MYSTERIES UNRESOLVED: DETECTIVE FICTION AND PARODY IN THOMAS PYNCHON'S *THE CRYING OF LOT 49* AND *INHERENT VICE*[*]

Ahmet KOÇ[**]

ABSTRACT

Thomas Pynchon's novels are noted for their postmodernist characteristics. Some of his novels also include certain features of detective fiction. In *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), the focus of Oedipa—a housewife whose name alludes to Oedipus of Sophocles— shifts to unravelling the mystery of a shadowy underground postal system, and she turns out to be an amateur detective. The challenge is that the 'clues' do not clarify the case, which may or may not be real. A similar pattern is available in *Inherent Vice* (2009), in which a professional and "pothead" detective, Larry "Doc" Sportello, is at work in 1970s California. *Inherent Vice* does not provide a clear, definitive resolution to the mysteries. Instead, the novel maintains ambiguity and open-endedness, allowing readers to reflect on the intricacies of the narrative and the nature of the quest itself. Thomas Pynchon plays with the detective genre by parodying generic conventions in both works. A parodic work, characterized by its dialogical nature, comically criticizes its target and simultaneously crystallizes its conventions. While utilizing recognizable tropes and characteristics of archetypal private investigators, Pynchon employs unconventional methods for solving the crime, ironic inversions, and absurdities to subvert the stereotypical portrayal of a detective. In this respect, Pynchon, with his examples of postmodern/metaphysical detective stories, both nurtures and subverts the detective genre. In this paper, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice* are examined regarding how Pynchon both validates and questions the established norms of the traditional detective genre by using parody.

Keywords: Thomas Pynchon, Detective Fiction, Parody, Postmodernism.

ÇÖZÜMLENMEMİŞ GİZEMLER: THOMAS PYNCHON'UN *THE CRYING OF LOT 49* VE *INHERENT VICE* ROMANLARINDA POLİSİYE KURGU VE PARODİ

ÖZ

Thomas Pynchon'ın romanları postmodernist özellikleriyle dikkat çeker. Bazı romanları polisiye kurgunun belirli özelliklerini de içerir. *The Crying of Lot 49*'da (1966), adı Sofokles'in Oidipus'una gönderme yapan ev hanımı Oedipa'nın odak noktası, karanlık bir yeraltı posta sisteminin gizemini çözmeye kayar ve kendisi amatör bir 'dedektif'e dönüşür. Buradaki zorluk, 'ipuçlarının' gerçek olabilecek ya da olmayabilecek vakayı açıklığa kavuşturmamasıdır. Benzer bir durum, profesyonel ve "esrarkeş" bir dedektif olan Larry "Doc" Sportello'nun 1970'lerin Kaliforniya'sında iş başında olduğu *Inherent Vice* (2009) eserinde de mevcuttur. *Inherent Vice* da gizemlere açık ve kesin bir çözüm getirmez. Bunun yerine, roman belirsizliği ve açık uçluluğu koruyarak okuyucuların anlatının incelikleri ve arayışın doğası üzerine düşünmelerine olanak tanır. Thomas Pynchon her iki eserinde de genel kabullerin parodisini yaparak dedektiflik türüyle oynar. Söyleşimsel doğasıyla nitelendirilen parodik bir eser, hedefini komik bir şekilde eleştirir ve aynı zamanda onun geleneklerini daha belirgin hale getirir. Pynchon, dedektif arketipinin bilindik özelliklerini kullanırken, suçu çözmek için alışılmadık yöntemler, ironik tersine çevirmeler ve absürtlükler kullanarak klişeleşmiş dedektif tasvirini altüst eder. Bu açıdan Pynchon, postmodern/metafizik dedektif örnekleriyle polisiye türünü hem besler hem de altüst eder. Bu makalede, Pynchon'ın *The Crying of Lot 49* ve *Inherent Vice* eserlerinde parodiyi yoluyla geleneksel polisiye türünün yerleşik normlarını nasıl hem tasdik edip hem de sorguladığı incelenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Thomas Pynchon, Polisiye Kurgu, Parodi, Postmodernizm.

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[**] Research Assistant Dr., Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature, E-mail: ahmet.koc@erdogan.edu.tr, ORCID Number: 0000-0002-0125-6652

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INTRODUCTION

Thomas Pynchon is a significant figure in American literature. Pynchon's contributions to literature extend beyond postmodernist qualities as the writer also engages in a dialogue with the conventions of detective fiction and reimagines the genre's boundaries through the lens of postmodernism. This can be clearly seen in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice*, where Pynchon not only adheres to the genre's conventions but also subverts them. Pynchon blends the novels' structure with irony, parody and existential questions. The archetypical detective story pattern, characterized by its definitive resolution and the reestablishment of order, is transformed by Pynchon to mirror the turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s—an era marked with postmodernity, paranoia, and cultural upheaval. By embracing and simultaneously inverting the detective fiction traditions, Pynchon's characters set out quests that transcend the uncovering of facts by delving into the existential realms.

This article examines Pynchon's engagement with the detective genre, identifying his challenge to convention with a sense of parody. Thomas Pynchon takes the reader through complex stories, abandoning the expected path to solving the mystery and instead leading the reader to an ending full of uncertainty that challenges what is normally expected of a detective story. In this way, Pynchon invites readers to reflect on the important social and philosophical issues of the time and to ponder the nature of reality and truth. Therefore, this study is not just an analysis of literary techniques. Thus, this study is not just an analysis of a literary technique; it is an insight into how detective fiction, as shaped by Pynchon`s parodic treatment, reflects the versatility and adaptability of the genre, ultimately asserting its place in the literary canon not just as a form of entertainment but as a profound quest for understanding an evolving world.

As Pynchon reworks the traditional detective fiction framework, it is essential to understand the foundational conventions of the genre. Detective fiction arose in the nineteenth century from early examples such as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* and evolved into a major genre focused on crime solving. The 1920s and her 1930s were a golden age of detective fiction, centred around Agatha Christie, who created characters such as Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple through mysterious plots. Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler gave the genre's prominent examples in the United

States with characters such as Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe. After World War II, the narratives turned more cynical, capturing the era's disillusionment. Throughout its evolution, detective fiction transcended mere entertainment, mirroring the societal shifts, anxieties, and moral dilemmas of its times.

Detective fiction can be described as a narrative concerning a crime and an investigator's attempt to solve it. The plot of detective fiction is expected to have a linear sequence of events that will eventually explain the whole situation, a fact that signifies the genre's end-dominated aspect. Detective fiction has had its conventions since the genre appeared, despite developments regarding the common characteristics and the formation of subgenres. Although there have been sub-branches within the genre, such as whodunit, hardboiled and spy, the pattern remains relatively similar in detective fiction: "the story of crime and the story of investigation" (Todorov 1977: 45). The detective, amateur or professional, is a kind of hidden reader of the story and tries to find clues that may signify the facts regarding the crime. The story's author attempts to hide and manipulate the clues, and the extent of this determines the story's success. Authors attempt to prevent the readers from solving the mystery of the crime before they let them do so (Hühn 1987: 459). However, the web of clues finally makes sense at the end of the story since they are all part of a plan by the author.

The narrative chain of the detective genre is considered "a victory of reason over chaos" (Brooks 1986: 54), a product of Enlightenment thinking. From the genre's beginning, detectives, ranging from Edgar Allan Poe's Auguste Dupin to Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, are equipped with skills ranging from ratiocination and sophisticated intelligence to analytical power that help them reach closure for mysteries. The writer assigns the detective as the triumphant at the end of the story. The detective's role is "to right wrongs by uncovering facts" (Stowe 1989: 570). For the detective, there is nothing that cannot be solved; what matters is time.

Apart from Todorov's and other critics' definitive efforts on the conventions of the genre, William Huntington Wright laid down a more general set of principles under the pseudonym S.S. Van Dine. Van Dine's rules for detective fiction serve as a structured guide to preserve the intellectual essence and logical coherence of narratives within the genre. A crucial element of Van Dine's guidelines is the emphasis on logical deduction and rationality within the narrative. It mandates that the storyline and the detective's investigative process be constructed to allow readers to actively participate in unravelling the mystery, fostering a sense

of engagement and intellectual challenge. Moreover, Van Dine underscores the significance of the detective as the central character, ensuring that the narrative remains focused on the core mystery without deviating into unrelated subplots. The resolution of the mystery, particularly the revelation of the culprit, is to be facilitated through reasoned deduction rather than reliance on random coincidences or unexplained occurrences. When juxtaposed with postmodernist or metaphysical detective fiction, however, many of the principles dominant in the traditional detective genre and the linear trajectory of the detective's infallibility start to blur.

Postmodern Reworking of the Detective Genre

The emphasis on temporality and coherence is especially questionable when considering the characteristics of postmodernist fiction. It could be said that postmodern writers such as Thomas Pynchon and Jorge Luis Borges find the genre attractive because they can perceive the authority established by the detective as something that can and should be overthrown. With the intrusion of postmodern literature into the detective genre, traditional detective stories and conventions are challenged by what is called postmodern or metaphysical detective fiction. The present study uses two terms interchangeably. It was Michael Holquist who, in his article titled "Whodunit and Other Questions: Meta-physical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction" (1971), described postmodern version of detective stories as metaphysical detective stories.

Metaphysical detective fiction transcends the traditional boundaries of crime narratives by infusing them with philosophical and occasionally supernatural themes. This subgenre eschews the conventional focus on solving a crime and delves into profound existential inquiries. Resolutions, if present, tend to be ambiguous or incomplete, thus inviting the audience to contemplate the narrative's broader philosophical implications. The structure of these stories is often sophisticated and non-linear, featuring narrators whose reliability is uncertain, thereby providing a thorough examination of the concepts of reality and existence. A metaphysical detective story:

> "Parodies or subverts traditional detective story conventions – such as narrative closure and the detective's role as a surrogate reader – with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot" (Merivale & Sweeney 1999: 2).

The central characters in metaphysical detective fiction often set on journeys beyond simple crime-solving. They try to answer deep existential questions about reality, knowledge, self, and the essence of being human. In this genre, the path of investigation might not always conclude with clear-cut answers, mirroring the enigmatic and complex nature of life. This

literary form expands the scope of traditional mysteries, employing the detective narrative to examine life's complexities.

Accordingly, the main difference between conventional and postmodern or metaphysical detective fiction is that the latter is not end-dominated; that is, it is "not concerned to have a neat ending in which all the questions are answered" (Holquist 1971: 153). In contrast, at the end of these fictions, the reader -and the detective- may have more to answer than he had at the beginning. Postmodern detective stories depart from the conventions of classical detective stories, but "their telos is the lack of telos, their plot consists in the calculated absence of plot" (Holquist 1971: 153). Furthermore, Holquist's statement (1971), "If, in the detective story, death must be solved, in the new metaphysical detective story it is life which must be solved" (155), speaks to the genre's deeper existential exploration. Unlike traditional detective fiction, where the goal is to solve the mystery of death or crime, metaphysical detective fiction aims to unravel the complexities and mysteries of life itself, exploring philosophical and existential questions that do not necessarily have clear answers. Thus, the focus shifts from solving a concrete crime to navigating the ambiguities and uncertainties of existence and reality. This idea contrasts with Western habits of epistemology: seeking reasonable knowledge and reaching closure, benchmarks of traditional detective fiction. Thomas Pynchon's novels align with this specific subgenre of detective fiction.

Parody

Even though detective fiction has a generic formula that remains largely unchanged, it still attracts readers without being exhausted as a genre, mainly because of writers' skilful and playful use of mystery and suspense in their stories. Among several other reasons, one could be the revitalization of the genre with parody. Postmodern detective stories go hand in hand with parody to challenge the established notions in detective conventions. However, they can contribute to the "renovation" of this "predominantly humorless genre" by bringing humour (Paravisini & Yorio 1987: 181). Oxford English Dictionary defines parody as follows:

> "[a] composition in prose or verse in which the characteristic turns of thought and phrase in an author or class of authors are imitated in such a way as to make them appear ridiculous, especially by applying them to ludicrously inappropriate subjects; an imitation of a work more or less closely odelled on the original, but so turned as to produce a ridiculous effect" (1989: 247).

Oxford's definition can be perceived as an understatement, as the prefix 'para' has more to connote. Etymologically, parody comes from a Greek word, *parodia*, meaning 'counter-song.'

However, the prefix para also has a neglected meaning: 'beside.' It is a "double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something at once inside a domestic economy and outside it, something simultaneously this side of the boundary line, threshold, or margin, and at the same time beyond it" (Miller 1977: 441). This suggests "an accord or intimacy instead of a contrast" regarding the term's meaning (Hutcheon 1985: 32). Similarly, Hutcheon argues that "parody is repetition, but repetition that includes difference; it is limitation with critical ironic distance, whose irony can cut both ways". Parody is "more than just textual comparison" (Hutcheon 1985: 34) and serves the parodied text as it crystallizes the conventions using repetition and difference. Many can consider it a distinct genre, but parody is crucial in nourishing the detective genre.

In her study of parody and metafiction, Margaret Rose (1979) indicates that "when the formal possibilities of a specific genre appear to have lost their function, -i.e., when techniques and structures have grown stale— the genre can gain new life by parodying the older forms and stretching them beyond their former limits" (59). Thus, parody offers two texts in one: the parodic text and the parodied text. Having two languages, two points of view and two styles, the parodic text provides a fresh way of perceiving the original. This refreshment may contribute to the infamous critical reception of the detective genre. The high modernist sensibility has often seen detective fiction as devoid of literary merit, simplistic, and unworthy of reading. In his article titled "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd," Edward Wilson, referring to Agatha Christie's work *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), states that "with so many fine books to be read, so much to be studied and known, there is no need to bore ourselves with this rubbish" (1944: 39-40). According to Todorov (1977), "Detective fiction has its norms; to develop them is also to disappoint them: to improve upon detective fiction is to write 'literature'" (43). Postmodern retake of the detective genre can be read in this sense as a tool to improve the genre and makes it one to be considered carefully. Since recognising the original is a primary condition of integral enjoyment, detecting the discrepancy by the reader is crucial for the effectiveness of parodic work. The vision or perspective of the writer who parodies the formulaic work observed in the texts reinforces the pleasure inherent in the original work.

It can be suggested that metaphysical detective fiction "uses parody primarily to foreground the implicit metaphysical dimension of the classical detective story" (Bényei 1995: 93). Through the occasional use of parody, this genre highlights the more profound, often overlooked questions that lie beneath the surface of the detective story structure. While a classical detective story might present a puzzle to be solved, thereby restoring order to a chaotic

world, a metaphysical detective story might question the possibility of knowing any objective truth, undermining the very foundation of the detective story. In this respect, parody is crucial in Pynchon's two novels.

The Crying of Lot 49 and *Inherent Vice*

A key figure in postmodern American literature, Thomas Pynchon plays with generic conventions, characters and the detective genre. Pynchon draws parallels to Owen's (1997) views regarding postmodern detective stories: "the postmodern detective story seeks not to evade or eliminate echoes of its genre's traditions; rather, it embraces the traditional, then turns it right on its head" (73). Pynchon created postmodern detective novels that are different from the conventional, traditional works of the detective genre and arguably function as a foil to them. That is to say, the story may begin with epistemological motives before shifting to an ontological quest, which does not mean an end to the detective story; rather it is a kind of transformation of it. The end of this new output signals a new beginning: asking questions regarding life and existence rather than a story one may not get the pleasure out if read a second time. This is a key point regarding Pynchon's reworking of the genre and the novels' status as metaphysical or postmodern detective stories.

Pynchon's play with the features of the detective genre reminds the reader of the conventions, creating a postmodernist dialogue. In *Inherent Vice*, Doc, to some extent, shares and differs from the characteristics of traditional detectives in this respect. Pynchon subverts the detective's eccentricity through his postmodern detective fiction, in other words, his intended deviation of their attributes from the generic norms. Characters like Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot have unique talents and methods which distinguish them from the average person. Their eccentricity manifests itself in their high intellect, observation skills and their focus on the crime. They do meticulous work, analysing the trivial details, and using logic and deductive skills to reveal the mystery. However, Pynchon's detectives exhibit a different kind of eccentricity, characterized by less structured and more chaotic patterns of investigators compared to their predecessors. Private investigator Larry "Doc" Sportello investigates the disappearance of his former girlfriend, Shasta Fay Hepworth. Being a hippie and a drug addict, Doc resembles Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes regarding the latter's bohemian soul. However, a significant difference lies between Sherlock and Doc regarding the nature of drug use. Doc uses marijuana while on the job to boost his chance of clarifying the case, while Sherlock's off-duty use of cocaine aims to escape from the "dull routine of existence" (Doyle

2006: 98) as he finds it "transcendentally stimulating and clarifying to the mind (Doyle 2006: 97). Dr Watson occasionally warns Holmes regarding the use of cocaine, and he is, therefore, against Sherlock's habit:

> "Why should you, for a mere passing pleasure, risk the loss of those great powers with which you have been endowed? Remember that I speak not only as one comrade to another, but as a medical man to one for whose constitution he is to some extent answerable" (Doyle 2006: 97-98).

Fortunately, Dr Watson is successful in his endeavour, as is evident in his declaration in "The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter":

> "For years I had gradually weaned him from that drug mania which had threatened once to check his remarkable career. Now I knew that under ordinary conditions, he no longer craved for this artificial stimulus" (Doyle 2006: 97-98).

Dr Watson once worries about Sherlock's use of drugs as they will harm his authentic capabilities regarding his job. In contrast, Pynchon's detective, Doc, perceives drug use as an integral aspect of his profession. When confronted with challenges, Doc resorts to drugs in an effort to decipher the enigma at hand.

> "Doc turned over Shasta's postcard now and stared at the picture on the front. It was a photo taken underwater of the ruins of some ancient city—broken columns and arches and collapsed retaining walls. The water was supernaturally clear and seemed to emit a vivid blue-green light. Fish, what Doc guessed you'd call tropical, were swimming back and forth. It all seemed familiar. He looked for a photo credit, a copyright date, a place of origin. Blank. He rolled a joint and lit up and considered. This had to be a message from someplace besides a Pacific Island whose name he couldn't pronounce" (Pynchon 2010: 167).

In the quotation above, what Doc thinks the revelation from the postcard unsurprisingly leads to a dead end. Doc believes that frequent marijuana use and occasional experimentation with substances like LSD can provide him with unconventional insights not readily available to ordinary detectives or investigators. This unconventional approach highlights that altered states of consciousness are seen as a means of accessing unorthodox perspectives, setting him apart from the typical methods associated with investigative work. This deliberate narrative choice serves to intricately complicate the process of uncovering clues. The portrayal of a detective resorting to substance use to enhance his focus represents an ironic inversion, a parodic reinterpretation of an established convention regarding the private eye having total concentration while they are after clues.

Doc's use of drugs to enhance his awareness of 'reality' may be seen as an element nourishing the parodic aspect of the detective. Regarding the awareness that drugs provide, it

can be noted that English author and intellectual Aldous Huxley demonstrated an enthusiasm regarding halogenic drugs' capability for philosophical and spiritual exploration. Huxley's The Doors of Perception (1954) details his experiences with mescaline and discusses its potential for spiritual enlightenment. As Hartogsohn argues, "Huxley used hallucinogenic drug experiences as the basis for an articulate philosophical exploration-" (Hartogsohn 2020: 70). Aldous Huxley describes his psychedelic experience with mescaline as revealing a fundamental, unfiltered reality. He felt he saw the world as Adam did at creation, witnessing "the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence" (Huxley 1954: 17). Huxley theorized that mescaline bypasses the brain's 'reducing valve, a concept inspired by Bergson's philosophy. He suggested that ordinarily, the brain filters the vast realm of possible consciousness, channelling experiences into biologically useful ones. This view posits that psychedelics could unlock a broader, more profound consciousness beyond everyday perception. He influenced the term 'psychedelic' and advocated for the controlled use of such substances amongst the intellectual elite. His ideas impacted the cultural approach to psychedelics in the 1960s and 70s, despite his caution (Hall & Farrell 2022: 1811). LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs were quite extensive and uncontrolled in contrast to Huxley's intention and experiences. Pynchon's Doc is a fictional figure of the 1960s and 70s America, where drug use was quite widespread and using and obtaining drugs was remarkably straightforward. This may have made drug use and its consequences an integral part of his life and profession. It can be interpreted that Pynchon's parodic intention involved having his protagonist administer these substances during his investigative work, thus adding depth to the character and alluding to Conan Doyle's Sherlock.

By blending the socio-political climate of the period into the narrative, Pynchon emphasizes how the counterculture and widespread drug use affected the detective's lifestyle and methods. Pynchon's complex storytelling can manifest itself in a narrative that departs from the infallible detective archetype by delving into Doc, a hippie character with flaws and inconsistencies. The narrative may move through altered states of consciousness, using a non-linear style to draw readers into the protagonist's changing experiences. In addition, Pynchon is able to inject parody and irony into the story, using the detective's substance use to provide both comic relief and critical insight, creating a well-rounded character navigating moral ambiguities and social changes that challenge the ethics of his profession. Viewed through this

lens, Pynchon's character would not only mirror Holmes, but also emerge as a distinct, richly drawn figure representing the turbulent spirit of Pynchon's time playfully.

A conventional detective is typically expected to possess exceptional powers of observation and a highly developed capacity for solving mysteries. Van Dine states as one of the rules in detective stories, "the method of murder, and the means of detecting it, must be rational and scientific" (1928: n.p). In this context, Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot exhibit distinct styles in collecting and interpreting clues, ultimately arriving at conclusions through sophisticated methodologies. However, *Inherent Vice*'s Doc does not measure up to the qualifications of his esteemed predecessors and thus the rules of Van Dine. Doc's suitability for an investigative role is questionable, as he lacks the traits typically sought in such a position, in stark contrast with the expectations. This inadequacy becomes even more pronounced by the challenges posed by the enigmatic entity known as Gold Fang. This subject of ambiguity makes it almost impossible for Doc to understand what is happening around him. Gold Fang alternates between various identities, including an Indo-Chinese heroin smuggling cartel, a maritime vessel, a group of dentists not paying income taxes, or even an upscale neo-Buddhist commune. During interviews with individuals associated with Gold Fang, Doc takes minimalistic and irreverent notes that offer little assistance in solving the case. This deliberate choice by Pynchon underscores his belief that the conventional notions of consistent clues and rational explanations have no place within the narrative. Pynchon appears to suggest the obsolescence of epistemological solutions by employing the ironic juxtaposition of a hippie—with little or no discipline—in the context of solving a mystery, a task traditionally characterized by meticulous examination of clues and the imposition of order through resolution.

Detective stories often also put the lead character in a complicated series of connections between different things in seemingly unrelated plot strands that eventually come up with the closure. This might be regarded as another contrast with Van Dine's principle that "the culprit must be determined by logical deductions —not by accident or coincidence or unmotivated confession" (1928: n.p). *Inherent Vice* is set up that way, but in many cases, the interweaving is no more than coincidence.

> "What goes around may come around, but it never ends up exactly the same place, you ever notice? Like a record on a turntable, all it takes is one groove's difference and the universe can be on into a whole 'nother song" (Pynchon 2010: 334).

Doc usually ends up even more confused than when he began his strange quest, including a distinct variety of social layers ranging from drug dealers to the rich. Ultimately, it's all rather

mundane, with much of the paranoia being a product of weed-soaked imaginations. From time to time, Doc feels the immense burden of his 'task', which never ceases to end up in a deadlock.

> "Doc didn't fall asleep till close to dawn and didn't really wake up till they were going over the Cajon Pass, and it felt like he'd just been dreaming about climbing a more-than-geographical ridgeline, up out of some worked-out and picked-over territory, and descending into new terrain along some great definitive slope it would be more trouble than he might be up to turn and climb back over again" (Pynchon 2010: 255).

In addition to his inadequacy as a detective, Doc's habitual consumption of marijuana, regardless of his responsibilities as an observer and assessor as well as his hippie character raises questions about the overarching purpose of his investigations. Pynchon may be implying that the essence of investigation is not confined to resolving deaths or crimes but extends to an exploration of life itself. The character's seeming distractions and idiosyncrasies might be a literary device to reflect the chaotic and often nonsensical reality that life presents, with the implication that understanding life's complexities might be as crucial, if not more so, than solving a case or answering a question definitively. In this way, the narrative questions the very essence of purposeful investigation, suggesting it could be an existential exploration, a journey through the layered fabric of life, where understanding oneself and the societal constructs may be as significant as the pursuit of truth in a conventional sense. This sentiment aligns with the sentiment expressed by Douglas Adams' detective Dirk Gently, who once remarked, "the only thing which prevented me from seeing the solution was the trifling fact that it was completely impossible" (181). Pynchon's narratives echo Dirk's scepticism regarding the chances of reaching solutions. Gently finds the remedy for the impossibility of the solution in a forced interconnectedness of all things while Pynchon's characters often find that every answer leads to more questions, and certainty remains elusive. Adams and Pynchon give the impression that the quest for knowledge and understanding is full of often insurmountable obstacles. For Dirk Gently, the impossibility is a playful challenge to be overcome with lateral thinking and an acceptance of the absurd. For Pynchon, impossibility can represent the overwhelming complexity of the world and the futility of trying to find definitive answers.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, however, Oedipa's eccentricity or unconventionality manifests in her being a stereotypical 1960s housewife with limited social engagement. The dual departure from conventional norms concerning the detective's persona, namely Oedipa being female and a housewife, serves to amplify the impact of Pynchon's parodic undertaking of the genre. Oedipa Maas is "a parodic everywoman of 1960s middle-class America" (Duyfhuizen

1991:80) The novel's opening with her participation in a Tupperware party signifies her specific social status as a middle-class housewife but simultaneously reinforces the peculiarity of the case. The juxtaposition of Oedipa's seemingly mundane social activities with her entanglement in a complex web of conspiracies and mysteries underscores Pynchon's ironic examination of social norms and the detective genre. Pynchon effectively subverts the conventions of the genre with an unlikely detective figure.

In Oedipa's case, the clues are strangely interconnected, but the more clues she confronts, the more the mystery heightens, a fact contrasting with the patterns of detective novels. Like in Doc's example, the clues make it much more elusive than the beginning, instead of clarifying the case. Edward Mendelson explains this clearly as follows:

> "The simple becomes complex, responsibility becomes not isolated but universal, the guilty locus turns out to be everywhere, and individual clues are unimportant because neither clues nor deduction can lead to the solution" (2003: 21).

This may be interpreted as Pynchon's problematizing and parodying the detective quests. Oedipa epitomizes the postmodernist quest for truth in a world abundant with signs and symbols that resist singular interpretations. Her journey mirrors the philosophical discourse of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, where truth is not an absolute but rather a construct shaped by societal influences and language. Foucault (1980) suggested, "Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint" (131), a perspective that resonates with Oedipa's encounters with the intertwined systems of communication, power, and control. Also, Derrida's (1967) assertion, "There is nothing outside of the text" (158) parallels Oedipa's experience as she deciphers layers of meaning within the texts and symbols she confronts, suggesting that her reality is inescapably mediated through these constructs. In the context of Pynchon's narrative, Oedipa's quest is reflective of a society grappling with the shifting grounds of knowledge and the instability of meaning, emblematic of the postmodern condition. Oedipa's realization of her search's futility is among her most prominent problems:

> "Each clue that comes is supposed to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence. But then she wondered if the gemlike "clues" were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night" (Pynchon 2006: 95).

The passage illustrates Oedipa's existential dilemma. She is caught between valuing the clues that she painstakingly collects —which have a certain allure and seem to promise permanence— and the realization that these clues may ultimately be inadequate. They could be a means of compensating for her inability to find a single, transformative truth that would cut

through the ambiguity. Oedipa's conclusion regarding the case is more complicated than the case itself. She has four possibilities at the end:

> "Either you have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream […] Or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you […] 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. Those, now that she was looking at them, she saw to be the alternatives. Those symmetrical four" (Pynchon 2006: 141).

Regarding the Oedipa's condition, it is fair to think that a potential reasonable solution for the traditional detective is profoundly challenged. Instead, given Oedipa's frequent engagement with alcohol, it becomes increasingly challenging for her to ascertain the authenticity of the provided clues. Oedipa's quest for the underground postal system or any other mystery is transformed into a seek for an exit from the void she has been in:

> "She didn't like any of them, but hoped she was mentally ill; that that's all it was. That night she sat for hours, too numb even to drink, teaching herself to breathe in a vacuum. For this, oh God, was the void. There was nobody who could help her. Nobody in the world. They were all on something, mad, possible enemies, dead" (Pynchon 2006: 141).

Unlike traditional detectives who are expected to at least start solving the puzzle towards the end of their investigation, Oedipa, as she gathers more information, not only drifts away from the resolution, but also finds herself in a dead end within a void. As Oedipa's scepticism deepens into paranoia, her journey resembles less a journey toward the truth and more a descent into a labyrinth where every clue leads not to answers, but to more complex enigmas, leaving her encircled by doubts rather than certainties. Detective narratives often entail a certain degree of scepticism, which aids in the unravelling of criminal mysteries. However, in the case of Oedipa, this essential scepticism undergoes a notable blend with pervasive paranoia, which reduces the detective's capacity for effective agency.

> "Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth… Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. Either Oedipa in the orbiting of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy of America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only was[sic] she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia" (Pynchon 2006: 150).

When contextualized within the backdrop of the novel, set in the landscape of 1960s America, the manifestation of paranoid behaviour in the novel becomes less accidental, serving as a poignant reflection of the era's prevailing atmosphere. This particular decade was apparently characterized by a heightened atmosphere of pervasive paranoia, owing to the prevailing Cold War tensions and a multitude of enigmatic and suspicious events that occurred during this period, such as the Red Scare, Cuban missile crisis, assassinations of John F. Kennedy and other political figures. These events shaped the characters and events within the narrative, echoing the fears and anxieties of the time.

In Pynchon's magnum opus, *Gravity of Rainbow*, the narrator claims that paranoia is "nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that everything is connected, everything in Creation, a secondary illumination—not yet blindingly One, but at least connected, and perhaps a route In" (703). The omnipresence of a seemingly all-powerful system might reasonably induce feelings of paranoia. Pynchon, whose literary reputation often hinges on his portrayal of paranoia-filled realms, presents characters having the belief in far-reaching, sinister plots that dictate their fates. In Pynchon's work, paranoia is described not as a delusion but as an early phase of realizing that "everything is connected" in the universe—a first step to understand the grand scheme. This perspective implies that the paranoid individual is on the verge of uncovering a hidden truth and possibly finding a way into the heart of the supposed conspiracy. Another possibility would be yet another complication on the process of finding the culprit in a detective fiction. While Pynchon politically underlies the significance of paranoia in the turbulent 1960s, he further contributes to the parodic approach embedded in his works through his use of paranoia. When the distinction between fact and fiction, reality and delusion, suspicion and paranoia, becomes indistinct, what persists are the uncharted domains—territories unsuitable for a detective's inquiry. And that is a prominent parodic feature of *The Crying of Lot 49* as well as *Inherent Vice*.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Thomas Pynchon's approach to detective fiction through *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice* offers a postmodern examination of the genre. In addition to using traditional elements of detective fiction, Pynchon twists these elements to introduce a layer that goes beyond solving the traditional crime mystery. His narratives, which have a rich background regarding the social, cultural and political environment of the 1960s and 1970s, examine existence, knowledge and the human condition in more depth. Pynchon challenges the reader's expectations and subverts the basic rules of the genre with the use of parody. The novels do not

offer a linear progress towards resolution, questions the infallibility of the detective, and presents mysteries that often resist definitive solutions.

In doing so, Pynchon reflects the concerns of the period marked by counterculture movements, political paranoia, and existential dread, and captures the spirit of the times in a way that both critiques and pays homage to the detective genre. On one hand, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice* owe much to tradition; they make the reader conscious of the conventions. However, these rules can be played, challenged, re-evaluated and parodied. Longstanding binaries such as real versus imaginary, true versus false are distorted in Pynchon's postmodern detective stories. That leads to a questioning of the fundamentals one has depended on for the attempt to understand phenomena surrounding individuals' lives.

The characters Pynchon creates, Oedipa Maas and Doc Sportello, are far from traditional detectives. As much as they are symbols of the cultural and existential quest of their time, they are also seekers of truth in their own realities. Their journey, riddled with uncertainty not only ridicules the conventions of the genre, but also serves to delve into the deeper philosophical questions that lie at the heart of human inquiry. The story's complexity and inclusion of so many characters can be regarded as a part of parody. Oedipa and Doc can be considered postmodern metaphysical investigators since their principal activity does not result in finding answers for whodunit questions, but rather reading and interpreting the texts, which are composed of free-floating signifiers. This makes *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice* parodies of the detective genre, whose foundational element is the idea that an absolute resolution or an objective truth which can be reached.

Pynchon's works reflect the versatility and adaptability of detective fiction, a genre that has long adhered certain rules. His work invites the reader to rethink the nature of truth and the role of detective stories in a rapidly changing world. Pynchon's parodic take on detective fiction not only provides the reader not with a postmodern look upon the traditional detective genre but also reminds the futility of the quest for any truth. Filled with parody and rich in cultural and philosophical insight, Pynchon's metaphysical detective stories underscore the genre's capacity to evolve and reflect the complexities of the period, ultimately acknowledging the genre's place in the literary canon as a form of both entertainment and quest.

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