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## THOMAS PYNCHON'S BIZARRE CHARACTER NAMES IN *THE CRYING OF LOT 49*

CHAITANYA GADHIRAJU<sup>1</sup>, Dr. L. MANJULA DAVIDSON<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar (Ph.D), Dept. of English, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India.

<sup>2</sup>Research Supervisor, Dept. of English, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India.



### ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to study and analyze Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and the names of the chief characters that feature in the novel. Pynchon's bizarre sense of humor aids him in the naming of his characters. Pynchon's quirky character names inform the reader regarding their personalities that begin to make sense as one delves deeper into his works of literary art. The present study aims to focus on Pynchon's character names that have never been very closely analyzed since most critics prefer to analyze the critical nature of his work. It is probably because of this reason that the character names in Pynchon's works are overshadowed by his own genius that went behind the creating his masterpieces. This study is also taken into regard the various readings that result from his character names which in turn make it possible for the reader to come to his own conclusions regarding the nature of Pynchon's work.

**Keywords:** Character names, postmodern fiction, serious literary art, wit, mockery and literary strategy and etymology

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### INTRODUCTION

In the *Bard Observer*, a magazine that featured Jonathan Rosenbaum's paper entitled "A Book Review by Jon Rosenbaum (*THE CRYING OF LOT 49*)", published on May 24, 1966, one can comprehend that the names created by Pynchon in his works serve as a literary device that has the potential to transcend the literary limitations and take his work to an altogether higher level. One can also view the stylistic devices that he makes use of while penning the works of literary art.

His style, which is generally fluid and colloquial in a natural way, occasionally becomes muddy and inadequately polished: after a host of characters with names like Genghis Cohen, Randolph Driblette, and Manny DiPresso, one

sometimes suspects that Pynchon wants to trivialize his own satire by giving it a harmless edge of **Mad Magazine** humor.

Thomas Ruggles Pynchon, Jr, highly acclaimed for his wit and humor is considered by even the most critical of critics to be the master of dark comedy and this mastery is perfectly depicted in the manner in which he uses satire, irony and parody in the naming of his characters. This multifaceted literary genius is known the world over for his highly complex and convoluted plotlines and his eccentric sounding character names. Despite Pynchon's notoriety regarding the complexity of subject matter as well as his associated depictions of the above said matter, he nonetheless is highly popular with the younger readers because of his humor and sharp wit.

A writer with eight novels, one short story collection, two technical publications, six essays, two reviews, two film adaptations, four introductions, three liner notes, various letters and blurbs to his credit, Pynchon has garnered great critical acclaim the world over. His oeuvre includes novels such as *V.*(1963), *The Crying of Lot 49*(1967), *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), *Vineland* (1990), *Mason & Dixon* (1997), *Against the Day* (2006), *Inherent Vice* (2009) and *Bleeding Edge* (2013) and short story collections entitled *Slow Learner* (1984). Pynchon's motion picture adaptations include *Impolex* (2011) loosely based on *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Inherent Vice* (2014) faithfully accurate to the novel version bearing the same name. Pynchon won the Mac Arthur Fellowship and has also won the National Book Award for Fiction in the year 1974 for his hugely celebrated novel *Gravity's Rainbow*. As Ali Chetwynd of the University of Michigan states in his review of *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* (2011) that:

Thomas Pynchon joins Phillip Roth, Toni Morrison, Don DeLillo and John Updike on the list of US novelists to merit a Cambridge Companion during their lifetime: a significant milestone in the academic mainstreaming of an author who, despite his reasonable sales and attendant research 'Pyndustry', retains a cultist aura. (142)

Though a lot of critics consider Pynchon to be a strong contender for the Nobel Prize in literature, one realizes that this supposition might not be able to turn into a possibility if one goes by the remarks that the Pulitzer committee made on the eve of nominating Pynchon's magnum opus, *Gravity's Rainbow*. The committee felt that the work was "turgid" and "obscene", which suggests that the world might not be ready to accept his literature and the philosophy that lies behind his literary work. However, Pynchon has managed to turn even the most skeptical of critics to see his work as he sees it himself and thereby cultivated his own set of faithful critics, who have spent decades studying and critically analyzing his exceedingly complicated works. Critics who concentrate primarily on Pynchon and postmodern literature include Molly Hite, Brian McHale, David Cowart, David Seed, Judith

Chambers, Steven Weisenburger, Ihab Hassan, Luc Herman, Inger H. Dalsgaard, W. Lawrence Hogue, and Jeffrey Severs to name just a few. Pynchon's popularity can be realized when one looks at the number of highly critical websites that are solely devoted to him such as *pynchonwiki*, *Pynchon Notes*, *thomaspynchon.com*, *Pynchon.pomona.edu*, *Pynchon.net* and *vheissu* to cite just a few, all of which provide Pynchon's biographical details, scanty as they might be. However, despite the largess of resource material, one is constantly aware that these scanty details are the results of an extremely allusive writer for whom personal space and privacy are of utmost importance. Pynchon's works often take up serious issues however; the form that they take on is noticeably relaxed and laid back which gives one the sense that the world need not take itself too seriously and neither should the reader take Pynchon too seriously. Pynchon achieves this by using characters and their names to infringe upon this largely serious tone that his works take on and comes up with this literary device in order to undercut the afore mentioned seriousness. For a clearer picture of how Pynchon manipulates names in his novels one can refer to Patrick Hurley's *Pynchon Character Names: A Dictionary* published in the year 2008.

Though there have been many articles that have attempted to showcase Pynchon's character names, in order to understand his work with a high degree of comprehensibility one needs to analyze the intent behind Pynchon's use of weird character names. When viewed from a superficial perspective these names evoke a comical response from the reader. However, when dug deeper one can find that Pynchon's absurd names serve an entirely different purpose altogether. Patrick J Hurley in *Pynchon Character Names: A Dictionary* (2008) opines that: (5)

Pynchon uses comic names throughout his fiction, but they apply to all social classes. Interestingly, his use of derive comic names for lower-class characters can actually be read as a radical gesture against class.

A thorough reading of Pynchon's texts depicts his take on class struggle, however, with Pynchon it is not just the conflict between the rich and the poor

but between the elect and the preterite. Pynchon uses the Calvinist thought that strongly believed that the people could be divided into three kinds, the elect, the preterite and the damned. Pynchon's use of the aforementioned doctrine and his incorporation of it into his fiction is something that most critics have been able to trace quite successfully. As Tony Tanner says in his work *Thomas Pynchon* (1982): (60)

In Pynchon's texts names do not operate as they do in, for example, Fielding in which Thwackum or Allworthy are or do exactly what their names indicate.... We usually expect to find the person in his or her name. In a realistic book as in life, the name comes to signify a real character with unique characteristics. This goes along with a very tenuous notion of the unique individual. Pynchon blows all this up. "Character" and identity are not stable in his fiction.... Pynchon indicates that he can see how, in various ways, people are subject to the authority of naming: how a whole society can exercise its power through naming.

However, one can notice that Pynchon does not consistently use the traditions of naming and subjects his character names to a high degree of creativity that is profoundly Pynchonian. Some of his characters are so named directly based on certain characteristics that are inherently a part of his characters, while other names are given indirectly and are based on certain associated characteristics that might not be too obvious for a reader reading his works for the first time. Pynchon makes use of literary devices such as irony, metonymy, paradox and puns to create character names that are distinctly recognized by critics as belonging to Pynchon and his works. One also needs to understand that the character names created by Pynchon cannot be rigidly employed and that one must make space for a small bit of flexibility to seep in. However, most postmodern critics also believe the guidelines that one sees Pynchon following regarding the creation of character names sometimes overlap with one another and lead to confusion which in turn leads one to believe that the

confusion created was indeed a deliberate act performed by Pynchon. One can see that all the aforementioned claims can be rationalized in many of Pynchon's early novels such as *The Crying of Lot 49*, his shortest and least populated novel till date. As David Seed in *The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon* (1988) states: (6)

Pynchon flattens out the characters in his early fiction into two-dimensional figures who ludicrously define themselves through single repeated actions, verbal mannerisms or obsessions.

In *The Crying of Lot 49* Pynchon names his characters in order to evoke a comic response from the readers more than anything. However, such a simple claim cannot be applied in Pynchon's case, especially because of his ability to turn even the most common-place of things into entities that deny such a simple explanation. In *The Crying of Lot 49* though Pynchon uses comic character names, it does not diminish the importance that one can accord to it nor does it lessen the manifold meanings that can be derived from it. Hurley suggests that the bizarre names that Pynchon creates play a "philosophical" part in the work. Hurley further suggests that in the case of most of the minor characters in the novel these names chiefly evoke just the comic nature of the aforesaid characters and that one it would be extremely difficult to find any other ulterior motive that Pynchon was probably attempting to suggest. Tanner believes that Pynchon uses these character names to subvert the "tyranny of naming". In a world inundated with chaos and control Pynchon uses the comicality of the character names to combat the disorientation that is so vastly present in this century. There are certain critics who see Pynchon's works as chiefly falling under the category of a satirical stance that he takes in almost all of his works. Pynchon's humor in most instances has an acerbic tone to it and this makes his humor to be seen as "biting". However, one finds that the juxtaposing of the comic with the serious as seen in *The Crying of Lot 49* brings to the forefront Pynchon's ability to create humor that can exist just for the pure joy of its own comicality. When one is reading *The Crying of Lot 49* one needs to keep in

mind that underneath the comic names there exists a wide-range of meanings and that one need not restrict oneself to the superficiality of the aforementioned comic character names. As Theodore D. Kharpertian in *A Hand to Turn the Time: The Menippean Satires of Thomas Pynchon* (1990) says that:

Paronomasias like Manny di Presson, Emory Bortz, and Genghis Cohen contribute to a Menippean form that functions both as entertainment per se and as textual denaturalization. (97)

The critic, Robert Brazeau in his paper entitled "A Note on "Pierce Inverarity" featured in *Pynchon Notes* in the year 1992 states that: (186)

Pynchon offers his readers a clue (or a bluff) in the names of his characters, allowing another book to pierce his own, opening Lot 49 to varied levels of interpretations.

Hurley traces the history that lies behind Oedipa Maas's name and further elucidates that the origin of the name cannot be restricted to only one work of Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*. Hurley believes that more than the aforementioned work, Oedipa's name can be traced back to Sophocles work, *Oedipus at Corona*. One can notice that both *Oedipus Rex* and *The Crying of Lot 49* have the same theme of quest, wherein the protagonist is given a puzzle and expects the character to solve in order to move the plot forward.

The name Wendell Mass also called Mucho was created by Pynchon primarily as a joke however, Hurley takes into consideration Colvile's analysis too, in order to trace the name. (96)

Colvile examines the name in detail suggesting that Maas refers to the mass media (his job) and that Mucho points toward the many identities he will take on after his continued use of L. S. D.

Pynchon third major character is Pierce Inverarity, whose name has engendered numerous critical analyses done by critics such as Theodore D. Khartertian, J. R. Pierce, Katherine N. Hayles, John Johnston to name just a few. According to Brazeau, this name made its first appearance in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) in the

form of John Inverarity. Though most of the character names created by Pynchon seem superficial at a glance, exhaustive re-readings display the possibility that there indeed might be a strong reason behind Pynchon's approach to naming. However, one needs to essentially comprehend that since there are diverse opinions held by numerous critics it is not feasible to claim that there exists only a single logic that could indeed be called the accurate one.

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