

Using Schema Theory to Trace the Connections between the Different Aspects of the Conflicting Roles of Oedipa Maas and the Intertext of Remedios Varo

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1: Introduction: Oedipa Maas's Conflicting Roles

From a purely theoretical stance, Pynchon's widely taught *The Crying of Lot 49* proves to be an excellent text for illustrating to students the postmodern concept of the end of essentialism, seen through the multiple point of view and the fragmentation of identity in the characters. From the very first lines, students accept that the protagonist is torn between being, at once, a fairly anonymous suburban housewife living in California and a sort of female version of the mythical Oedipus. They also accept easily enough that the reference to Oedipus implies two things: that she will be sent on a quest which will require going away and learning something (with or without coming back and—the sexual reverse of the Greek hero—killing her mother and marrying her father); and secondly, that she may be related in some way to the Freudian psychological interpretation of this sexual situation.

The dream element of this latter aspect appears clearly in the opening pages when Oedipa's distinction between the real and the dream is shattered, as her nights are interrupted, first by Pierce and his many voices at the time he changed his will (6), and then by Dr Hilarius, with his demand that she take part in his LSD program—LSD, a drug that also blurs the line between the real and the dream. Hilarius tells Oedipa that he is a Freudian (93), that he used hypnotism in Buchenwald (95), and that he chose, not Jung, but Freud, the Jew: "the dreamer whose puns probe ancient foetid shafts and tunnels of truth" (89). Remedios Varo has a (surreal) painting of a woman visiting a psychiatrist.

Students accept readily that Oedipa is the wife of a disc jockey, and that, in spite of this fact, which ought to make her life livelier and more connected, she saw herself as an isolated, entrapped, Rapunzel figure (12). Like Rapunzel, and like Remedios Varo, who paints lots of long-haired damsels in Gothic towers, Oedipa has long hair (102) and she is held fast by a sort of magic (though this does not extend so far as converting her hair into a wig): "anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all" (13). There are many magician figures in Remedios Varo and all the women have long hair.

At the part when Oedipa recalls her visit to Mexico with Pierce, where she had *cried* before a painting, one can show students the middle panel of the triptych, *Bordando el manto terrestre*. They will understand the Existential *angst* of the void (associated also with the Modernists E. M. Forster and Joseph Conrad) and Oedipa's heartfelt cry, "*Shall I project a world?*" (56). David Cowart's explanations of Pynchon's debt to Remedios Varo in *Lot 49*, especially chapter 2, are essential reading, and vital though they are, even he says that he has not exhausted all the possible presences of Remedios Varo in the novel. Students see how *Bordando el manto terrestre* makes Oedipa question her life on Earth, and upon waking up from a nightmare in her Berkeley hotel room and seeing her own face in the mirror beside a Remedios Varo reproduction on the wall, she questions her identity (69-70).

The figures associated with Rapunzel in her tower and with other embroiderers or weavers—Arachne, Philomela, Procne and the Lady of Shalott—are also easily added to Oedipa's image, though I don't usually go into the Borgesian implications with the students as Debra Castillo does (in her "Borges and Pynchon: The Tenuous Symmetries of Art" in O'Donnell 1991): "The reflexivity of a text on a painting depicting a tapestry that describes an interior state through allusion to textualized myth (Rapunzel, Arachne, Philomela and Procne, the Lady of Shalott) is essential" (39-40). But students can no doubt see the synaesthesia of Remedios Varo as a mixture of genres and detect its underlying presence in the novel. Oedipa is told she could take up embroidery (13) as an option. Arachne weaves and embroiders, but for defying the goddess, she is turned into a spider, the symbol of female industry through spinning and weaving. The two sisters, Philomela and Procne, suffer similar fates: the former has her tongue cut out or mutilated (like Domenico in *The Courier's Tragedy*), but is able to point the finger of guilt by weaving a tapestry of her abduction by her brother-in-law. Betrayed by her husband with her own sister, Procne kills their son and serves him up to her husband for supper, and both are turned, by magic, into birds. Hints of cannibalism occur in *Lot 49*, albeit in a much more surreal way, through the bones transformed into cigarette filters and wine. Birds often figure in Varo's work too, and in the first part of the triptych, *Hacia la torre*, the nun-like figures seem to be kept in thrall by birds. The Lady of Shalott is locked up for different reasons. She has to choose between life and art. She weaves a web (like the *webs* or wrinkles around Driblette's eyes [54] or like Mr Thoth's knitting [64]) and when the mirror breaks, as with Oedipa in the Echo Courts motel (24), disaster is on its way. (The mirror is associated with *maaswerk* and narcissism.) Since we never learn Pierce's true sentiments towards Oedipa, we do not know whether the whole point of the job as executrix of the legacy is to benefit her or to cause her harm. But in all these cases, the tapestry is a *cryptic* form of the *word*. These women cannot speak directly; they have to use clandestine means, like the underground communications system in the novel.

Looking back at the Remedios Varo triptych, I tell my students that the surrealists saw woman as a magical figure, a mediator between reality and mystery. The artist, the painter, is an alchemist, who converts colours into images, as in one of Varo's paintings. The surrealists, therefore, were concerned with the female arts of sewing and tapestry, so Varo's *Bordando el manto terrestre* (painted in 1961) is a ritual recreation of the world by the artist. Varo paints the marvellous, the sublime, and females predominate by far. The triptych was apparently influenced by her friend Leonora Carrington's *Nunscape* of a few years earlier, 1956, of nuns on a boat in the sea, and is also reminiscent of Ángela Santos's *Un mundo* (1929). Oedipa is nun-like in several ways: while isolated, she is still part of a collective, she is indistinguishable from the crowd of Californian housewives, until she is sent on her quest; she receives, or thinks she almost receives, sacred illuminations or epiphanies; and she appears to want to be chaste, for Pierce had told Metzger that Oedipa "wouldn't be easy" (28)—whatever that means. There isn't much sex with Mucho Maas, in spite of his name; even less towards the end with Pierce, who preferred his stamps; and she has to be drunk, or excited by scenes of impaling (she has an Impala car), to acquiesce to the sexual advances of—the albeit wonderfully handsome—Metzger.

The figure of Oedipa embraces, therefore, both sacred and profane love. When she tries to escape from the omnipresent evidence of the Trystero in San Narciso and heads up to San Francisco, she only finds more signs. Coming across the dying sailor and feeling an impulse to touch him, to offer him love, she enters yet another, but entirely different, role and phase. The expansive phase of the quest gives way to a reductive phase. The need to touch—she "took the man in her arms" (87)—suggests that she can no longer rely on the evidence coming from the senses of sight and sound. She has to be totally involved and, against the further evidence of the void, she almost refuses to go on *looking* for evidence of the Trystero and searching for meaning.

When I tell students that the scene with the old sailor is a sort of *pietà*, or *Virgen de los Dolores* or *de las Angustias* (the Virgin of Granada), they understand, they see it in their mind's eye, but they begin to protest because she had so far been associated with very different roles, even opposing roles, either innocent, virginal figures, or women of ill repute, rather like the "angel of the house" and the whore in Victorian literature: a mummy (26),¹ a stripper (26-27), and a Barbie doll (27), Alice in Wonderland ("Things then did not delay in turning curious" [29], "Rabbit" Warren [96], and Genghis Cohen's succession of doorways [65]), Marilyn Monroe (16), and a Jewess ("Edna Mosh" [96],² "kosher" [120]; see also Hollander's references [75]). Students find it hard to believe that Oedipa can be all of these things. But, indeed, she can, and after the mention of Dallas (35), if we follow Hollander's theory, that the whole book is riddled with tacit references to the assassination of President Kennedy, then, as *pietà*, she is also a Jackie Kennedy figure.

As regards Marilyn Monroe (the nymph on the sign at Echo Courts motel has billowing skirts reminiscent of Monroe's skirt in *The Seven Year Itch*), recently accessed documents indicate that Monroe had Communist friends in Mexico City (like Oedipa and Jesús Arrabal and Remedios Varo, of course), and she went straight from pillow talk with Jack and Robert Kennedy to something similar perhaps with her friends in Mexico City. Hollander, again, has suggested how close the young Pynchon was to inside information on the assassination of Kennedy.

2: Ways of Viewing Oedipa's Roles

Oedipa becomes all of these things, indeed, Collado sees the metamorphoses of V. as also present in different ways in all Pynchon's novels (83). Alternatively, this multiplicity of roles Oedipa is forced into, and the many examples of *layers* or *surfaces*, as in Remedios Varo, suggest that Pynchon may have created his protagonist along the lines of William Burroughs's "laminations." This theory would be backed up by the belief that Oedipa had the *potential* to be all these things. One of the ways of interpreting Pierce's comment that Oedipa "would not be easy" is to reject the sexual sense and embrace the moral one: that *she* slammed the door of the hotel bedroom in Mazatlán because she did not agree with his unethical and undoubtedly illegal means of getting rich. Pierce might therefore have seen in her the potential for feeling, perhaps on his behalf, for the *underdog*, if only she could see him or her (though it is almost always a him), and for that, she needed to be forced out of her comfortable house in Kinneret-Among-The-Pines.

If Oedipa has the potential for all these things, then the necessary traits are within her, growing steadily, almost organically, as a tree progressively adds rings to its trunk on the outside. Laminations are thin layers superimposed one upon another. But this model does not allow us to see Oedipa *simultaneously* in several or all of these roles; it suggests that one or more are hidden or outgrown.

Hollander suggests the metaphors of embroidery (69)—the *maaswerk*—represent the overside and underside or overt and covert: "But a comprehensive reading of *Lot 49* must account for how Pynchon's themes, tropes and narrative strategy interweave, must demonstrate how Pynchon structures the narrative (or overside) and allusions (or underside) of the novel into a unified whole" (66). He also suggests the "magic eye" as a metaphor to illustrate the need to adopt a different visual stance to grasp the hidden meanings. A third approach he mentions is Pynchon's deployment of the enthymeme, "a logical construct with the conclusion unexpressed—to be drawn by the reader or listener" (81), especially if the conclusion is comic. Fourthly, Hollander suggests that a jazz player's improvisations or variations on a theme could be an apt metaphor for understanding Pynchon:

In each of these cases (comic, jazzman, painter [he refers to Dalí's *Voltaire in the Slave Market*]), the audience has to perform mental operations, *fill in blanks*, catch wordplay, recognize referents, complete syllogisms or analogies, bring a working knowledge of history to the artistic experience, understand enough to reach the right conclusions. Pynchon is a master at leading us on, then leaving us historical-political blanks to fill in. If we follow the trail of the indicators he carefully lays down for us we will arrive at answers that unify on the underside what seems like disunity on the overside. (83-84; emphasis added)

3: Schema Theory and Oedipa's Roles

An alternative approach, I suggest, is to set the roles out linearly and chronologically, so that they can be compared as a whole. I prepare sheets for my students (see Appendix 2) *not* in terms of the relating of the narrative, but of the reconstructed narrative time-line, starting with Oedipa's flashbacks and recollections. Even this method can fail to reflect the reality unless one realises that the roles are *cumulative* and not discrete. As Oedipa enacts the *Pietà* role, she does not cease to be a quester, though she does reduce and limit that aspect of her life at that point.

This approach leads towards a comprehensive model for understanding Oedipa's capacity for enacting these roles, and especially for seeing the connections between them, and that model entails a form of cognitive frame theory. For imaginative writing to be successful, the writer must have some control over the imaginations of his or her readers to carry them along. Pynchon runs the path of the imagination in leaps and bounds, taking us, in this instance, from Oedipus to Rapunzel, to the Virgin Mary, via Alice in Wonderland and Marilyn Monroe. Pynchon is able to make these leaps and carry us along because he works with frames, or schemata, which are recognisable to the reader. He may jump from one field to another, there may even be apparent incompatibility of schemata, but because they are inherently structured, the writer knows that some element in the structuring of one schema will tie in somehow with one or more elements in the other schema or schemata evoked in the reader's mind. And what is most important: according to schema theory, once a schema has been triggered in the reader's mind by a specific word, the *whole* schema is evoked, including aspects that are not mentioned. The schema comes complete, and the reader, with his or her knowledge of that schema, fills in the unmentioned or "default" elements, which are latent or subconsciously present. Things can also link up by being *opposite*, like a virgin and a whore.

A model for analysis which my students and I find very useful and straightforward, is that invented by Guy Cook to detect, analyze, and describe the functions of schemata in texts. It sets up frameworks in the form of scenarios in which the events are re-enacted. Through the re-enacting, the similarities are

pointed out, but so too are the *dissimilarities*; and it is quite often through schema disruption—using but *subverting* a scenario, by showing things to be lacking or different—that important points are made, and especially, humor is created.

The main work in which Guy Cook describes his findings and elaborates his model is *Discourse and Literature*. The model goes back to Minsky and to Schank and Abelson's prototype set out in *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding*. He also draws upon Charles Fillmore and his "frames" (Oedipa finds the Trystero symbol in a laundromat "somewhere near Fillmore"! [84]) and George Lakoff's work in the 1980s with his "cognitive model," and Lakoff and Johnson's "experiential gestalt."

Cook shows that the basic claim of schema theory is that human understanding, and here, text understanding, can be represented as a hierarchy of levels of schemata in which failure to understand on one level can be corrected by referring to the level above. A theory of coherence may be extrapolated from this, whereby failure of correction at a lower level may be referred to a higher one. The levels are set out paradigmatically by Schank and Abelson as in the diagram:

Schank and Abelson's Levels in Schemata

THEMES (3):	role themes, interpersonal themes, life themes
GOALS (5):	satisfaction, enjoyment, achievement, preservation, crisis-handling (all objectives of possible plans or scripts; departure from <i>expected</i> goals the usual focus of literary writing)
PLANS (unlimited):	novel and unpredictable, but recognize and carry out goals
SCRIPTS (3):	situational, personal, instrumental (structures that describe appropriate sequences of events in a particular context. "Slots" where participants have roles, props, entry conditions, results, scenes and their sequence.)

(Schank and Abelson)

Coherence is created when the reader perceives connections between schemata. The connections may be causal, or inclusive, in that one schema may be contained in another, whereas excluding processes may signal deviance. The schemata represent the *norm*, or expectation once it has been triggered, and so any unexpected factor or detail can cause schema disruption and/or refreshment.

Defamiliarization (to use the Russian formalist notion) can make a crucial contribution to a theory of the relation between a literary text and the reader's mind at work on the text. A writer may introduce a schema only to disrupt and radically alter it. In its static nature, an altered or subverted schema suffers the foregrounding of certain of its components or aspects. The deviation may have a meaningful or aesthetic effect that contributes to the power of the text. For example, when Metzger suggests playing "Strip Botticelli," the word "Botticelli" triggers a schema which is both verbal and visual, which takes us back to Pynchon's *V.* and *Venus* as the classical ideal of feminine beauty. But *Oedipa* subverts the concept of naked beauty when she puts on her naked body layer upon layer of clothing, turning herself into a coloured beachball with legs. The concepts are opposite and comic, but the painting and the beachball coincide in their common ground of the sea, so there are odd connections. The deeper meaning of the whole scene may be that you cannot trust the word of a lawyer.

According to Cook, the levels at which the defamiliarization may take place are at those of language schemata, text schemata, and world schemata. The attitude towards lawyers, for example, would fall within world schemata. Cook demonstrates three aspects to the introduction of changes in schemata: existing schemata may be destroyed; new ones may be constructed; and new connections may be established between existing schemata. This is what Cook calls "schema refreshment," and disruption is a pre-requisite. The different procedures are reinforcing, preserving, and adding, while the disruptive procedures are refreshing through destroying, reconstructing, and connecting. The primary function of certain discourses, particularly literary and publicity, is to make a change in the schemata of their readers. Our schema of "Oedipus" will never be the same again since we have come across a twentieth-century female version of him.

To help students understand the way this functions, I give them sheets (see Appendix 1) which itemize the ways in which the Oedipus schema has been refreshed through *Oedipa Maas*. Foregrounded are her gender—since we have a female Oedipus, we receive some message about the roles of women in ancient Greece and the middle of the twentieth century—and her socio-economic status, which says something about the different social hierarchy. Also foregrounded is *Oedipa's* failure to answer the enigmas with which she is faced, which, compared with Oedipus, removes a potential nobility and heroism from her character, preparing us for the foregrounded genre difference in text purpose: comedy rather than tragedy.

As the students compare *Oedipa Maas* to the schema of the Virgin Mary, again, they appreciate the differences rather than the similarities. *Oedipa*, at age 28, is not a mother, and certainly does not pretend to the honor of being the Mother of God, but, in this profane age, she may receive a sacred message (like Moses) and has the potential to succor those in need. To give succor is a

plan Oedipa and the Virgin Mary do share. Also, they share escape narratives, even if they are not voluntary, as in Mary and Joseph's flight to Egypt. But again, the texts are different: the disciples of the New Testament are executors, after Pentecost, of the Word of God, as indeed, was Mary Magdalene (Oedipa shares the long hair, tears, and adultery), while Oedipa doesn't know what she is the executor of (see Quilligan 188), though there may be common ground, as the disciples at first didn't see things at all clearly, yet went on to do the best communications exercise in the history of the world.

The main point of setting out the schemas and showing how they are subverted and refreshed is to demonstrate exactly how the different connecting words and ideas (which form the vertical line on the table in Appendix 2) function. One could go on to set out all the schemas I have suggested on the horizontal axis. And, I must add, the list of roles I have drawn up for Oedipa is not exhaustive, one could add Androgyné, Young Republican, or Rose of Sharon Joad, for example.

The point of all this is that we can be more precise than just saying that Oedipa is deeply impressed by and identifies with a painting of the Earth's crust (*manto* in Spanish) and plays the role of the Virgin Mary, who wears a mantle (also *manto* in Spanish, one being a metaphorical extension of the literal usage.) We can say, with more linguistic precision, that *mantle* is a prop in the schema of the Virgin Mary and it is also part of an image which is a prop to the traveller Oedipa Maas. Furthermore, this image partakes in the general scheme of "crisis-handling" in the life of the individual. The Virgin Mary had no Existential *angst*; she was worried in that she was not married, but had faith in the God of the Old Testament and asked no questions when taken along new paths. Oedipa lives in an age in which there is no unique authority accepted unquestionably by everyone. It is for this reason that some people see Oedipa also as a female version of Everyman. But again, this would not be limiting as an *essence*, it would be, rather, another discrete role that could yet be found to have connections with her other roles.

Conclusions

Setting out the connecting factors as plans (for example, to execute a will, or to communicate knowledge of the Logos, to achieve liberty—the Virgin Mary and Christ sought freedom from sin and also subverted authority) helps us to see the big ideas in the novel and to see ways in which certain factors may unite more than one schema. Both the Virgin Mary and Alice in Wonderland ventured, like Oedipus and Oedipa, into the unknown. Strange worlds and languages, with new authorities, were encountered and had to be dealt with. Students enjoy trying to find the connections themselves, and end up with lots of crosses in the different boxes. For example, music unites several schemata, and in *Lot 49*—and all of Pynchon's other works—there is music everywhere.

Curiously, Remedios Varo includes different musical instruments, the piano, a guitar, a flute, etc, in her paintings. Travel and transport also permeate her work, often with characters that have their transport incorporated in the form of wheels or sails. Oedipa is at one with her vehicle: "She and the Chevy seemed parked at the center of an odd, religious instant" (15). As Cowart observed, Pynchon was no doubt fascinated by what he saw in Varo's paintings of strange worlds where the stars communicated with the creators of art or of the world itself. The reader makes the connections, and the student can analyze the connections within each schema and across schemas; but while for Oedipa, the making of connections aims at ontological meaning but leads to paranoia, for the reader, connecting is a lexical game, and the serious meanings involving how to live the individual life within the community, on earth, in the cosmos don't necessarily do much more for us than entertain the brain. One can hold discussions on the potential moral purpose of Pynchon's fictions, but ultimately, what prevails is their overt multivocality and marked variance from the Oedipal epic with its univocal ethical purpose. Studying Pynchon's use of familiar schema in terms of both world knowledge and text types helps us to see more clearly how readers understand his works in all their complexity, and confirms what we intuited.

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Notes

¹ The Egyptian connection—with its papyri, hieroglyphs, cryptic codes and mummies coming to life—Hollander notes is part of the "sacred" aspect of the novel, had been traced earlier by Meikle to a story by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "Lot N° 249." Both the mummy and Pierce's stamps are referred to as an auctioneer's lot. But Miekle thinks this connection is a smokescreen for a more important debt to H. P. Lovecraft's story "The Call of Cthulhu" (288).

² Mosh is like Moses, who received the Divine Word in the Ten Commandments. Remedios Varo was not Jewish, but was obsessed by her large nose and did a painting of a woman going to the plastic surgeon for a nose job, like Esther does in *V*. Varo knew all about Jewish persecution through Leonora Carrington's relationship with Max Ernst during the war. Perhaps the obliterated background also points to Oedipa's Jewishness.

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Appendix 1. Schema Refreshment

1. OEDIPUS

WORLD SCHEMATA

- INSTANCE: Oedipa Maas, of Kinneret-Among-The-Pines
 IS: without family; becomes self-sufficient (default element: disinherited?)
 BUT NOT a man; NOT child of king; NOT inhabitant of ancient Greece;
 IS married
- EVENTS: sent into "exile"; has adventures; faces the unknown; watches a film which has "a merry old Greek fisherman" (19) BUT does NOT solve enigmas, kill father (mother?) and marry mother (father?)
- PROPS: HAS long hair
 BUT HAS car*

*Just as the horse became identified with its rider in the past, giving rise to the centaur in Greek literature, Oedipa's car is part of herself—"she and the Chevy seemed parked at the centre of an odd, religious instant" (15)—just like her husband Mucho's customers when he worked at the used car lot. Curiously, in several of Remedios Varo's paintings of travellers, the mode of locomotion is incorporated, reminding us of Nefastis's "To keep it all cycling," (72) and Pierce's "Keep it bouncing" (123).

TEXT SCHEMATA

- INSTANCE: *The Crying of Lot 49*
 IS: intended to entertain
 NOT intended to edify
 NOT a tragedy; NO tragic flaw in hero/heroine

LANGUAGE SCHEMATA

- INSTANCE: *The Crying of Lot 49*
 IS: NOT univocal heroic epic; IS multivocal (acc. to Bakhtin's distinction of the novel)

2. THE VIRGIN MARY

WORLD SCHEMATA

- INSTANCE: Oedipa Maas, of Kinneret-Among-The-Pines
 IS: young woman; Jewish?; goes into “exile”;
 NOT a mother
- EVENTS: is informed she has been chosen for an important purpose;
 the purpose is NOT to give birth to the Son of God;
 she goes to San Narciso; it is a Sunday;
 does NOT go to the Biblical Kinneret
 she is told tales or sees a play about Lago di Pietà (41);
 sees “nuns” in Remedios Varo’s tryptich;
 sees the “mantle” of the world being woven;
 experiences or almost experiences epiphanies;
 holds the dying sailor “as if he were her own child” (87);
 sees in the rooming-house “A picture of a saint,
 hanging well-water to oil for Jerusalem’s Easter lamps” (88)
- PROPS: HAS long hair;
 Wears blue and black (apart from her knickers, which are of
 “assorted colors” [23])

TEXT SCHEMATA

- INSTANCE: Oedipa Maas of Kinneret-Among-The-Pines
 IS: NOT a figure in a sacred text; NOT an icon;

LANGUAGE SCHEMATA

- INSTANCE: Oedipa Maas
 IS: involved in a scene with language of Biblical overtones:
 “embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit
 windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all
 the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests
 of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was
 the world” (13).

