

The Crying of Lot 49 and "The Shadow"

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Early on in Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49, the narrator presents a scene that reveals Pierce Inverarity's penchant for playing that mysterious hero of pulps, radio, motion pictures, and comic books and strips: The Shadow. In his best Lamont Cranston voice, Pierce, spurned by his one-time lover, Oedipa Maas, concludes a phone call to her with the ominous warning that she and her husband Mucho can expect "A little visit from the Shadow."¹ Although the Shadow himself neither appears in the novel nor is ever mentioned again, this brief allusion is far from gratuitous. Rather, like the countless other references to pop characters in this novel and Pynchon's V. and Gravity's Rainbow, this allusion to the Shadow enriches the thematic texture of The Crying of Lot 49.

Oedipa's world is clearly a world of ambiguity, of confusion, of mysterious happenings, a world where, as one of the characters says, "Looks don't mean a thing any more" (17). Describing Oedipa's reaction to this world, David Cowart in his Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion writes, "Oedipa is a mental Rapunzel, locked in the epistemological 'tower' of herself, forever unsure that what she perceives coincides with what really is."² Her world is indeed a world of unsolved and possibly unsolvable puzzles. The only treasures she garners during her voyage through it are questions: How did Pierce die? Why did he call her? Why did he make her the executor of his will? What is the Trystero conspiracy? Does this conspiracy exist? Why did Driblette commit suicide? And will Oedipa ever discover who she herself is?

This sense of the complexity and ambiguity of Oedipa's world deepens further when the reader turns from a study of Lot 49 to a study of the actual nature of the Shadow. By comparing himself to the Shadow, Pierce brings into this novel all of the rich ambiguities that surround the Shadow, his powers, his identity, and his creation. Within the traditions of popular culture in which he originated, what the Shadow could actually do in the way of super-powered heroics is as ambiguous as anything in Lot 49. Some-

times, he could cloud men's minds and become invisible; sometimes, he was only able to do the former; sometimes, he could do neither and had to rely on his twin Colt .45's to italicize his commitment to the belief that "the weed of Evil bears bitter fruit." His identity is equally problematic. Although most people still believe that he was really Lamont Cranston, the Shadow had no actual alter ego for a long time; Cranston was simply one mask in his wardrobe. And when the Shadow's real identity was finally revealed, he was said not to be Lamont Cranston, but rather Kent Allard. And despite this revelation, in his latest incarnation in DC-Comics' superb Shadow series, he is once again Mr. Cranston. Finally, the identity of the author of the Shadow pulps is also unclear, a mystery in fact as deep as the mystery of the Trystero. The books were written under the name Maxwell Grant. But Grant, for much of the Shadow's pulp career, was really Walter B. Gibson. But Gibson wasn't always Grant. Sometimes Grant was Theodore Tinsley; other times he was Bruce Elliot; and still other times he was Lester Dent, who sometimes wrote under the name Kenneth Roberson, a name at times shared by writers who called themselves Norman Daniels, Alan Hathaway, and William Bogart.³

Pynchon's use of the Shadow, however, extends beyond Pierce's allusion and the complexities it slips in through the novel's back door. The narrator of Lot 49 compounds its sense of enveloping uncertainty by using elements associated with the Shadow and his world. Fogs, mists, and shadows permeate the stories in which the Shadow stars, creating a mise en scène in which nothing is seen clearly, a milieu in which people and things and landscapes are continually observed through obscuring layers. A typical Shadow story begins, for example, with the following dark, expressionistic, brooding, layered look:

Long Island Sound lay blanketed with a dense, sullen mist. From the shore, the heavy fog appeared as a grimy mass of solid blackness. The scene was one of swirling impenetrable night, for not a gleam of light disturbed the omnipresent darkness.⁴

Such dense, sullen mists, heavy fogs, and masses of solid blackness also fill the landscape of Lot 49, a California landscape that is far from sunny. When Genghis Cohen telephones Oedipa at one point, the morning is "soaked in rain-light," and a mist rises from the pool outside Oedipa's room (68). When she stops on the slope outside San Narciso to meditate on her experiences, smog hangs all around the horizon while the center of the circle formed by the smog is "painfully bright." This bright center generates a moment of awareness in her, a "religious instant" of revelation. But she breaks off this moment, the narrator states, "as if a cloud had approached the sun or the smog thickened" (13). Later in the novel, she is continually seen in the shadows. After finding the alcoholic sailor huddled in the shadow of his flop house, she comes "into the shadows" (92) and joins him. After leaving him, she walks among shadows and settles "back in the shadow of a column" (96). And in the novel's last scene, after she is seated in the auction room where she may or may not find the answers to her questions, an assistant closes "the heavy door on the lobby windows and the sun" (138). Again, she is in shadow, in the impenetrable night that is the Shadow's realm.

Just as the landscape is layered with obscuring mists, fogs, and shadows, many of Pynchon's characters layer themselves with masks and, thereby, add to the novel's sense of uncertainty. Masking, of course, is central to the Shadow; in his role of crime-fighter, he lives a constant masquerade. Speaking of the Shadow's love of masks, Ron Goulart writes that this character "comes across as the kind of man who would wear a mask even when he's alone in a pitch black room."⁵ The characters in Lot 49 would probably also wear masks even when alone. For example, in the forty or so lines in which he (rather, his voice) appears, Pierce Inverarity not only assumes the role of Lamont Cranston, he also disguises himself as a "second secretary at the Transylvanian Consulate," a "comic-Negro," a "hostile Pachuco," and a Gestapo officer. Similarly, Oedipa's psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarius, is known to have a whole repertoire of "faces" that he numbers and names. And, interestingly, some of the characters in this novel even take on what

appears to be the long, flowing black cape of the Shadow himself. At one point, the agents of the Trystero--a conspiracy responsible for much of the confusion and ambiguity in the novel--appear garbed in "cloaks like black sails" (118). The relationship between these masked figures and the Shadow is further emphasized by the phrases the narrator uses to describe them and their conspiracy. They are "shadow legatees" (136) of a "shadow-state" (122).

But the master masker in Lot 49 is unquestionably Oedipa herself. As the narrator reveals, she is afraid of going into herself "further down perhaps than she could reach" (3); and when she is faced with the need to confront what lurks in her inner self, she reacts with "near panic" (4). To avoid this panic, she repeatedly creates a mask-like "buffer" (6) between herself and her inner world, and a corresponding buffer between her self and those elements in her environment that might force her to peer into her inner self. Sometimes her disguises involve little more than the putting on of sunglasses, or the assumption of a pose she recalls from some old movie, or the use of an ID tag given her outside a bar, or the putting on of multiple layers of clothing for a game of Strip Botticelli. At other times, however, her maskings are much more elaborate.

The most pervasive and complex example of this tendency is revealed in Oedipa's obsessive commitment to the discovery of the Trystero. By assuming the role of She-Who-Searches-for-the-Trystero, she avoids her inner feelings; she masks herself from herself. For example, when she realizes that all those men who had been closest to her--Mucho, Hilarius, Metzger, and Driblette--are irrevocably separated from her, she does not view the loss as a personal one and, thereby, does not allow it to affect her inner self. Instead, she views the loss only from the perspective of her quest for the Trystero. She feels no grief, only an increasing sense of this mysterious conspiracy's power to "strip" away from her--for some inexplicable reason--these lovers, helpers, and guides.⁶ Whereas the Shadow relied on his masks to discover what evil lurked in the hearts of men, Oedipa relies on her mask-like buffers to avoid discovering what lurks in her heart.⁷

Notes

¹ Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49 (New York: Bantam, 1967), 3. Subsequent references are to this edition. Pynchon's use of the Shadow in Lot 49--and the Jungian implications of this allusion--is briefly discussed in Martin Green's "The Crying of Lot 49: Pynchon's Heart of Darkness," Pynchon Notes 8 (1982), 35-36.

² David Cowart, Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1980), 6.

³ Ron Goulart, An Informal History of the Pulp Magazine (New York: Ace, 1972), 44-58.

⁴ Quoted by Goulart, 47.

⁵ Goulart, 46.

⁶ Lot 49, 114. A much more extensive discussion of the masking that occurs in this novel appears in my article "No More Sea Changes: Hawkes, Pynchon, Gaddis, and Barth," Critique, 23, 2 (1981), 48-60.

⁷ An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Midwest Popular Culture Conference, October, 1981.