

The crying of lot 49 – the mystery of trystero

[Life](#)



Thomas Pynchon's novel *The Crying of Lot 49* is his second novel, and its his shortest novel, and many even consider it more of an experimental novel. This novel is about a woman named Oedipa Maas and her quest for the secret behind a hidden and a shadowy organization known as Trystero (it is also sometimes spelled as Tristero). This novel was written in 1960s which was a very turbulent time in the history of the United States. Many things happened during this period, many of them had a dramatic influence on the lives of the ordinary people. During this period, the world witnessed the assassination of J.

F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, there was also the rise in the rights women and Civil Rights movement. This was also a time of the so called drug culture, for the abuse of drugs was very common. The novel shows us this world as a world that is constantly high, constantly on drugs and drunk, filled with secrets, information from questionable sources and secret identities. The subject of this paper is the secret society and an organization known as Trystero and their secret underground war against United States government and the official state postal system.

Before we move on to the story of the novel, we must first remind ourselves of the postmodern novel and what constitutes a postmodern literature.

Postmodern literature, as postmodernism as a whole, is very hard to define for there are no standards for it nor are there any founding fathers, writers who set the standards for it. We could say that postmodern literature is a continuation of the experimentation started by the modernist writers and authors and their usage of fragmentation, paradox, questionable authors, etc

and it is also a reaction against the enlightenment ideas set by modernist literature.

As it was mentioned, postmodern literature is very hard to define and many even say that it no longer exists, also hard to determine. However, many authors and literary critics agree on common themes that occur in postmodern literature, themes that are almost always present in these works and that are always grouped together in order to create irony, humour or to parody something.

These themes are however not always used by all the postmodern authors, so they can not be called standard postmodern themes, but they occur most commonly. Thomas Pynchon and his novel *The Crying of Lot 49* are an example of postmodern writing, for Pynchon always uses parody, paranoia, playfulness and black humour in his works, and this work is also filled with these themes. Postmodern authors, Pynchon among them, usually treat serious themes and subjects in a humorous and funny manner. Pynchon does that in this novel.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon deals with a serious topic about lives of people in a modern consumer America, about secrets and mysterious organizations, secret identities and also how information can influence our thoughts and even confuse and disturb us, but he approached all of that in a humorous and a funny way. This novel is a sort of a parody of a detective novel. This is because in real detective novels, the hero starts to solve the mystery starting from various and numerous clues, from a, we could say,

chaos of information and draws a conclusion which leads to the truth behind the mystery and reveals the bad guy.

In this novel however, we have Oedipa who opens a mailbox to get the letter and discovers that she has a job to do, pretty simple really, but as the novel progresses, her life and task become more complicated and complicated, she learns about the Trystero and her ex-boyfriend's job and business undertakings but instead of making things clear, instead of solving the mystery of the Trystero, she became even more confused than she was when she first found out about them, so much confused that she almost lost her mind and started to think if it all was nothing more than a joke, created by her deceased ex-boyfriend or even maybe this was all just the work of her own imagination.

This novel also has paranoia present in itself, Oedipa becomes paranoid about the world and the people around herself, but she is not the only one really. Almost all characters are paranoid, and the existence of the Trystero is more than enough to create a paranoid world. What also makes this novel postmodern is the usage of wordplay. Pynchon plays with words, names of the people, like Pierce Inverarity, Mike Fallopian, Stanley koteks, Oedipa Maas, with the names of the towns like San Narciso and we also have the wordplay with words like waste which is turned here in this novel into an acronym W. A. S. T. E. and KCUF radio station. What also makes this novel postmodern is that we have unreliable narrator.

Oedipa Maas is the main protagonist of this story, but we see the action of the novel only as she does and we know what we know, no more no less, and

she is almost always drunk or on drugs, just like all other characters that appear in the novel. We can say that this novel also combines elements of both modern and postmodern novels, because the relation between these two genres is often connected because they share both similarities and differences. Oedipa Maas is the heroine, a modernist heroine who is trapped in a postmodern world. Her quest is not only to discover the death of Mr Inverarity and of the Tristero, but also to discover her inner self and her inner soul.

She meets people who can be considered as lost causes, but Pynchon sees them as someone really worth fighting for as they have shown the real self-discovery. We could say that this is the novel of the character development, a bildungsroman, for Oedipa develops her character, no matter how confused she is in the end, she becomes stronger and more determined to discover the real truth, no matter how weird and confusing that truth really is. She continues and carries on even though her quest is a lost cause. However, Pynchon also uses his postmodern novel in order to criticize the modernist vision of the world by showing us a society that filled with discarded objects and discarded people.

The most obvious example of this is the acronym WASTE, which becomes a central theme in the novel, but will talk about it later in the paper. There are also discarded people who formed secret underground groups and societies as a response to various forms of rejection by their society. For example we have IA group, created by a man who swore off love after his wife cheated on him, The Alameda County Death Club and the Peter Pinguids, a group of people who are against industrial capitalism etc. As it was stated in the <https://assignbuster.com/the-crying-of-lot-49-the-mystery-of-trystero/>

beginning, the subject of this paper is the mysterious Trystero organization. This novel is about a world, a world that seems to be constantly on drugs or drunk.

We could think that this is the world that many people try to get away from, trying to vanish from it, for in this novel Oedipa meets various people who just want to be left alone, forgotten perhaps. We see people who have not rebelled against the government and they are not the deserters, they have just chose to leave, to hide and stay hidden. Oedipa sees this as their first real independent choice, a choice they have all made away from the press, the government and its institutions. They don't use official state institutions, in this case the official postal system of the United States. This is the world of secrets and hidden identities, and of course secret societies, underground organizations, like Trystero is. What is this Trystero? Who are they? What is their goal? Their mission and agenda?

Oedipa wants to find out just that, who they are and what they want, but unfortunately all she accomplishes is to end up completely baffled by everything and everyone she meets. As it was mentioned in the previous paragraph, she does not give up and is determined to continue with her search. Trystero represents this main aspect of underground and of hiding away from the government and the world. We as readers of this novel know about Trystero as much as Oedipa does and we also in the end, as she does, end up confused and baffled if all of this was actually real or was it all just her imagination or a bad joke. The bulk of the book is spent following Oedipa as she tries to track down what exactly the Trystero is.

She stumbles upon this one night when she and Metzger are at The Scope, a club frequented by Yoyodyne employees, a huge defense contractor for the military in the area. While in the ladies' room Oedipa notices the following written near a drawing of a muted horn: " Interested in sophisticated fun? You, hubby, girl friends. The more the merrier. Get in touch with Kirby, through WASTE only, Box 7391, L. A. " 1 The book then follows a play-within-a-play format when Oedipa watches a play called The Courier's Tragedy which puts into some context the history between Tristero and Thurn And Taxis, the latter being a real mail distribution company throughout Europe for many centuries. It is from this play that Oedipa learns about the history of Trysterero.

According to the story, Trysterero was defeated by Thurn and Taxis in the 1700. and since then it has been hiding and went underground. This Trysterero now exists, or at least it appears to exist, or maybe not, as a secret society that is completely separated from the United States government and the official postal service. Oedipa even believes that Trysterero battled with Pony Express and United States Postal Service over the control of information flow. However, this battle seems to go on, between Tristero and US Postal Service. Tristero is the symbol of the underground here in the novel and they are present as an invisible force with a hidden agenda and goals.

Their symbol is a muted post horn which is the first thing Oedipa sees of the Tristero in a club mentioned early and their way of communicating and transferring of information is through the WASTE system which uses clever disguises - their way of transferring information, a kind of parody to the official postal service, is by using waste-bins as their post-boxes. Thomas
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Pynchon does a very good job in making us believe that this society indeed really exists, but he also confuses by putting various names, most of them of people who are actually not so important for the story of the novel, but he does manage to create an illusion of a conspiracy. The most important part of the novel is the reproduction of the fictional Jacobean Drama known as *The Courier's Tragedy*.

This play is where Oedipa first hears the name Tristero and of their struggle with Thurn and Taxis. This play provides us with the first account of the Tristero, but it is their symbol that really draws our attention. We will now discuss the symbols of Tristero, for they are the key to understanding it, or at least trying to understand the story behind them. These include the muted post horn and WASTE system. We will begin with the first symbol that Oedipa comes in contact with and that is the muted post horn. Oedipa first sees this symbol in the bathroom of a club *The Scope*, as a part of a small message, more like an add. From that moment she will see this symbol everywhere she goes.

Genghis Cohen will show her the post horn that is hidden in a certain stamp collection that was in the possession of her late ex-boyfriend, Mr Inverarity. Later she will see the same symbol being scribbled on paper by a technician in Yoyodyne building, Stanley Kotelko. Oedipa even sees it when children draw it in the park and play a game in which they mention Tristero. This post horn, as Oedipa finds out from Cohen, was a symbol of Thurn and Taxis. Their symbol is a post horn, while Tristero uses a muted post horn, probably as a way to mock them. Tristero, as it is given, fought against Thurn and Taxis and lost the battle. Tristero went into the hiding and managed to reach <https://assignbuster.com/the-crying-of-lot-49-the-mystery-of-tristero/>

United States somewhere around 1853. He fought the Pony Express and Wells, Fargo, and their agents were always either dressed as outlaws in black or as Indians. Oedipa manages to recover a ring from an old man, Mr. Thoth, who lives in a retirement home built by Pierce Inverarity. He tells her that this ring, which has the muted post horn engraved on it, was given to him by his grandfather who got it from an Indian he killed. However, at one time, Oedipa met a man who wore a pin with the muted post horn: "What if I told you," she addressed the owner of the pin, "that I was an agent of Thurn and Taxis?" "What," he answered, "some theatrical agency?"² Here we have a different story about the origin of the muted post horn.

According to his story, this is a symbol of Inamorati Anonymus, a group of people who forsook love, which they see as the worst addiction of all. The creator of the organization and of the symbol was a Yoyodyne executive, who founded the Inamorati Anonymus after finding out that his wife was cheating on him. This leads us back to the point when Oedipa saw for the first time the muted post horn as a part of the advertisement for this organization, which makes us believe if Tristero really is real or just an organization of people who have forsook love and make sure that no one else ever falls in love are using secretive methods to communicate with each other.

Another characteristic of this novel, and another symbol of the Tristero, is the so-called WASTE. This can stand as an acronym which means We Await Silent Tristero Empire, which is always written on regular waste bins. This can also stand for a secret underground information network that is used by people who forsook their own lives and chosen to live in secrecy and away from the government. There are even corporations who refuse to use the <https://assignbuster.com/the-crying-of-lot-49-the-mystery-of-tristero/>

official postal system, like Yoyodine, and there is also an organization known as Peter Penguid Society, of which Mike Fallopien is the member, who oppose the monopoly of the US Postal Service and are using their own private system.

This is a system of information transfer that is used by those who want to remain hidden, secret, and there are signs that Tristero is the runner of it. They use waste bins and their postman, or couriers, are bums and other social misfits. Inamorati Anonymus is the organization that openly uses the WASTE system for their communication. These two symbols, the muted post horn and the WASTE system, give us and Oedipa clues about Tristero but they also confuse us, because as we learn about their connection with Tristero, we also learn their other meanings and that they are being used by some other underground isolated groups and organizations. After all this confusion, Oedipa returns to the Jacobean Drama, where she first heard the word Tristero.

She comes in contact with Emory Bortz, a professor at San Narciso College, for the information about the play itself, especially the Tristero version of the play. Unfortunately, the only person who knew the real story about the play was Driblette, who directed the play Oedipa saw, and he committed suicide. As we draw near to the end of the novel, we see that Oedipa discovers a great deal of historical Tristero, about its origins. She discovers that it was created around 1577, in the Netherlands. After William of Orange achieved independence from Spain and the Holy Roman empire, he replaced the people who were in control of the Thurn and Taxis and Leopold I's rule, and in their place put a man named Jan Hinckard.

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However, Hinckard was challenged by his cousin Hernando Joaquin de Tristero y Calavera. Tristero fought a guerilla war against Hinckard from 1578. until 1583. Tristero gives up the fighting and sets up a covert system. However, Oedipa finds out that during 17th Century, Thurn and Taxis struggle to maintain their system , and this may mena that Tristero was very effective during that time and period. Tristero's presence as the black coated bandits was confirmed by Proffesor Bortz wh ogave her a book An Account of the Singular Peregrinations of Dr. Diocletian Blobb. Dr. Blobb survived one of their attacks with him being captured by them and sent back to England in order t otell everyone of the power of Tristero.

Oedipa in the end managed t odiscover a great deal of historical information about the Tristero, but this did not satisfy her because she still did not know why Driblette mentioned the Tristero in his work, when in the original work there is no mentioning of them at all. Wheteher this is true or not, Oedipa tells everything to Mike Fallopian back at the Scope, where she first saw the muted post horn. Fallopian, after hearing her story and her findings, asks Oedipa if she ever considered the possibility that this may all had been a joke orchestrated by Pierce Inverarity. She did consider this, but refuses to think like that anymore. Later she goes back and again searches through all of the Pierce's possessions and finds out that Pierce had presence in all the places and had influence on all the people she met.

He owned Zapf's Used Bookstore, where she bought her copy of the Jacobean drama, he also owned the Tank Theater, where she saw Driblette's production of " The Courier's Tragedy". Proffesor Bortz works at San Narciso College, which was founded by Pierce himself, and even blobb's

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Peregrinations were bought at Zapf's Used Bookstore. This leads her to believe that Fallopian may be right, that all of this was nothing more than a joke, a gag produced by Pierce himself. The ending of the novel also does not help us, for it is open ended. Oedipa goes to an auction of Peirce's stamp collection, which is under the name Lot 49, but that is where it all ends. In a conclusion, we are left confused whether this was all real.

Pynchon did a great job of providing the information about the historical founding of the Tristero, but he also filled his novel with other information, all of it made up, even the historical. Instead of finding answers, we find more and more questions. The Crying of Lot 49 shows a fragmented world in which there are always more alternatives, in this world information leads to more information which create more questions and answers. This leads people, like Oedipa in this case, to create various alternate interpretations just in order to create some sort of the bigger picture onto which they will hold to. This entire Tristero conspiracy may have been a joke or a paranoid creation by Oedipa herself, or maybe there is truth behind it all. We will never know.

We do know, that there are secret organizations who uses secret and undercover means of communicating, there are people who have secret identities, who seek truth somewhere else. We all live in the world filled with information and symbols and who knows, maybe there is a secret undercover conspiracy by a secret postal system who wants to bring down the monopol of the government's postal system. Personally, I find this novel to be very interesting because it deals with a mystery and search for the truth. When I read it, I found it hard to understand it in the end, whether this is all true, if there really is Tristero, or maybe this was all just a paranoid

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dream by Oedipa or maybe even a possibility that this was all a bad joke by Pierce with Oedipa as its target.

Whatever the truth is, we will never really know, for the novel has the open ending, but all quests, all attempts to find some sort of truth end up like that

- with more questions than answers and with multiple interpretations of

evidence and information. End Notes 1. Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot*

49, First perennial fiction library edition, 1986. Pg. 52 2. *ibid.*, Pg. 111

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