it, when she sees ‘the ordered swirl of houses and streets’ and feels that she is being communicated with ‘out of the eye of some whirlwind.’ […] The ‘true continuity’ lies in San Narciso’s being simply a part of the larger climatic pattern of America, Pierce’s legacy.” 160
* *“Incommensurate with his need to possess”* 🡪 See relation to Gatsby’s “commensurate with his capacity for wonder.” (160)
* *“Keep it bouncing”* 🡪 Idea of combatting energy degradation (160)
* ***“****She thought of other, immobilized”* 🡪 “Oedipa’s memories bring to the foreground those figures whom our culture tends to marginalize and render invisible. […]rejected by, or choosing to opt out of, mainstream culture, these squatters and drifters are nevertheless ‘congruent’ with the land that Oedipa has lived in all her life, as San Narciso is part of a larger, newly discovered continuity. (162)
* \*\* Note how the novel ends with a high uncertainty/potential. This speaks to the books treatment of entropy; to give a concrete ending would provide a uniform certainty Pynchon as been critical of this entire time.\*
* As this opens her eyes to new information, Oedipa’s understanding of the revelation occurring is further defined via Jesús Arrabal’s theory of miracles (the, as mentioned, “intrusion of one world to another”). Playing off references to Jesus Christ, the Christian Savior, and Arrabal, literally translated to “the regions on the outskirts of a city,”[[1]](#footnote-1) Jesús Arrabal represents closed system revitalization (or salvation) via the marginalized “Other.”[[2]](#footnote-2) At the same time, Oedipa begins to see his reliance upon Pierce for “outside” revitalization. In some sense, this helps her understand her own reliance upon the Tristero, or “Other” America for her own revitalization.

1. 119 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)