

The presence of entropy in the crying of lot 49



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In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Thomas Pynchon expresses a very interesting view of entropy through the actions of Oedipa Maas. In communication theory, entropy is a measure of the efficiency of a system, as a code or language, in transmitting information. Otherwise, the definition of entropy I will use is “the ultimate state reached in the degradation of matter in the universe: a state of inert uniformity of component elements; an absence of form, pattern, hierarchy, or differentiation.” In Oedipa’s adventures throughout the novel, Pynchon uses her attempt to sort out Pierce’s will as an example of the work of Maxwell’s demon. Maxwell’s demon is a vessel divided into two portions, A and B, by a division in which there is a small hole, which allows only swifter molecules to one side and slower molecules are contained in the other. The purpose of Maxwell’s demon is to contradict the second law of thermodynamics and, without work, to lower the temperature of A and raise the temperature of B. The principle of entropy is explained in the chaos that Oedipa discovers traveling through California. Pynchon clearly proves the idea that gathering information is directly related to measurements of disorder. Through Oedipa, Pynchon ultimately proves how Maxwell’s demon cannot work. The basic operating principle of Maxwell’s demon is the ability to open and close a small hole between two portions of a vessel full of air at uniform temperature. In her essay “Maxwell’s Demon, Entropy, Information: *The Crying of Lot 49*,” Anne Mangel states that “in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon uses Maxwell’s notion of the demon as a metaphor for Oedipa’s experiences.” Oedipa illustrates this when she speaks of the loss of her men. She says, “They are stripping away, one by one, my men. My shrink, pursued by Israelis, has gone mad; my husband, on LSD, gropes like a child further and further into the rooms and endless rooms of the elaborate candy

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house of himself and away, hopelessly away, from what has passed, I was hoping forever, for love; my one extra marital fella has sloped with a depraved 15-year-old; my best guide back to the Trystero has taken a Brody. Where am I?" (126). Oedipa symbolizes the demon because she is allowing people into, then closing them out of, her life. She is in a conformist society, which represents the uniformity in Maxwell's demon. In the novel, Oedipa Mass is left as executor of the will, sorting out random inheritance, just as Maxwell's demon is called upon to sort out the randomness of molecules. Oedipa finds an extreme amount of chaos around her, which is related to the chaos in Maxwell's demon. As she begins to put order to this chaos, she notices the enormity of entropy in society. She therefore begins her random travel throughout California, symbolizing the entropy of molecules moving in random directions. Oedipa's representation of the demon shows when she begins to sort out the symbols and codes in society, as Maxwell's demon would begin sorting out the molecules. Oedipa discovers a great deal of chaos in society as she travels throughout California. In particular, the WASTE, DEATH, and NADA acronyms in the novel all represent examples of entropy in communication. Through these words, Pynchon shows that the randomness of language has disturbing potential. Oedipa faces mass confusion when confronted with these words, and she notices the psychological effects these words can have on the people of California. Thus, Oedipa witnesses an interesting form of entropy: the entropy of communication. As Anne Mangel states, "The interesting aspects of the system, at least in relation to Pynchon, are the notion of the sending information through signals and codes, and also the idea of noise and distortion." An important principle of communication entropy is the ability of

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noise to change the message that is being conveyed. Oedipa notices this throughout California while trying to solve the mystery of Trystero. On page 139, Mucho interviews Oedipa for the radio, and announces her name to be “Mrs. Edna Mosh” because the sound will change through entropy of communication. Later, in the streets, Oedipa notices children playing a jump rope game. They play on the post horn and sing, “Tristoe, Tristoe, one, two, three, Turning taxi from across the sea.... (pg. 96)” Oedipa notices that they misinterpreted the words from Thurn and Taxis. Again, therefore, Pynchon shows entropy in communication. When Oedipa researches the play *The Courier's Tragedy*, furthermore, she notices one line can be found in many different forms in different versions. In all these examples, Pynchon introduces the concept of entropy in society and relates it to the concept of Maxwell's demon through Oedipa. Pynchon proves in *The Crying of Lot 49* that gathering information is directly related to entropy. The more information Oedipa gathers throughout the novel, the more confused she becomes. In Tony Tanner's essay “*The Crying of Lot 49*,” Tanner states, “Her (referring to Oedipa) problem is beyond verification or falsification. She has emerged from narcissism, but is it only to enter into paranoia? She runs over the possibilities: Either you have stumbled indeed...onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream; onto a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst reserving their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty, for the official government system; maybe even onto a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know, and you too, sweetie. Or a plot has been mounted against you... so labyrinthine that it must have meaning beyond just a practical joke. Or you

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are fantasizing some such plot, in which case you are a nut, out of your skull.” This statement shows how confused Oedipa has become after gathering so much information. Oedipa finds herself sometimes incapable at telling whether she is awake or asleep. She can’t tell if information is real or if she witnessed it in her dreams. Through this, Pynchon proves how large amounts of research into a topic can lead to less comprehension of the subject. This chaos is another occurrence of entropy in *The Crying of Lot 49*. In his essay, “The Use of Codes in *The Crying of Lot 49*,” Frank Kermode says that “if the systems are to work, and the book to work as a system, it will be because the reader can do what Oedipa could not when confronted with Maxwell’s demon; make the piston move, reverse the entropy of communication as that device reverses physical entropy. But if you make the eyes of this novel move, or if you believe in the original plot on which it depends, you risk a kind of madness, which is the ultimate human cost of holding everything together in a single design.” Kermode knows that a reader has to make some sense of this book, and he makes a valid point. Getting too into the plot of this novel will make a person quite confused, as was Pynchon’s intention. *The Crying of Lot 49* is less a novel than it is an essay. Pynchon uses his novel to explain his theories on Maxwell’s demon and entropy. Through Oedipa, Pynchon proves that entropy exists throughout society. Ultimately, using Oedipa as an example of Maxwell’s demon proves that Maxwell’s demon would not work. Oedipa sorts out as much as she can only to find that she has created more chaos. In the end, she has no answers, just as Pynchon shows that Maxwell’s demon would provide no answers to contradicting the second law of thermodynamics.