The Postmodern self in Thomas Pynchon's the Crying of Lot 49

Dismantling the unified self by a combination of postmodern philosophy and close reading

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Abstract

This essay is about identity and the self in Thomas Pynchon's critically acclaimed masterpiece *The Crying of Lot 49*. Through a combination of postmodern philosophy and close reading, it examines instances of postmodernist representations of identity in the novel. The essay argues that Pynchon is dismantling the idea of a unified self and instead argues for and presents a postmodern take on identity in its place. Questions asked by the essay are: in what ways does Pynchon criticize the idea of a unified self? What alternatives to this notion does Pynchon present? The essay is split into six chapters, an introductory section followed by a background on Thomas Pynchon and the novel. This is followed by an in-depth look into postmodernism, and Ludwig Wittgenstein's importance for it, as well as the basic concepts of his philosophy. This is followed by the main analysis in which a myriad of segments and quotations from the novel are looked at. Lastly, this is followed by a summarizing conclusion. The essay assumes a postmodernist approach of not being a definitive answer; rather it is one voice among many in the community of Pynchon interpreters. The conclusion shows that the examples given in the analysis present a range of answers as to how Pynchon dismantles the self, and what alternatives he presents in its wake. Pynchon explores the Cartesian ego, Lacanian other, Freudian ego and postmodernist alternatives in the novel, and presents in postmodern fashion, a multitude of answers as to how he dismantles the idea of a unified self in the novel.

Keywords: Pynchon, self, identity, postmodernism, Wittgenstein
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1. Introduction
Thomas Pynchon is both a critically acclaimed writer and a divisive author at the same time. He stands as one of the foremost figures of postmodernism in literature and many critics hail him as the quintessential postmodern author. His novels have received such acclaim as redefining postmodernism, and, subsequently, many are a major part of the postmodern canon of literature. Yet his novels have been criticized for being crass and obscene, over convoluted and a mockery of high culture. It is this blend of styles that truly exemplifies Pynchon; he explores everything from low to high culture and produces a jumble of the two. Pynchon's work is divisive as it requires the reader’s full attention. His superfluous style of writing is bound to confuse some readers, and the immense scale and complexity of his work spans everything from "simple" detective stories to metahistorical retellings featuring over 400 characters in the same book and multiple narrators each with their own unique style. An apt comparison to make as to both how complex and nuanced Pynchon's work is to imagine an anthill sprawling deep underground with thousands of elaborate passageways to thousands of different events, organizations and characters. This is in many ways what reading a Pynchon novel is like; once the reader thinks and can guess what is coming, Pynchon goes off on a completely different tangent and leaves the reader dazed and confused. In some sense then, this is the main reason why his novels are so divisive; either one gets frustrated at Pynchon’s stubbornness to provide no answers and further convolute his plots, or one goes along for the ride and metaphorically follows the white rabbit down the hole into Wonderland. At the end of his novels, what began as a rather simple story along a straight path has evolved into a labyrinth of endless hallways. This is why, when analyzing and interpreting Pynchon, one can go almost anywhere with his writing since it is so immense in its scope. Analysts and critics have interpreted Pynchon in almost every possible way, from Marxist analyses to new historicist readings, and this has given rise to a growing community of Pynchon interpreters. Since the author is unwilling to share answers due to his reclusive nature, critics and analysts are left wondering as to what may or may not be the true intent of Pynchon. Therefore, the best an analysis can hope for is to metaphorically not make it out of the labyrinthine maze of the novel, but rather become another dead end in the ever-growing scope that is Pynchon's writing. This essay then becomes another thread to pick up on and unravel, in hope of reaching some answers, but not definitive ones, as the postmodern nature of Pynchon's work shies away from the grand narratives of the past and seeks refuge in the little narratives, providing not the answers, but an answer. Friedrich Nietzsche, whose philosophy stands as a
precursor to postmodernism, said in his masterpiece *Thus Spake Zarathustra* that "This- is now my way,- where is yours?" Thus did I answer those who asked me 'the way.' For the way-it does not exist!" (152). The phrase is now often simplified as "You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist". This is the same mentality one must assume when analyzing Pynchon directly. Similarly, Brian McHale advises critics: "[...] to approach Pynchon head-on (or as nearly head-on as the special difficulties of his texts permit), and then one has some chance of finally reaching the hilltop, from where it is possible to survey the entire countryside." (*Postmodernist Fiction* 10)

The notion of the unified self that this essay uses is a common notion in philosophy of the self, but requires some explanation. The unified self is to some degree an essentialist idea, that there is some entity or function that constitutes the self as a unified being in and of itself, i.e. it is a substance, whether it be graspable (such as the body or brain) or ungraspable (such as the soul or mind). Thus, the belief in a unified self is the belief that there exists some entity in each person that constitutes their individual self. Neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris has criticized the idea of a unified self in his book *Waking Up*:

As a matter of neurology, the sense of having a persistent and unified self must be an illusion, because it is built upon processes that, by their very nature as processes, are transitory and multifarious. There is no region of the brain that can be the seat of a soul. Everything that makes us human— our emotional lives, capacity for language, the impulses that give rise to complex behavior, and our ability to restrain other impulses that we consider uncivilized— is spread across the entirety of the cortex and many subcortical brain regions as well. The whole brain is involved in making us what we are. So we need not await any data from the lab to say that the self cannot be what it seems. (115-116)

This is just one of the explanations why the notion of the conventional self is under scrutiny in philosophy, and has been so from the beginnings of philosophy itself. Pynchon began exploring the main topic of this essay, namely the self, in his first novel *V.* in it he describes identity as a multifaceted subject:

I am the twentieth century. I am the ragtime and the tango; sans-serif, clean geometry. I am the virgin's-hair whip and the cunningly detailed shackles of decadent passion. I am every lonely railway station in every capital of Europe. I
am the Street, the fanciless buildings of government, the cafe-dansant, the
clockwork figure, the jazz saxophone, the tourist-lady's hairpiece, the fairy's
rubber breasts, the travelling clock which always tells the wrong time and chimes
in different keys. I am the dead palm tree, the Negro's dancing pumps, the dried
fountain after tourist season. I am all the appurtenances of night. (283)

Yet it is in *The Crying of Lot 49* (hereinafter abbreviated as *Lot 49*) that Pynchon truly delves
into the topic of the self and identity. Pynchon in many ways performs a tour de force through
history and his interpretations of the self in the novel stretch from René Descartes' "Cogito
Ergo Sum" to Sigmund Freud's Id, ego and super-ego. Again, this shows the vast scope of
Pynchon's ambition in *Lot 49* to in a sense dismantle the idea of a unified self. He does so
through a multitude of characters, actions, thoughts and events which will be the main focus
of the analysis. A fair argument could be made that *Gravity's Rainbow* would be a better
novel to use for this type of analysis, but the main focus of this essay is not consciousness
itself (which *Gravity's Rainbow* character Slothrop with his split consciousness revolves
around). Instead, this essays focus is on the self and creating identity foremost. The aim of the
essay is to both examine and analyze forms of the self found in *Lot 49*, and prove that
Pynchon is criticizing our common notions of identity and the self in the novel. The thesis for
the essay is the following: to show through close reading how Pynchon dismantles the idea of
a unified self in *The Crying of Lot 49* and instead presents a postmodern version of the self.
Pynchon's take on the self is analyzed in a postmodernist fashion through a range of
postmodernist theorists and philosophers, mainly through the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein.
Questions asked by the essay are: in what ways does Pynchon criticize the idea of a unified
self? What alternatives to this notion does Pynchon present? Also, it should be noted the essay
uses the terms ego, self, and identity at times interchangeably.

Mark Currie proposes in his book *Postmodern Narrative Theory* a postmodern way of
analyzing the self and identity in postmodernist literature. First off, he dispels the idea that the
notion of postmodernism can be nailed down, a concept that is discussed heavily in the
background about the topic (1). He does however list three main features of the postmodern
narrative, namely diversification, deconstruction and politicization, and describes the
postmodern narrative as not being confined only to the novel, but as an ongoing contemporary
event (10). Secondly, he presents two different ways of seeing identity in novels, both of
which stray away from the idea of identity being inside oneself "like the kernel of a nut"(25)
which is a feature of postmodernist representations of identity, as decentered and divided. The
first way of viewing identity is to consider it relational, which is similar to Jacques Lacan's theory of the other, namely that the individual always stands in relation to the other (in this case people) and thus constitutes him or herself. In other words, it is always through differences or similarities that the self is constructed apart from the other. The second way of viewing identity is the creation of identity through the narrative. This way argues that identities are made up by the stories and events a person goes through in his life, that a person chooses what characterizes him or herself through a form of self-narration. Both of these ways are featured at great length in *Lot 49* and both discard the self as internal, viewing it rather as something external. This also raises the question of the reader identifying with characters in a novel. Does inference affect characters in a novel as much as inference and stereotypes affect people in the real world? (25). And how does identification truly work? Currie states that "recent narratology tends to be more skeptical of the possibility that any reader can suspend his or her identity or climb to some Olympian height, some transcendental aesthetic realm which is no longer cluttered by the thorny issues of identity" (30). Yet the answer might not be so straightforward, since the work of Louis Althusser and his theory of interpellation suggests a different route. Althusser argues the creation of the subject (or identity) through grand narratives, i.e. creating reality through ideology (e.g. Christianity, Marxism etc.) in fiction featured in for example novels or films. However, since *Lot 49* is far from a grand narrative and in fact shies away from them, this is a theory which is not relevant for this essay. To further add depth and complexity to the question of identity, Ludwig Wittgenstein's notions of identity and language games featured from his two greatest works are used in conjunction with a postmodern reading and analysis. Using Wittgenstein's philosophy, it is possible to analyze the self as a creation of language, as it is through language that the self constitutes itself. Without language; it is not possible for the self to exist.

The essay is constituted by six main sections with this introduction being the first one. The second one is the method and materials section which delves into the method of the essay and explains why the particular approach that this essay uses was chosen. The third part is the background, which has a biography on Thomas Pynchon and information about *The Crying of Lot 49*. The fourth section is a lengthy in-depth introduction to postmodernism and a short introduction to Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy, in addition to basic explanations of his core concepts used in the analysis. The fifth part is the analysis, which uses numerous examples and quotations from the novel and discusses the core subject of identity. This is lasted followed by a final conclusion of all the claims put forth and conclusions drawn in the essay.
Lastly, I want to give a sincere thank you to my supervisor Iulian Cananau for all the
guidance, and for having inspiring lessons that in turn inspired me to write an essay in literary
theory.

2. Method and Materials
The method for the essay is primarily close reading, looking at segments of the novel and
analyzing them through a combination of both postmodern philosophy and Wittgenstein's
philosophy. In order to understand where the arguments regarding identity originate, a
detailed background was needed in order to first supply the groundwork of how postmodernist
thought is used in the analysis.

It should be noted that there are conflicting schools of postmodern theory and, as explained
in the background, many within the postmodernist movement are themselves the biggest
critics of the movement. This has led to several distinct schools of thought, but most relevant
for this essay are the combined theories of Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale. While their
ideas are not 100% compatible, they do support each other's work to a large degree.
Hutcheon's theories are similar to McHale's work established in the two books of his cited in
this essay and both argue for a non-fixed position for postmodernism. Since they both opt for
a more abstract form of postmodernism, constructing postmodernism for McHale and a form
of aesthetic poetics for Hutcheon, this train of thought parallels well with Pynchon's writing
and is more easily applicable to it. The other option to choose for this essay would have been
to base it on Frederic Jameson's theories about postmodernism as expounded in his book
Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism. In many ways Jameson presents a
more clear-cut and perhaps more concrete form of postmodernism, but the "downside" of
basing this essay mainly on Jameson is that his version of postmodernism is grounded heavily
in Marxist theory. Much of it is concerned with ideas about the proletariat, the bourgeoisie,
the liberal subject and capitalism. If one were to do a Marxist reading of Pynchon (which one
certainly can do) Jameson would be a much more suitable for this essay. But since this essay
focuses on identity and the self, there would have been too little to go on for the analysis as
regards the theory.
3. Background

3.1 Thomas Pynchon

Thomas Pynchon is in many ways as enigmatic as his novels. His recluse lifestyle has almost raised as many questions as his work has. He never participates in interviews and very few photos of him exists. Consequently, very little info other than barebones facts actually exist about his actual person. He was born in 1937 in New York and started writing at a young age. Some of his short stories were featured in his local school’s newspaper. He studied engineering physics at Cornell University after high school and went on to serve two years in the US Navy. After finishing his tour of duty he went back to Cornell and studied English. At Cornell he spent time with novelist Richard Fariña and historian Kirkpatrick Sale. Supposedly, he attended a course taught by Vladimir Nabokov but no reliable evidence exists of this. (Dalsgaard, Herman and McHale 9-10).

Pynchon wrote several short stories which went up for awards including "Entropy" and "Under the Rose" in 1961. He worked as a writer for Boeing Airplane Co. in Seattle while finishing his first major novel *V.* in 1963. The novel was a National Book Award finalist and received the Faulkner Foundation award for best first novel. After this he supposedly moved to and lived in Mexico, and segments of his second novel *The Crying of Lot 49* were featured in *Esquire* before its release in 1966. Curiously, even though it won awards he has made disparaging comments after its release stating that he had forgotten everything about writing a novel when he wrote it. Perhaps it is no surprise then that his critically acclaimed masterpiece (by most considered his finest novel) *Gravity's Rainbow* is a return to a writing style more akin to *V.* rather than what could be considered a more straightforward novel in *Lot 49* (at least considering structure and chronology). *Gravity's Rainbow* released in 1973 was a contestant for the esteemed Pulitzer Prize, but the jury ruled it out as a novel that was "unreadable", "turgid", "overwritten", and "obscene". It took seventeen years until his next major novel *Vineland* was released. During this time he moved to New York and married Melanie Jackson, a literary agent who is also the great-granddaughter of Theodore Roosevelt. He still presides there and has a son, Jackson, with his wife Melanie. He has since written *Mason & Dixon* (1997), *Against the Day* (2006) and *Inherent Vice* in 2009 which has also been adapted into a film. In that time he also released several nonfiction works, published reviews and forewords to other writers' novels as well as a collection of short stories entitled *Slow Learner* with a rare reflective introduction written by himself (Dalsgaard, Herman and McHale 10-12).
Rumors run rampant regarding Pynchon's personal life and due to his reclusive nature (which he has commented on saying simply not talking to reporters doesn't make one a recluse) many strange rumors have circulated over the years about the mysterious author. There are numerous twists, turns and contradictions about who Pynchon supposedly is in "real life" and Pynchon seemingly does not want to supply the answers to many of the questions which his critics and fans alike have. He has played with the role of being a recluse and seemingly in his later years has satirized his own figure, appearing in animated form with a paper bag on him in the television series "The Simpsons" (Dalsgaard, Herman and McHale 9-13).

He is considered a major figure of American literature and both *Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* are a part of the postmodern canon (Dalsgaard, Herman and McHale 1). Brian McHale even goes so far as to suggest in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* that without Pynchon's work "there might never have been such a pressing need to develop a theory of literary postmodernism in the first place" (97). His writing has been praised as being a part of the new poetics and how he deals with more complex and contemporary issues, such as class and gender, has received much admiration. Perhaps the most praised feature of his writing, and justly so, is his channeling of the encyclopedic vision, his ability to time and time again show his readers the futile effort of desperately trying to fully understand the world. Many of his novels offer the promise of answers but never give them and this is also one of the reasons why some readers find his novels meaningless (Dalsgaard, Herman and McHale 1-5). It should be noted that most of his novels are considered notoriously difficult, and the ways to interpret Pynchon's writing has shifted from one decade to the next. From poststructuralism and Marxism to postmodernism and new historicism, the ways to analyze his novels are seemingly endless (Dalsgaard, Herman and McHale 7). Due to Pynchon not providing any answers, readers, literary critics and analysts are forced to fend for themselves in understanding his work, and a community of people trying to understand Pynchon has sprung up in the wake of his novels. He has been compared to writers such as Jonathan Swift and Herman Melville and the scope of his writing is in many ways immense and channels many earlier great authors and works. Pynchon himself mentioned writers such as Ray Bradbury, F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner as inspirations for his writing in an application for a scholarship in the 1950s (Dalsgaard, Herman and McHale 83-85).
3.2 The Crying of Lot 49

The blurb on the back of the 2006 edition from Harper Perennial modern classics of the book describes the novel as "[t]he highly original satire about Oedipa Maas, a woman who finds herself enmeshed in a worldwide conspiracy, meets some extremely interesting characters, and attains a not inconsiderable amount of self knowledge" (Pynchon Lot 49). Together with Gravity's Rainbow this novel is the foremost accepted masterpieces of Pynchon’s canon (Dalsgaard, Herman and McHale 3). The novel is set in the 1960s in California and mainly takes place around and in San Narcisco, a fictional version of San Francisco where the protagonist Oedipa Maas, a Californian housewife becomes a co-executor of an ex boyfriend’s, Pierce Inverarity, estate after he passes away before the novel begins. She becomes entangled in a worldwide conspiracy while dealing with Inverarity’s estate and explores many different subcultures while trying to unravel the truth of a secret underground postal service named Trystero, which may or may not be part of a conspiracy stretching across history and nations. This is the center of which the plot revolves around, but it is always unclear whether this conspiracy is actually real, a practical joke or a hallucination. Oedipa Maas embarks on an almost Odyssean journey through California and in the end, ends up on the crying of lot 49, an auction of Inverarity’s estate without any real answers (30-32).

Thomas Hill Schaub describes the novel in The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon as "unique... because of its insinuation that the text itself is a kind of plot perpetrated upon the reader, containing a secret meaning known only to the author. This is to speak of the novels effect rather than to suggest there is such a secret yet to be discovered" (32). This is of course one of Pynchon’s most praised attributes of his writing: his encyclopedic vision and ability to both tease and induce paranoia in the reader. An apt comparison to make is that of a detective novel which begins with an event (in many cases a murder) and in the beginning has many possible alternatives (in this case suspects). As the story progresses, there are fewer and fewer murder suspects and in the end the murderer is finally revealed and the reader gets his or her answers. Not so much with Lot 49, as it actually does the exact same thing but in reverse fashion. It starts with a simple plot of handling an estate, but evolves into an almost infinitely complex story which features almost endless possibilities as to what might actually be true. The reader is left with no answers at the end of the novel and the questions just pile up on each other as the novel progresses. It is easy to accuse Lot 49 of having no purpose or meaning, but in postmodern fashion this in and of itself might be meaning or, at the very least, the goal for Pynchon (Dalsgaard, Herman and McHale 174).
4. Postmodernism

Defining postmodernism is not an easy thing to do. The word itself is paradoxical, how can something be after modernism? The postmodern era is after the modern era, i.e. from the 1950s and forward. Just as modern history is not the history of the present day, but rather the history of the events leading up to the present day, postmodernism is still an ongoing movement. Nevertheless it is a noun that needs definition but is seldom defined precisely other than in vague terms or contradictory statements. The *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* defines postmodernism as: "a style and movement in art, architecture, literature, etc. in the late 20th century that reacts against modern styles, for example by mixing features from traditional and modern styles" ("Postmodernism"). It is evident that postmodernism encompasses many different subjects, styles and, above all, was a reaction against modernism. A definition of modernism is also then required to understand postmodernism, modernism as described by the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* states that it is: "a style and movement in art, architecture and literature popular in the middle of the 20th century in which modern ideas, methods and materials were used rather than traditional ones" ("Modernism"). The question then naturally becomes what this actually entails for literature.

The following table was featured in *The Postmodern Turn*, a book of essays and texts by Steven Best & Douglas Kellner defining postmodernism in all its subjects (art, architecture etc.). For literature the text was written by Ihab Hassan in a chapter entitled "Towards a Concept of Postmodernism". He firstly raises the issues of defining postmodernism at all and indicates that there is no clear-cut difference between modernism and postmodernism. For Hassan, a heterogenic view is what defines postmodernism and in that sense, modernism is a large part of postmodernism. Hassan stresses the difference of going from a centered view to a decentered view. He presents the following table of distinct differences between modernist and postmodernist literature, including topics such as narration, symbolism and meaning:

| Modernism | Romanticism/Symbolism Form (conjunctive, closed) Purpose Design Hierarchhy Mastery/Logos Art Object/Finished Work Distance Creation/Totalization Synthesis Presence Centering Genre/Boundary Semantics Paradigm Hypotaxis Metaphor Selection Root/Depth Interpretation/Reading Signified Lisible (Readerly) Narrative/Grande Histoire Master Code Symptom Type Genital/Phallic Paranoia Origin/Cause God the Father Metaphysics |
Determinancy/Transcendence


Thus, the differences between modernist and postmodernist literature are becoming more apparent. Yet, even these distinctions between the two movements by Hassan have been criticized as being too reductionist. In *Modernism/Postmodernism*, a collection of essays including for example Jean Francois Lyotard's "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism" and Umberto Eco's "Postmodernism, Irony, the Enjoyable", author and editor Peter Brooker lists other critics of Hassan's distinctions such as Christina Brooke-Rose and Susan Rubin Suleiman. Brooker himself argues that Hassan's table is inconsistent and an example of a reductionist mistake, because it describes postmodernism by essentially replacing one dogma with another. Simply put, postmodernism is much more than just another dogma or worldview. Essentially, it is about moving away from the grand narratives of earlier literary critique and towards smaller narratives, not replacing previous grand narratives with another (in this case postmodernism) which is an idea originally brought forth by Lyotard (Brooker 12-13).

If all definitions of postmodernism are too reductionist, then perhaps an argument brought forth by Brian McHale in his book *Constructing Postmodernism* is not too farfetched. In the book he states that "[p]ostmodernism is not a found object, but a manufactured artifact" (1). He even goes on to say that "there 'is' no such 'thing' as postmodernism" (1). What he means by this is that there is no single definition capable of "binding" postmodernism as it is too complex a subject to metaphorically contain. Language itself has become a problem similar to Wittgenstein's language games, incapable of encompassing the postmodern phenomena. Therefore every definition of postmodernism is in a sense doomed as it either ends up too reductionist or becomes yet another metanarrative. He highlights the problematic nature of postmodernism in a text about Thomas Pynchon's postmodernism: "When did postmodernism
begin (if it ever did), and what are its features? Is it a specifically aesthetic category, or does it apply to culture and society generally? These and other questions remain literally debatable and unresolved, perhaps unresolvable" (Dalsgaard, Herman and McHale 97). One of the most important things McHale brings up in order to differentiate postmodernism is Dick Higgins's take on the cognitive and postcognitive which is a concept that is vital for the analysis part of this essay. His take focuses on the shift in perspective from modernism to postmodernism. According to Higgins, the question asked by artists until the 20th century was "[h]ow can I interpret this world of which I am part? And what am I in it?" (McHale 32-33). The question asked in the postmodern era evolved into "[w]hich world is this? What is to be done with it? Which of my selves is to do it?" (33). Hassan's focus on moving from the centered to the decentered, from one voice to a polyphony of voices is apparent in Higgins's text.

It is fairly evident then that defining postmodernism in literature is not as simple as looking at the word in a dictionary. The final piece of explaining the postmodernist puzzle in this essay is Linda Hutcheon's theory of postmodern aesthetics. In her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, she argues that postmodernism itself is paradoxical and rather than providing answers or definitions, all postmodernism does is ask questions (xii). Hutcheon states that the term postmodernism itself is problematic as it is both over-defined and under-defined, that is, it has too many definitions but at the same time lacks definition (the paradoxical nature of the word). However, she also questions the decentered nature of Hassan's definition as well as Lyotard's grand and small narratives by raising the important question of whether postmodernism has to be a disruptive and questioning force as it is often seen. She shares the concerns of McHale in both defining postmodernism and that postmodernism itself ends up as another "institution" or grand narrative (4-8). Furthermore, Hutcheon and McHale also argue that postmodernism is not a found "subject", rather something that is actively created by the participants in it. Where McHale talks about constructing postmodernism, Hutcheon argues for a poetics of postmodernism which is "an open, ever-changing theoretical structure" (14). However, she does not mean poetics in the structuralist sense of the word i.e. written poetry, rather a poem that exists across all subjects including art, architecture and everything that falls under the word culture (14). The plurality found in poetics speaks to an open and inclusive postmodernism, but this in a sense is also paradoxical as contradictory statements can be made under the idea of postmodernism. What Hutcheon stresses at the end of *A Poetics of Postmodernism* is that while postmodernism is in many ways a disruptive force that problematizes and decenters, asking questions to which it cannot supply the answers. If it did, it would go against its own anti-totalizing roots. The concern raised by Brooker about
postmodernism becoming a grand narrative is also found in Hutcheon. That does not mean that there are not answers to be found in postmodernism, but these answers are paradoxical as they must suppress the basic fundament of postmodernism which is raising questions. As such, contradictions and paradoxes lie at the center of postmodernism which supplies no answers, but instead and most importantly raises the questions in the first place (231). The parallels to Pynchon's writing are obvious and perhaps McHale is not too farfetched when he argues the necessity of Pynchon's writing for postmodernist interpretations.

In order to further delve deeper into both postmodernism and identity some of the basic concepts of Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy will be introduced now. These concepts are then used in the analysis part of the essay. It should also be mentioned that Pynchon explicitly mentions Wittgenstein in his novel V. and Pynchon actually quotes the beginning of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in the novel "DIEWELTISTALLESWASDERFALLIST" to which a character replies "The world is all that the case is', Mondaugen said. 'I've heard that somewhere before" (171).

4.1 Ludwig Wittgenstein and Postmodernism

Wittgenstein's work of philosophy in language, mathematics and mind stands as a cornerstone of western philosophy in the 20th century. Wittgenstein's philosophy has much resemblance with the postmodern movement. One could argue that Wittgenstein, like Nietzsche, in many ways stands as one of the precursors to the entire school of postmodernism. Since Wittgenstein's passing is at the start of the postmodernist movement, it is easy to see the correlation, as his work more and more entered the mainstream, it influenced and colored the postmodern movement. Particularly, he was mentioned in literary journals and his theories became an important part of literary criticism from the 1960s and onward, as well as for the aesthetics movement in general. Since postmodernism in so many ways challenged the boundaries of language, Wittgenstein's philosophy can be found almost anywhere one looks closer at the postmodern school of thought (Magee 341-342).

For this essay, it is mainly his work in language and identity which will be the focus. His philosophy is mainly inspired by Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, who he also worked together with, both of which he mentions in one of his great works, the *Tractatus* (Sluga and Stern 5-9). The *Tractatus* is a short book with a fairly unique compressed style written in short segments rather than in an essay format. Wittgenstein wrote to Russell and said that: "The main point is the theory of what can be expressed by [gesagt] propositions - i.e. by language -(and, which comes to the same, what can be thought) and what cannot be expressed
by propositions, but only shown [gezeigt]; which, I believe is the cardinal problem of philosophy” (9). Wittgenstein emphasizes the following phrase both in the foreword and ending of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* saying that in essence this is his central theme "what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein 3, 89). What Wittgenstein proved in the *Tractatus* was the existence of the boundaries of language and man’s inability to truly express him or herself. In some sense then, philosophizing is useless as one uses language to solve a problem that cannot be solved with language (Sluga and Stern 11-15).

In his second major work the *Philosophical Investigations* many of his earlier thoughts contradict the thoughts presented in the later work. One of his major new ideas is the concept of the language game, something that Lyotard used in his work on metanarratives (15-19). Essentially, what Wittgenstein means by language game is that language is an activity, a game that all humans participate in. Language outside of the language game is meaningless. In some ways then language means action; take the word silence for example. Any word in the English language could be used to describe the phenomenon of silence, as it could be replaced with noise and noise could assume its meaning. But if one says "silence!" it becomes an action, in this case for example a teacher telling the class to be quiet. This is then what is meant by language as a game; speakers know the rules and what consequences and actions one can achieve with language. But outside of the game, the words are in themselves meaningless, they can only be used to participate in the language game since they have no inherent or set meaning (20-24). Whether his conclusions are correct is a different matter, but no one can deny Wittgenstein's lasting impact in the fields of mathematics, language and philosophy as a whole (Sluga and Stern 30).

5. Analysis

Undoubtedly, parody is a major part of the postmodernist movement. The way postmodernist novels play with preconceived notions of just about everything is a standout feature of those novels (Hutcheon 22). An obvious example is the music group "The Paranoids" in *Lot 49*, a group of young Americans who sing in a fake English accent (playing with identity and how they are conceived) which is of course a reference to the popularity of "The Beatles" in the 1960s. The following quote examined in close reading is an example of aporia in the novel, where it is not certain if Pynchon is joking with the reader or being serious. It is set in the beginning of the novel when Oedipa is talking with their family lawyer Roseman: "They often
went to the same group therapy sessions, in a carpool with a photographer from Palo Alto who thought he was a volleyball" (Pynchon Lot 49 9). It is easy to assume that this is an example of satire, where Pynchon is simply making an absurd statement as logically no person identifies with a volleyball. But Lot 49 requires a certain amount of suspension of disbelief, and paradoxically, of belief itself. Imagine in this case that the postmodern notion of identity being a sum of how one is treated by the other (in this case people) is the defining factor. One of the most common factors now is gender as a social construct, i.e. making gender through interaction. Therefore, if people treated this photographer from Palo Alto as a volleyball, is it then unconceivable that he would see himself as volleyball or at least entertain this fantasy? (McHale Postmodernist Fiction 32-33).

Cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter, whose research specializes in the "self" and "I", wrote in his book I Am a Strange Loop that "we self-perceiving, self-inventing, locked-in mirages are little miracles of self-reference" (363). What he meant in part by this is that self-invention and self-perceiving are vital as to what is referred to as the self or in this case the subject of the photographer who thinks he is a volleyball. Hence, this person could actually talk himself into believing that he is a volleyball by the strange loop that is the self. This is further explored near the end of the novel when Oedipa confronts Dr. Hilarius who is about to be apprehended by law enforcement when she begins to doubt her own experiences:

I came,' she said, 'hoping you could talk me out of a fantasy. 'Cherish it!' cried Hilarius, fiercely. 'What else do any of you have? Hold it tightly by its little tentacle, don't let the Freudians coax it away or the pharmacists poison it out of you. Whatever it is, hold it dear, for when you lose it you go over by that much to the others. You begin to cease to be (Pynchon Lot 49 113).

Here Pynchon reinforces the idea of identity being a sort of fantasy, as if giving up fantasy is the same as giving up identity. It is also possible to imagine this as a critique against the standard Freudian narrative self, made up of several parts, namely the Id, ego and super-ego. Even these ideas are discarded in a postmodern representation of identity and it leads to what could be considered the lead motif of the novel which is Oedipa's thought "shall I project a world?" (Pynchon Lot 49 64). This contemplation is after first having seen the Trystero muted horn which again reinforces this idea of reality and identity as a sort of fantasy, a projection. This of course could be seen as a commentary on literature overall, as the text can produce and project a world which only exists in the text but takes place in the reader’s mind.
Projection is of course also a Freudian term, and it means the projection of negative attributes of oneself onto the other.

However the projection trope is more likely meant to bring into question if any of the events in the novel are real or if they are all in Oedipa's head? And, in the end, does that question truly matter? Are not the events just as real anyway for the reader to whom the text has always been imaginary? At this point in the novel the reader has clearly identified him or herself with Oedipa as the protagonist. In their book *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle raise the important point that the reader always creates an identity with the protagonist of the novel. In essence, "[i]t is to give oneself a world of fictional people, to start to let one's identity merge with that of a fiction. It is, finally, also to create a character for oneself, to create oneself as a character" (70). On top of that, almost everything in the novel is narrated through Mrs. Maas, except for some rare narratorial omniscience in the beginning of the novel. The reader then is bound to Oedipa's identity and her telling of the story. There is no way to find out if any of the events in the novel are actually true (McHale *Postmodernist Fiction* 32-33). This is of course also further delved into at the end of the novel and Oedipa's journey:

Change your name to Miles, Dean, Serge, and /or Leonard, baby, she advised her reflection in the hall; light of that afternoon's vanity mirror. Either way, they'll call it paranoia. They. Either you have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, 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 delivery 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 you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you, so expensive and elaborate, involving items like the forging of stamps and ancient books, constant surveillance of your movements, planting of post horn images all over San Francisco, bribing of librarians, hiring of professional actors and Pierce Inverarity only knows what-all besides, all financed out of the estate in a way either too secret or too involved for your non-legal mind to know about even though you are co-executor, so labyrinthine that it must have meaning beyond just a practical joke. Or you are
fantasying some such plot, in which case you are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull.
(Pynchon Lot 49 141)

The first sentence of the above quote mentions changing names. Names are a central aspect of Lot 49 and possibly what Pynchon is trying to say through the names. Oedipa Maas is of course a reference to Sophocles Oedipus Rex where Pynchon has simply swapped the gender of the character. But otherwise, very little of the character Oedipa and what goes on in the novel has any reference to the classical Greek play. The best way to describe Pynchon's naming of Oedipa is as a red herring, meant only to incite the reader's fantasies and preconceived assumptions. What Pynchon is doing here is in a sense playing a language game straight from Wittgenstein; he is trying to force the reader to find some allegories or resemblance of Sophocle’s great work but there are none to be found, other than the slight parallel that both characters are trying to solve a mystery. Pynchon is actively using the language game against the reader in order to invoke something that is not there. What the word Maas refers to is uncertain but some critics have pointed out the similarity to "Oedipa, my ass" implying that Pynchon is making a joke out of the similarity, and with parody being a staple of postmodernism, it does not seem entirely farfetched. This could be an example of Pynchon trying to illustrate the faultiness of basic assumptions about association and inference in a postmodern decentered fashion. He challenges the basic assumptions made by the reader in order to show that their worldview is not "correct". Oedipa's affair with Pierce Inverarity, whose very name suggests piercing variety, is further evidence that this is in fact what Pynchon is doing. San Narcisco, other than the obvious reference to San Francisco (the hot seat of the hippie counterculture in the 1960s), refers to the Greek mythological figure of Narcissus, whose name is the origin of the term narcissism. Oedipa's psychiatrist Dr. Hilarius is a victim of the same language game, as there is absolutely nothing remotely hilarious about him, since Dr. Hilarius was a willing and eager participant in various horrible experiments at the Buchenwald concentration camp during World War II. Of course, since Hilarius is a Freudian, his character can be seen as a critique against Freudian psychoanalysis, which could be considered an impressive mythology based on essentially no real evidence (Wittgenstein The Philosophical Investigations 9-13). David Cowart in The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon also mentions the playwright Wharfinger, and suggests that his name is an acrostic of famous playwrights Webster, Heywood, Marston, Ford and Massinger combined (86).
In regards to the ending of the novel, Michel Foucault’s understanding of identity in relation with the linearity of time is of considerable value, as “[c]ontinuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity” (quoted in Hutcheon 158). This is a notion echoed by Oedipa halfway through Lot 49, when the conspiracy theories have begun to ramp up and she is metaphorically caught in the spider’s web of possibilities. She thinks to herself:

She could, at this stage of things, recognize signals like that, as the epileptic is said to—an odor, color, pure piercing grace note announcing his seizure. Afterward it is only this signal, really dross, this secular announcement, and never what is revealed during the attack, that he remembers. Oedipa wondered whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back. (Pynchon Lot 49 76)

Many of the sentiments expressed here are uttered again in the final pages which have been mentioned earlier. Oedipa worries about the fact that everything that has eluded her so far will not be revealed to her. Just as there is no grand truth to be found at the end of the novel, Oedipa contemplates middles: "She had heard all about excluded middles; they were bad shit, to be avoided" (Pynchon Lot 49 150). There is no middle ground to be found for her, either everything is true or everything is just a lie. Either everything is a part of a worldwide conspiracy, or it could all be in her head. Mucho tells Oedipa to “just be yourself...” (Pynchon Lot 49 113-114) indicating that there is something to be found within a person that constitutes themselves. However, there is nothing there to be found, just as there is no grand message to be found in Oedipa's story. Much of this is of course related to Lyotard's work on grand and small narratives, and Pynchon is using a very similar concept that predates Lyotard’s work to drive home this point.

When Oedipa discusses the Jacobean play featured in the novel with the director Randolph Driblette, there is another allusion to the difficulty of names. Driblette answers Oedipa's questions about the original writer of the play Wharfinger: "It isn't literature, it doesn't mean anything. Wharfinger was no Shakespeare.' 'Who was he?' she said. 'Who was Shakespeare. It
was a long time ago" (Pynchon Lot 49 60). This is also a phenomenon of intertextuality, as the tragedy is a story within a story distinct from the rest of the novel, unique in the way it is told by Oedipa to the reader, and thus makes the reader question if he or she has read a good account of the play. When Driblette states that Wharfinger was no Shakespeare, he is making a direct inference to the historical figure of Shakespeare and his plays, comparing Wharfinger to Shakespeare. But when Oedipa asks who Wharfinger was, Driblette problematizes the historical figure of Shakespeare and history itself instead.

This is a common feature of postmodernism and Hutcheon describes it as historiographic metafiction: "It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity" (Hutcheon 93). Amy J. Elias further explains in The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon how Pynchon often looks at, problematizes and in a sense tears down our versions of history. As regards identity then, can people today actually say who Shakespeare was? Depictions of him, historical facts and his writing are not enough; even combined together they do not manage to describe fully who Shakespeare was. Through Driblette, Pynchon makes a profound statement in its simplicity as to how well humanity actually knows its history and naturally its identity (124).

Having been introduced to the concept of projecting a world, Oedipa has an encounter at a gay bar with an anonymous man who she sees wearing the Trystero sign. Here, Pynchon introduces another alternative to the projected world in the form of an anonymous organization and perhaps a unique form of living that retains the self. She herself wears a nametag that says "Arnold Spangler" and gets referred to as Arnold in the conversation. On two separate occasions she also gets called "Edna Mosh" by two different people, her husband Mucho Maas and his boss Funch. Oedipa's many names stand in direct contrast to the man she meets. The anonymous man is a member of the "Inamorati Anonymous" (IA) made up of members who are recovering from being in love, "the worst addiction of them all" (Pynchon Lot 49 91). The organization never has any meetings nor are any names revealed as they work through an anonymous phone service to support each other. As such, they are a community of isolates. Sigmund Freud referred to lovesickness as "the psychosis of normal people" and by that he meant that the length a fully sane person is willing to go through for love borders on the psychotic. Being in love then can be seen as giving up one’s identity, as love is often described as the merging of two halves, forming two individuals into one couple. The IA stands then to preserve its identities by avoiding love. Love forces the individual into another
role, a partner, and that role does not exist if an individual is not a part of a relationship, i.e. the self is split into more roles when being in a relationship. In some respect, this could be a direct reference to a concept Pynchon played with in his earlier novel V., where one character goes through a form of self-multiplication, i.e. creating multiple identities (and literary voices) for himself. Taking that concept and combining it together with the IA in Lot 49, in some sense then, the more partners a person has, the more selves a person has. For instance, if one person has three separate romantic relationships with three different people, three different versions of this person exist. Love and relationships then can be seen as a basis for self-multiplication. Considering that love can also wane or vanish over time, this ties into Pynchon’s fascination with the concept of entropy; in this case, as relationships end, so too can selves vanish over time as they both no longer serve a purpose and cease to exist entirely. This is highlighted by Luc Herman in The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon when he discusses Pynchon’s indebtedness to Henry Adams’s theory of entropy in history and society (24-26).

The concept of multiple selves first requires a list of what factors are generally considered facets of identity. Names have already been mentioned, as well as historical context, but other common factors include social class, gender etc. Another common facet of identity is of course jobs or occupation, which also play a complex role in the novel. Oedipa is a housewife, but at the same time she could be described as a detective in the novel. Mucho Maas is a former car-salesman who works as a disk jockey. Dr Hilarius is a former Nazi doctor as well as a psychiatrist. The lawyer Metzger was formerly a childhood actor named Baby Igor. Manny Di Presso, who is also Metzger’s friend, is a lawyer turned actor. Miles is a motel manager who is also a band member of "The Paranoids". The list of people who are not who the reader thinks they are originally or who seem to play multiple roles goes on almost endlessly, showing that identity is inherently fragmented.

At the beginning of the novel when Oedipa finds out about Pierce’s will, she has the following thoughts:

What did she so desire escape from? Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental: that what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all. Having no apparatus except gut fear and female cunning to examine this formless magic, to understand how it works, how to measure its field strength, count its lines of
force, she may fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disk jockey. If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else? (Pynchon *Lot 49* 11-12).

There are several things to analyze in this quote. To begin with, this is one of the rare times in the novel that Oedipa actively addresses herself as a woman. Hutcheon addresses the female subject as the product and the viewer, the spectacle and spectator at the same time. From a feminist perspective, gender is problematized and sometimes subjects are engendered as Oedipa is doing to herself by referring to herself as "a captive maiden" but also having "female cunning". She is thrust both into a female role and at the same time a submissive role waiting for a "knight of deliverance" (Pynchon *Lot 49* 161). However, Pynchon takes this in a postmodern way radically away from a question of gender to a much more problematic question of identity. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein describes the subject as not belonging to the world, but as "a limit of the world" (69). He goes on to say that "[w]hat brings the self into philosophy is the fact that ‘the world is my world’. The philosophical self is not the human being, not the human body, or the human soul, with which psychology deals, but rather the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world—not a part of it" (70). What Pynchon presents in the above quoted paragraph is strikingly similar to what Wittgenstein proposes, that the self is simultaneously neither a something nor a nothing. Whereas Wittgenstein says in the *Tractatus* that "what can be shown, cannot be said" (31) as a way of avoiding the problem of describing something through language, Pynchon describes the self in magical terms and uses the metaphor of a tower that is everywhere, just like there is no escape from the self. He describes what Oedipa could do to try and understand the tower, but everything is to some degree meaningless. Even the knight of deliverance cannot do anything against the magic and borders of the ego. But Wittgenstein also confesses in the ending of the *Tractatus* that "[t]here are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical" (89).

This is why Driblette when discussing the play with Oedipa stresses the point that reality is inside his mind and language is meaningless to him, just as Wittgenstein concluded in the *Tractatus* that "[w]hat we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (89). Driblette says:
That's what I'm here for. To give the spirit flesh. The words, who cares? They're rote noises to hold line bashes with, to get past the bone barriers around an actor's memory, right? But the reality is in this head. Mine. I'm the projector of the planetarium, all the closest little universe visible in the circle of that stage is coming out of my mouth, eyes, sometimes other orifices also (Pynchon *Lot 49* 62).

The words are meaningless as Driblette is the "projector of the planetarium" similar to Oedipa who asks if she shall "project a world" (Pynchon *Lot 49* 64). Driblette also commits suicide later in the novel, thus ending his "projection" of the world. This view of the subjectivity of language is also shared by philosopher Émile Benveniste: "It is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of 'ego' in reality, in its reality" (quoted in Hutcheon 168). Therefore, when Driblette questions the meaning of language itself, he is also questioning himself and his own identity. Jacques Derrida made a case for something very similar to Benveniste, arguing that we are always subjects to language, and that the subject can in a sense not exist outside of language as it is through language that it constitutes itself: "From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We think only in signs" (quoted in Bennett and Royle 131).

When Oedipa is in the bathroom in the motel with Metzger she has a frightening experience in reference to the loss of the self/ego. "At some point she went into the bathroom, tried to find her image in the mirror and couldn't. She had a moment of nearly pure terror. Then she remembered that the mirror had broken and fallen in the sink" (Pynchon *Lot 49* 29). Naturally, a mirror is one of the objects that make individuals reflect upon themselves. Even in a mirror the self stands in reflection to the self presented in the mirror, similar to what psychologist Jacques Lacan argued about the self standing in reference to the "other". Hence, the frightening loss of ego then for Oedipa can be seen as not only a moment of pure terror of her losing herself, but also from losing the world she finds herself in, i.e. her projected world. The broken mirror with its multiple cracks is perhaps a better representation of the self than the whole entire mirror, as identities are by their very nature multifaceted and unable to conform to a single unitary subject. Pynchon takes this idea even further in *Gravity's Rainbow* where the main character's self is split into several characters and beings, unable to abide just in one single person.

This idea is further explored in the novel when, after Dr. Hilarius has been arrested, Oedipa talks to her husband's boss Funch. Funch expresses concern regarding Mucho (who in fact is a
part of an ongoing LSD experiment of Dr. Hilarius): "They're calling him the Brothers N. He's losing his identity, Edna, how else can I put it? Day by day, Wendell is less himself and more generic. He enters a staff meeting and the room is suddenly full of people, you know? He's a walking assembly of a man" (Pynchon *Lot 49* 115). Mucho's name is of course relevant here, as mucho refers to much, which here could literally mean many men. The phrasing of Funch is also of importance, as he clearly says that Mucho is in fact losing his identity, implying that firstly there is something to be lost, and secondly, it contrasts with the fact that Mucho is seemingly also gaining identities. Thirdly, it is stated that Wendell is less of himself and more generic, again implying that there is a predefined self. When Funch says that Wendell is full of people when entering a staff meeting, it could be seen as a reference to the fact that all people have multiple identities. Consider an average middle class man in his late 30s. He might very well be for example a husband, a father, a worker, a tennis player, and a brother. Consider then, bringing into a room his wife, his son, his boss, his tennis partner and his brother. Chances are, this average middle class man would have a very hard time balancing his several identities and finding a middle ground for who he really is. Not to mention the fact that he by all certainty does not act the same way he does with his wife as he does with his boss, or even talk about the same things he does with his son as he does with his tennis partner. What Pynchon is doing here is an exaggeration of this phenomenon, by contrasting the self with the other in almost Lacanian fashion, that is, that the self always stands in relation to the other. This hearkens back to the basic paradox of both the concept and word *person*, as it stems from the Latin word *persona*, which was a mask an actor wore in theater plays to signify playing a different character, a different person. Essentially then, to understand or know a person is to know their mask. Identity becomes a sort of fictional character itself since how can one truly know another person if their identity is just a mask? Of course real people exist, but this raises the question of how much fiction is actually a part of an identity or a person (Bennett and Royle 66). In one of his novels, Salman Rushdie describes identity as:

I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have seen done, of everything done to me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter, each 'I', every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude (quoted in Hutcheon 164).
Here, Rushdie presents an idea of how complex and multifaceted identities truly are. Pynchon argues something similar when Oedipa discusses this "problem" of the unified self that Mucho presents after having talked to Funch. She asks Maas:

Is this what Funch means when he says you’re coming on like a whole roomful of people?" That’s what I am,' said Mucho, 'right. Everybody is.'... Whenever I put the headset on now," he'd continued 'I really do understand what I find there. When those kids sing about ‘She loves you,’ yeah, well, you know, she does, she’s any number of people, all over the world, back through time, different colors, sizes, ages, shapes, distances from death, but she loves. And the ‘you’ is everybody. And herself. Oedipa, the human voice, you know, it’s a flipping miracle (Pynchon Lot 49 117).

Mucho here is clearly stating how vast identities truly are, and that the unified self is an illusion as everybody is, according to him, a bunch of people. It is of significant importance that Mucho is the character who has this realization. Throughout much of the novel, he has been completely absent and almost a nonfactor. Oedipa and Mucho have no children together and Oedipa has cheated on him with at least two different people (to the reader’s knowledge), Pierce and Metzger. It might be fair to say that their relationship is not the best. As such, while Oedipa has undergone her Odyssean journey, perhaps Mucho has undergone a similar journey, except the reader is never told about it. Even though it had been enhanced by LSD, his experiences are just as valid as Oedipa's. While this is not treated as a realization for Oedipa, perhaps it should be. It goes to show that everyone in the novel is just as complicated as she is and that there are millions of factors that go into defining an identity. Metzger goes off and has a relationship with a younger woman and disappears for the rest of the novel, Hilarius has a breakdown and gets arrested and Driblette commits suicide by wading into the Atlantic and drowns himself. In fact, Mucho actually appears briefly in Pynchon's later novel Vineland where he is a self-made millionaire in the music industry. All of these lives continue on without Oedipa. Pynchon is perhaps in some form implying that every identity is just as complicated as Oedipa’s is, except that fact is rarely acknowledged. It is an almost staggering thought to imagine that other characters in the novel could undergo similar journeys or face as complex decisions. As Salman Rushdie said, the totality of events and circumstances that make up an individual is found in everybody with an equally vast multitude of factors coming into play.
Sam Harris writes in *Waking Up* regarding the ego that:

> The feeling that we call 'I' is an illusion. There is no discrete self or ego living like a Minotaur in the labyrinth of the brain. And the feeling that there is—the sense of being perched somewhere behind your eyes, looking out at a world that is separate from yourself—can be altered or entirely extinguished. (9)

He echoes Jean Paul Sartre's notion of the self being-in-itself and being-for-itself when he asks the question of "[w]hy should we live in *relationship to* ourselves rather than merely *as* ourselves?" (114) and gives the example of losing an object and trying to find it. When a person finds the object he or she has been looking for and proclaims "ah, there it is" who is this person talking to other than themselves? This goes to show that there is both an "I" and a "me" in the same brain, and rather than thoughts being a monologue, they are in a sense a dialogue between one’s selves (114-115). He goes on to say that "[t]he sense that we are unified subjects is a fiction, produced by a multitude of separate processes and structures of which we are not aware and over which we exert no conscious control" (116) and argues that the only base of the self is psychological continuity. This is an idea argued by philosopher Derek Parfit, who states that physical continuity is not merely as important as psychological continuity, as illustrated by the duplicate’s paradox, or teleportation paradox. This paradox asks the question what one considers to be the self and problematizes it through an elaborate situation. Imagine that there is a teleportation-device sometime in the near future that immediately teleports a person to another location. In this example, the hypothetical person's (in this case a female) friends have already traveled to Mars and live there in a colony, assuring the hypothetical person that the teleportation is both instantaneous and without complications. This person decides to follow her friends to Mars, but when she arrives at the station there is a catch. Through some breakthrough in quantum mechanics, the teleportation device does not actually transport the person's body to Mars. Instead it replicates it on Mars and deletes the one on Earth. The personnel at the station assures the traveler that it will be like blinking and when she opens her eyes, she is already on the other side. For all intents and purposes, the self on Mars is her real self, although replicated. Most people will argue that there is something unsettling about this conundrum, and this is why Parfit argues that essentially the only thing that is the basis of identity is psychological continuity, everything else is just conjecture or happenstance (86-87).
All of this is connected with the mysterious Nefastis machine in *Lot 49*, which is a version of the thought experiment Maxwell's demon, a "machine" that violates the second law of thermodynamics. Physicist James Clark Maxwell came up with the thought experiment which in more detail is about a demon and two small chambers of gas. Between the two chambers there is a door which the demon controls. When gas molecules get close to the door, the demon rapidly opens and shuts the door so that the faster molecules move into one chamber, and the slower ones move into the other. Since faster molecules are by their nature warmer, when the demon opens and closes the door it is in essence creating one hot and one cold chamber. Maxwell's theory was that this experiment shows how the second law of thermodynamics could possibly be violated and entropy avoided. Amid all of the strange and truly bizarre things that occur in *Lot 49* this is perhaps the strangest one of them all, but the theme of entropy is something Pynchon previously explored in his short story titled "Entropy" and returns to again in *Gravity's Rainbow* after *Lot 49*. Basically, entropy is unavoidable in the world which means that death is unavoidable as there is no avoiding the second law of thermodynamics (Dalsgaard, Herman and McHale 160-161). What this means for the self is that the destruction of the self is unavoidable, as death is unavoidable, thus shattering the psychological continuity of the self which Harris and Parfit explained is the basis for identity. However, if the Nefastis machine worked for Oedipa (it does not since she is not deemed as a "sensitive", and who is or is not "sensitive" is not explained in the novel) she could avoid this problem of entropy and avoid the disintegration of her identity. As John Nefastis explains "[e]ntropy is a figure of speech then… a metaphor. It connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow. The machine uses both. The demon makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true" (Pynchon *Lot 49* 85). Therefore, Oedipa could in a sense be trapped in the world of conspiracy theories she has "projected" onto herself if the machine worked for her. The previously mentioned Henry Adams wrote a piece entitled *A Letter to American Teachers of History* where he explained the value of entropy as a concept for understanding both society and history. While Adams's interpretation is slightly different than Maxwell's, Adams saw history reaching a point of equilibrium and likened Schopenhauer's concept of will (the driving force for all of nature) to entropy (92). To some extent, even the will must eventually fade due to the second law of thermodynamics and all forms of identities eventually must vanish. Adams writes that "[s]ociety must still continue to act upon it, as the Platonist, the Stoic and the Christian did, for the obvious reason that it was and is their only motive for existence, - their solitary title to their identity" (115-116). What he
means is that the mind is central to identity, yet, it too shall eventually cease to exist due to entropy, because even the will must finally end.

The parallel to Oedipa and the reader is easy to make, in fact the parallel between all novels and its readers is apparent as well. Novels are by their very nature entropic, they have a beginning and an ending. Some postmodern novels have problematized these basic features by breaking the fourth wall yet the text must inevitably reach its conclusion. That is not to say that an ending cannot be open ended or the fact that stories can continue in future works or even by readers themselves (fan fiction for example). In The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon, Inger H. Dalsgaard states that reading and interpreting Pynchon is in some small shape or form combating entropy as well. She argues that Pynchon is in some sense only laying the groundwork; all the words and sentences are just that, words and sentences. The parallel to Wittgenstein's language games is obvious. It is the readers that are responsible for all the infinite amount of inference to his texts, and just as Maxwell's demon sorts out the gas molecules by opening and closing the door, the reader attempts the same sort of sorting throughout Pynchon's novels. To some degree, the more text with allusions and allegories that Pynchon produces, the more interpretations and explanations his readers will produce as well thus creating a loop of avoiding entropy, à la Maxwell's Demon. Dalsgaard goes on to ask: "Is Oedipa a character created by the necessity of coincidences, by the strength of the metaphor, by Pynchon's thought experiment (in writing The Crying of Lot 49); or did she exist for him 'long before the days of the metaphor,' as Nefastis claims the demon did for Maxwell? (160-161). This raises the question of identity and character to an ontological level, and to some extent adds further complexity as to how Pynchon manifests identity in his writing. Bennett and Royle say that "[t]o identify with a person in a novel is to identify oneself, to produce an identity for oneself". Therefore, by identifying with characters through reading, each individual reader creates additional selves. What Pynchon is possibly saying is that reading in and of itself is anti-entropic, akin to Maxwell's sorting demon.

In Gravity's Rainbow Pynchon often speaks directly to the reader through third person dialogue (i.e. when he writes you it is actually the reader he is addressing). Pynchon writes:

You go from dream to dream inside me. You have passage to my last shabby corner, and there, among the debris, you've found life. I'm no longer sure which of all the words, images, dreams or ghosts are 'yours' and which are 'mine.' It's past sorting out. We're both being someone new now, someone incredible (123).
Especially noteworthy is Pynchon's choice of words "[i]t's past sorting out" as the word sorting is the exact same verb Maxwell used to describe what the demon does in his thought experiment. Keeping in mind what Dalsgaard wrote about entropy and reading Pynchon, Maxwell's demon, and all of the convoluted twists and turns of *Lot 49*, this idea regarding reading and producing identities is not too farfetched. In fact, to some degree, is it not likely that it is a goal for Pynchon?

Having looked at a multitude of postmodern representations of identity in *Lot 49*, it is fairly obvious how immense the scope of postmodern theory truly is, and the postmodern movement as a whole. This is remarkably similar to Pynchon's encyclopedic vision, his ability to draw on almost anything imaginable in the world, ranging from lowbrow to highbrow culture, from technology to spirituality and so forth. It is also rather obvious how easy Hutcheon's theory of the postmodern poetics, i.e. creating postmodernism, can be found in Pynchon's writing. Pynchon's style of writing seems to stress the importance of decentered writing; this is perhaps akin to his reclusive identity as well. In fact, to some degree, identifying postmodern representations of identity is similar to identifying the postmodern movement's identity as well. Pynchon did not want to end up as an oracle of postmodernism; instead he is just a participant in it. Rather than supplying answers, he asks questions, just as postmodernism does.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been to examine postmodern representations of identity in Thomas Pynchon's novel *The Crying of Lot 49*. By close reading, it has been shown that Pynchon in many ways dismantles the idea of a unified self, and instead presents a more postmodern self, decentered and ungraspable. Thus it has fulfilled the goals set out by the aim and thesis of the essay that were to both examine how Pynchon dismantles the self and what he presents in its wake. A range of answers have been provided to the questions raised at the beginning of this essay "in what ways does Pynchon criticize the idea of a unified self? What alternatives to this notion does Pynchon present?"

As explained in the introduction, the overall goal of this essay was never to provide a definitive answer or "the" truth in Pynchon's writing. Rather, it joins an ongoing "canon" of essays attempting to make sense out of Pynchon and his both infinitely complex writing and mysterious nature. However, in many ways, that is what a postmodern analysis is, since postmodernism strives to move away from definitive answers and instead problematizes
everything, not providing a definitive answers is not a problem, rather, providing a definitive answer in and of itself is a problem, as postmodernism argues that these cannot exist. It is easy to make the connection to Wittgenstein and his language games. In some sense, philosophizing for Wittgenstein was meaningless due to the constrictions of language. In the *Tractatus*, he repeats the phrase "what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence" to make sure the reader gets what Wittgenstein is suggesting. The philosopher Emil Cioran said that "one does not inhabit a country; one inhabits a language. That is our country, our fatherland - and no other" echoing Wittgenstein and the notion of being born in language, thus being born in an identity. In some sense, trying to make sense out of Pynchon is doomed to fail, but, considering Pynchon's fascination with entropy and Dalsgaard's claim of Pynchon as the anti-entropic writer, the attempt of trying is meaningful and exactly what Pynchon wants the reader to do.

The theme of identity can be found almost anywhere one looks in *Lot 49*, as illustrated by the numerous examples. Thanks in no small part to Pynchon's encyclopedic vision and superfluous writing style, it is sometimes easy to miss the small comments and interjections Pynchon presents. It could certainly be argued that Pynchon is making the case for the Cartesian ego in relation to identity, as both Driblette and Oedipa talk about "projecting the world" and thus placing the center of identity in the mind, which is also something that Henry Adams argued at great length. However, it is this essay’s view that the Cartesian ego found in *Lot 49* is just another representation of the true self; Pynchon is not claiming that it is the basis, but rather that it is one basis of identity. Just as he presents both Lacanian and Freudian versions of identity, so too does he in many ways present a Wittgenstein approach to identity, most likely to some degree, all of them inspirations for Pynchon. The explicit mentions of Freud in *Lot 49* and Wittgenstein in *V.* are ample evidence that he is well aware of their theories, and thanks to his encyclopedic vision, they are just some out of hundreds of theorists and views found in his novels. Intersubjectivity sits at the heart of postmodernism and postmodernist literature, and this is exactly what is achieved in *Lot 49*. There is no one truth to be found, not even one reality to be found in the novel.

As the reader identifies with Oedipa and undergoes her journey, ultimately arriving at basically nothing, awaiting some sort of answer (at the crying of lot 49 and its mysterious buyer) the answer is snatched away as the novel ends. By the end, the reader is left with two alternatives just as Oedipa is. Either everything about the vast amount of conspiracies and plots have been true, or it has all been a delusion in Oedipa's head. Thus, both the reader and Oedipa face a dilemma as to what might be true at the end of the novel. Is this the same
dilemma as what might be true regarding the self? Clearly, Pynchon has presented a dismantled unified self and problematized the self in an almost endless degree of ways. Yet, Pynchon leaves this alternative open because postmodernism in its nature does not provide answers, as it cannot become another grand narrative. Pynchon leaves this door open for the reader to decide. In some ways, it could be argued that the true self is found in the literary self, perhaps the only true self. Yet this too can be problematized. Each reader brings his or her own back story with them, and projects different traits and things into each character. Thus, by the reader identifying and infusing life into characters, more selves are created akin to the anti-entropic nature of Pynchon's novels.

Hopefully, this essay has been a worthwhile complement to the ever-growing community of Pynchon interpreters. As it reaches its end, another dead end in the labyrinth of Pynchon analyses can be found. McHale likened analyzing Pynchon in Postmodernist Fiction to climbing a hill "and then one has some chance of finally reaching the hilltop, from where it is possible to survey the entire countryside" (10). It is a very apt comparison to make, not only in regard to Pynchon's novels, but to the subject of this essay as well. As Pynchon has illustrated, a broken mirror better reflects the self than a whole one. Just as it is impossible to view identity as one thing (in this case a hill), the entire countryside must be taken into consideration when one is viewing the self.

For future essays, a look at consciousness itself would be an interesting path to take when analyzing Lot 49. Much has already been said about the subject in Gravity's Rainbow, but more remains to be explored about it in The Crying of Lot 49. Regardless, there can never be too many interpretations of Pynchon, as every essay is combating entropy on a small scale.
Works Cited


