

**Subterfuges of Patriarchy and the Survivals: A Study of Floating Opera and The Crying of  
Lot of 49**

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**Abstract**

It ought to be stressed that Barth and Pynchon are technical virtuosi. They are bestowed with the talent to employ the literary tools and devices with functional valuations and variations. Furthermore, the Weltanschauung of Barth and Pynchon is deeply colored but not totally obtruded by the stresses and strains Sturm und Drang the tensions and anxieties Angst experienced by men and women. Barth and Pynchon capture as it were the very pulse of the present world, which has witnessed two Global Wars, the Wall Street Crash, the Great depression, the anomie and the great accent placed on materialism.

**Key Words:** Zeitgeist, patriarchy, animalistic, domination, conjugal, sex, media

It is an acknowledged fact that the mind-set of Barth and Pynchon as creative artists is of an outstanding caliber and high artistic maturation. At this juncture, it is stressed and indisputably established that Barth and Pynchon are the outstanding and remarkable artistic geniuses, who have contributed immensely to the growth, strength, and relevance of American Literature, and by extension to World Literature.

Furthermore, the literary products of Barth and Pynchon gain lasting value mainly because they reflect on the problems and issues of life, which are universally experienced by all in all ages in the past and also in the years to come. In fact, life precedes literature as far as Barth and Pynchon are concerned. They have grown into great artists of significance, relevance, and consequence, who take pride in being American Writers in American English.

Moreover, Barth and Pynchon take all the writing care at their disposal to see to it that the structure is of a balanced and perfect manner and that the organization is tightly well knit, without any loose ends.

In their accent on Gestalt Barth and Pynchon merit a close, critical, and analytical study. Barth and Pynchon concentrate on the generic form, which is fiction or short fiction. They realize the importance of balancing the form against the content. In other words, they do not sacrifice content for form. Yet again, Barth and Pynchon place the accent, in a balanced manner, on the elements of fiction or short fiction, and the rhetorical requirements, which overlap one another. There is the proper description of the milieu, Zeitgeist, Weltanschauung and the race, class and gender

The major themes that draw the attention of writers the world over including Barth and Pynchon are not the age old subjects of birth, growth, maturity, passion, union, new birth, mutability, decay, death, and rebirth. On the other hand on the familial ground it is human relationships, which have suffered a serious jolt because of the accent on material side and animalistic side of life. And it is sex first and loves next. The argument that is currently prevalent among the intellectuals is where there is satisfactory sex there is bound to be love and not otherwise. Consequently where there is no satisfactory sex there is bound to be violence and death. This vein of thinking began in the sixties of the twentieth century when post modernism made its mark.

Therefore, Barth and Pynchon concentrate on the psychic angle of their men and women characters, who suffer from mental crises. The family relationship has touched an unhealthy low because of sexism, or over-sexed or under-sexed condition, and the beastly animalism in men characters. There is the stress on a life that is rooted in a mechanical and daily dull routine. The tempo of life is one of a fast phase and it is fast living and nothing else. Therefore, the tragedy of men and women is that they have lost their self-respect, honor, and dignity, and as a consequence they lose their separate and distinct individuality. In such a context, notwithstanding the phenomenal material gains and high standard of living men and women suffer from mental crises and as a result of the persistent psychic strains and stresses turn into neurotic case studies.

No other writer has more sympathetically explored, from a feminine angle, the basic human activities of lovemaking, conception, and gestation. In a word without absolute values and meaningful existence, the moral responsibility of human beings for one another has become a precious gift to be treasured and fostered. Barth has moved steadily towards the celebration of male-female companionship, and particularly a mutual admiration of one another at all levels of human activity. Love triangles, coupled with fornication, recur in Barth's works, one attraction that the triangle has for Barth is purely technical.

Todd Andrews discovers the truth at the end of the novel, *The Floating Opera*, “. . . nothing makes any difference, including the truth” (120). Although Todd applies his new awareness specifically to the question of his planned suicide, deciding that if there is no final reason for living, there is none for dying either, his truth is about a response to, and a reflection to his private crisis, and quest for a new personal awareness are intimate aspects of the love-story he chronicles. He got into a love affair with Jane Mack, wife of his best friend, Harrison Mack.

Jane suddenly, and without warning, offered herself to him. Todd later discovered that she did so because Harrison wanted her to do so. In fact, Jane and Harrison desired the affair out of love for Todd; they wanted no silly jealousy, no guilt, no recriminations. Zack Bowena considers this episode of Barth's commentary on “liberal morality, both political and sexual and political” (58). It is because of Harrison's left wing sympathies, sexual because of the curious

and the self-conscious, almost ideological, nature of the affair itself.

The fictions, *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, are similar in plot. Each book depicts a love triangle, in which a bachelor makes love to a married woman with the husband's consent, and in which pregnancy results with neither man knowing for certain whom the father is.

The affair in *The Floating Opera* takes up less than one-third of that book, and is played for laughs. Barth focuses on the theme of sex in his fictions and treats it as a thrust area of his study of human beings. He repeatedly contends that life situations take their roots and growth and development in love and sex.

Barth celebrates love, the full spectrum from the comic mechanics of sex to the dogma about deathless passion of Western civilization's contradictory faiths in the companionship of mutual gender esteem and the boredom of marital familiarity.

Despite conjugal sentimentality, Barth puts stable marriage out to sea, and de-centers its trunk as Patricia Tobin argues "The rhizomatics of story, de-territorializing in the process also, the phallic genitality that is adultery's bane and reproduction's boon..." (159).

Sex, especially sexual rivalry plays a major role in Barth's fiction. Among the first person narrators, women assume metaphorical identities, as both muses and temptresses. In *The Floating Opera*, Todd's

self-destructive tendencies are, in some measure, dependent on his rivalry with Harrison Mack over Jane Mack, a motif that would be continued in the triangle, involving Jake Homer and the Morgans.

On his first sexual encounter with Betty June Gunter in his bedroom, Todd happens to catch their images reflected in the mirror on the dresser. The textual passage makes an interesting reading and it is quoted "Betty June's face buried in the pillow, her scrawny little buttocks thrust skywards, me gangly as a whippet and braying like an ass. I exploded with laughter ...." (120).

Since the physical aspect of the act is to him intrinsically ludicrous, Todd concludes that to ascribe other dimensions to it is to engage in self-deception. Later observing a pair of crabs, Todd recalls a process that takes up to fourteen hours, and again ridicules abstractions and absolutes. The textual passage is quoted below:

Crabs refer to the male and the female thus coupled as one crab a doubler, just as Plato imagined the human prototype to be male and female joined into one being.... I laughed and made a mental note to make a physical note, for my inquiry, of the similarity between crabbers and Plato, and to remind Jane that there were creatures who took longer than I. . . . (53-54)

Though Todd could play the cynic well, can flippantly such things as the concept of love, and even reject the notion that there is an

essential difference between human love and crab love, he is dissatisfied with things as they are. His laughter, intended to convince the reader of his sophistication and detachment, at times is a symptom of frustration, and his state, but a step removed from hysteria.

In Todd's preoccupation with himself, he fails to see Jane as anything but a sexual object. Consequentially, when Jane walks out of him, he is shocked, for he had not thought of her as a creature independent from his plans and lusts. Todd is also interested in the nature of writing. He never disguises his function as a storyteller, and opens the book with comments that simultaneously refer to navigation and narration, and of his intention to "let the creeks and covers go by" (3).

Todd also notes that fiction and life have mirroring qualities, though it is not clear, which is the subject, and which is the reflection. He introduces the chapter, Calliope Music, with double, nearly mirroring, columns of type. He likes to share his knowledge of writing with the reader, and in the chapter Coitus, smugly reveals that he is aware of climaxes and anticlimaxes, both in sex and fiction.

Thomas Pynchon's book *The Crying of Lot 49* deals with a quest of an American housewife in the nineteen-sixties. This central figure is the protagonist Oedipa Maas, following the theme of Oedipus, the tragic hero of ancient Greek mythology. Oedipus, having slain his father, having married his own mother, and even having fathered four children without knowing about his true relationship to those people,

finally has to learn about his past and the fact that he descended morally. At the end of the myth he blinds himself, not willing to see any more. "Oedipa descends to the underworld of America" (Newman, 80), leaving her usual environment behind to investigate on an underground mail system which makes itself known to her. But with every new piece of information and with every revelation Oedipa gets more confused. During her quest for the mysterious underground mail system, called the "Tristero System", the term revelation itself is being deconstructed (Bérubé, 217). Although the Tristero System reveals itself to Oedipa, nothing is really revealed, as the information she gets is in most cases useless. "Hooking readers onto Oedipa's quest, *The Crying of Lot 49* denies a final denouement and remains characterized by a pervasive ambiguity.

All in all she is dominated by men, who do not take her seriously, when she asks them for help. Mucho does not listen to her at all and does not give any support. Her psychiatrist, Dr Hilarius, tries to use her for his drug testing on housewives. Even her lawyer, whom she consults to get some advice concerning the will she has to execute, tries to harass her while she is having lunch with him (12). Feeling insulated in her boots, she ignores his attempt to "play footsie with her under the table" (12). Last but not least the will she has to execute shows that her former lover Pierce does still have some power over her, even after his death. Oedipa stands all this, without reflecting about the role she plays in the patriarchal society. In her suburban environment she is insulated like the way

she is insulated in these boots. Insensitive against any degradation and the indifference of men towards her she lives a life of monotony. Later we also learn that Oedipa prefers the stillness of four walls to an illusion of freedom like she experiences it on the highways of California (16).

When Oedipa leaves her husband to start her work as an executor it becomes obvious that she does not care for him very much. Her going up and away spontaneously without telling him anything personal, apart from some practical advice how to handle the basil and Dr. Hilarius, shows us that she is quite indifferent towards him (14). She sees herself as seductive and good looking, knows that she is attractive (18), and acts with a "movie gaiety" (21) when playing Strip Boticelli with her co-executor Metzger. While this game she is playing with fire, trying not to get undressed, or at least not to get undressed too soon. Their game brings her "no nearer to nudity" (26) as it is said in the novel. Thus she is playing with Metzger in two different ways. On the one hand she is playing this special game and on the other hand she is teasing him (26). Though she feels angry when Metzger is trying to seduce her, she finally gives in, being laid. During this procedure she even falls asleep (27) and awakes in the middle of their act. Afterwards she cries, but comes back to Metzger when he tells her to do so (28).

It is another interesting fact that during her quest Oedipa assumes different names and thus adopts different identities on the way to her own identity. She wears a button which identifies her as "Arnold Snarb" (76) when she enters a bar called "the Greek Way". This could as well be seen as an allusion to

the Greek hero Oedipus and his quest for identity. He does not know who he actually is and has to find out about his identity during a long row of cruel experiences. Later Oedipa is even addressed as "Edna Mosh" (96) in the course of a radio interview by her own husband, as he is not willing to expose the real identity of his wife. When she visits a gynaecologist, fearing that she is pregnant, she calls herself Grace Bortz. This pseudonym she chooses is the name of the wife of a university professor, whom she contacted several times during her investigations.

Oedipa tries to understand every philosophy of the involved organisations or persons. She shows no feminist but rather an old fashioned and patriarchal attitude, as she tries to understand every speech one of these mostly male characters is imposing on her. Oedipa represents in a way the archetype of the understanding woman, who is always open for the troubles and attitudes of men. Due to her "cultural conditioning" (Madsen, 59) she is often misled as the above mentioned behaviour occupies her with things that are not necessary, but very confusing to the reader as well as to Oedipa. As soon as she does ask specific and demanding questions the men refuse to say anything further and withdraw. They only offer her the knowledge they want her to have, the information they regard as suitable for her. She is never given any helpful information by purpose. Whenever she gets to know sensible and helpful facts and details, this happens accidentally.

Due to her cultural belief, Oedipa is even "unable to discover an alternative source of value external to the limited eschatology to



which she has been educated” (Madsen, 60). This is one of the greatest obstacles to her quest, as it is one that comes from inside her and has long time ago been planted inside her by society. She cannot imagine or accept the ambiguity of her culture. Now she has to discover that there are discontinuities within her environment, which leave "her poised between the signs that she tries to interpret and their culturally constrained potential for meaning" (Madsen, 60). These “cognitive obstacles” (Madsen, 64) weigh much more than the obstacles imposed upon her by her dominant male antagonists, as for example Driblette trying to discourage her (Pynchon, 52). As a result of her conditioning Oedipa is rather likely to believe that she is suffering from severe mental illness, than to accept that America might really be the way it reveals itself, now.

During her quest Oedipa is alternating between the self-critical opinion that she is suffering from paranoia, the feeling that there is a plot against her, and the impression that she is revealing a great mystery. The following quotation represents her usual thoughts quite well:

“Either Oedipal in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full

circle into some  
paranoia.”(126)

Most of the time she believes in a plot set up by Pierce and the idea, that believing in such a plot is a sign for paranoia. This further increases her uncertainty and leads her into a vicious circle.

Regarding all this we can state that Oedipa's quest is “grounded in a hyperbolically banalized world” (Hite, 73) lacking any intensity or real feelings. From this the heroine tries to escape as she is not able to cope with its banality any longer. Her quest is thus a “birth passage” (Hite, 73) for a new life. Oedipa who is heading for a change is "directed toward transcendence" (Hite, 73) which she finally reaches stating that her legacy was America. Although she did not find any ultimate truths, she found different concepts of life, different interpretations of America, various attitudes and ideologies, and finally had access to new interpretations of American history. She learned about poor individuals outside the bright and glittering city centres and the cosy suburbs. Her knowledge had been increased, although she is not able to cope with all this yet, and although she is presently not in a position to use the knowledge she has gained. She did not find any substitute for her lost religious belief. But instead of this she has reached something that is more important, even if she might not see the worth of it, yet. Oedipa might be convinced that she has lost something, now that she does not know any more what to believe in. Her conceptions of reality have all tumbled and there is nothing to replace the loss. What she does not see is that she can do without such easy comfort. She has the chance to do without a religious

symbol to set her hopes on, and she will as well be able to live without the lie of the American Dream she has once believed in.

There is a hope for the future, that she might not return to her conventional suburban life, daring to live a life free from male dominance and the bondage of marriage. She will never again have to endure the “lifeless repetition” (Newman, 73) of her former daily routine again. As her relationship to Mucho is at an end as well, there is a possibility that she will soon chose a different kind of relationship or that she might be able to do without any male assistance at all. She is not likely to pick up her former “Rapunzel-like role” (Quilligan, 112) again. Caring for her husband, who is the centre of her attention, will surely not be a sufficient aim for her any longer after the

experiences she has made during her investigations. There is surely no way back to the insulated position of a housewife.

And each novel of Barth and Pynchon extends the dimensions of the self reflexive form in a continuous, ever renewed effort to realize, and exhaust its full potential, and ultimately triumph over the form. While Barth makes use of the innovative and imaginative ways of storytelling communicates through his art the purpose sense. And turning the critical attention on Pynchon it ought to be stressed that Pynchon realizes the importance of his private sensations, ideas, feelings and experiences and sense data, which allowed finding literary expression in socially accepted behavior.

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