

If you mean it, sing it



Despite the fact that *The Crying of Lot 49* is chock-full of the use of methods of communication, the only time when anything is actually communicated is when a few songs are sung by The Paranoids. Any letters mentioned in the novel are void of meaning; relationships tend to be self-indulgent and superficial; even radio broadcasts are phony. Moreover, of the few songs that are not sung by the Paranoids, none have any substantial meaning either. Overall, unless stated or utilized by a member of the band, no form of communication possesses the slightest trace of an actual desire to communicate. The first time one sees meaning in communication is immediately before Oedipa and Metzger have sex – yet another form of exchange void of substance – when the Paranoids are singing outside their bedroom window. The song immediately has some sort of meaning because it tells a story: A man longs for the woman he loves, but knows he cannot go to her – “As I lie...and you lie alone tonight...how can I come to you” (Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1999. 27). It may sound like a rather blas, overdone theme for a song; yet, compared to anything that has appeared in the novel before it, it is monumental in honesty and emotion. So far, the only other forms of communication have been shellacked with grandiose, Time Warner effects. For example, the entire book begins with Oedipa Maas being named executrix of an eccentric multi-millionaire’s will. Then, she visits his lawyer who studies nothing else but Perry Mason television episodes, the father of the concocted, kitschy detective drama. Finally, she drives to San Narciso, a city paved with prefabricated, Vegas-esque buildings and billboards, to find the coexecutor, Metzger. Something this fantastic could only occur in a Hollywood B-movie! Therefore, is not this song the first “true” thing she

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encounters, the first expression of substance? The next major song by The Paranoids does not occur till the end of the novel; yet, prior to that, a few other forms of empty communication show up. First, while slumming around a bar called The Scope, Oedipa encounters Mike Fallopian who receives a letter via the underground postal service. He tells the reader (and Oedipa) in advance that the note will be garbage by explaining how “ each member has to send at least one letter a week through the Yoyodyne system” (39); if they don’t, they’re fined. Therefore, one cannot expect a mandatory letter, like the one Fallopian opens, to have any sort of value. In fact, all it says is, “ Dear Mike, ... how are you? Just thought I’d drop you a note. How’s your book coming? Guess that’s all for now. See you at The Scope” (39). No one could possibly argue that the letter is of any consequence or that it presents any sort of meaning to its reader. Even the implication that the author of the letter wants to know how Mike’s book is doing is purely empty, for one has no doubt that he, in reality, doesn’t give a damn about it. Therefore, here is a perfect example of using a common form of communication to communicate nothing. The next time there is a reasonably relative exchange of ideas between people is during Oedipa’s visit to the Yoyodyne stockholders’ meeting. While she’s there, the corporate stockholders sing two songs in praise of their beloved Yoyodyne. Normally, one would think that such a jubilant expression of loyalty would be expressed through meaningful, heart-felt words. Even my thesis would imply that, as they are singing songs, there should be honesty and emotion present. However, these little ditties were written by the corporate world. They, like the required Yoyodyne mailing system, are mandatory expressions churned out robotically no matter how many Vaseline-slick smiles one has singing them.

The lyrics themselves seem to aureate hollow and capitalistic California ideals “ Pink pavilions bravely shining,/ Palm trees tall and true” (65) and “ Yoyodyne... Contracts flee thee yet./ DOD has shafted thee,/ Out of spite, I’ll bet” (66). Not only do the words lack worthwhile meaning, but they also show how jaded and corrupt the people singing them must be. Of course, if these people are like every first grader pledging allegiance to the flag, by now the words have become so heavily etched into their minds that they don’t even think about them when they’re reciting them, making even the act of singing insincere and rehearsed. Therefore, the only thing these two songs communicate is a lack of emotion. Finally, after Oedipa has brushed with death thanks to Dr. Hilarious, she reunites with her husband, Mucho, in the back of his radio truck. One would presume that, as a couple, they would have the most honest forms of communication in the entire novel; yet, somehow, at this moment they manage to present one of the coldest and obscure relationships. She enters the truck greeted by a soundless smile from him, being told to “ be herself” before having a microphone thrust in front of her. A couple of weeks, maybe closer to a month, without seeing her husband, and all Oedipa gets is a mic thrown in her face. Moreover, after receiving her comments on the rather mind-boggling events that just occurred in Dr. Hilarious’s office, Mucho bastardizes her name into Edna Mosh, saying that he “ was allowing for the distortion on these rigs, and then when they put it on tape” (114), so it will come out clear in the final broadcast. In essence, he asks her to be herself only to document her as someone entirely different before sending it off to be regarded as fact by the rest of the world. If that’s not screwing with the veracity of communication, I don’t know what is. The last major form of honest interaction between

people occurs when Oedipa returns to Echo Courts and sees The Paranoids again. At this point, one of the band members, Serge, sings a song about how his girlfriend left him for an older man, and how he is now patrolling the schoolyards for a new female companion “ For me, my baby was a woman/ For him she’s just another nymphet/ Why did they run around ... As long as she’s gone away ... I’ve had to find somebody new ... I had a date last night with an eight-year-old” (120-121). Out of all the moments in the novel, this one seems to be the most painfully real and true. Here is Serge, obviously broken by the fact that someone whom he believed he loved has ditched him for a smooth-talking Humbert Humbert wannabe, singing his heart out in hope that his lyrics will console him; for, in fact, there is no eight-year-old “groovy” replacement in his life. He is the only character, therefore, to really feel regret and loss, believe he experienced the emotion of love, and have the gusto to communicate it to the rest of the world. Overall, it is simply the one time, save possibly the first Paranoids song, where a form of communication actually communicates anything. In essence, the entire novel displays how communication does not function. Perhaps the only reason Pynchon even gives The Paranoids a few moments of honest, expressible emotion is that he wants to show that the future generations have the hope of not being as jaded as the present one, allowing for the possibility for communication to reestablish itself truly in a society. Overall, though, regardless of Pynchon’s reasons for having The Paranoids be the tool, The Crying of Lot 49 only has people expressing meaning to each other when the band is singing.