

Oedipa Maas's Struggle against Existential Nihilism in *The Crying of Lot 49*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the journey of protagonist Oedipa Maas in Thomas Pynchon's novella *The Crying of Lot 49*, specifically through the lens of her resistance to existential nihilism. Her development throughout the novel provides the structure for this essay, which follows her as she numbs herself to avoid meaninglessness, sensitizes herself to fabricate meaning, becomes conscious of this fabrication, and collapses into and subsequently overcomes existential nihilism. Remedios Varo's triptych, *Bordando el manto terrestre*, acts as an extended metaphor in this sense, highlighting Oedipa's attempt to escape her symbolic tower and illuminate the void around her. The views of prominent existential philosophers and writers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard also bring the book's themes into focus. As Oedipa uses her newfound sensitivity to weave a world of countless connections and fantastic conspiracies, her arc follows her absurd quest to construct order in her world and thus avoid the anguishing existential nihilist crisis of facing meaninglessness or nonexistence.

Since the dawn of humanity, we have been asking the big questions: why are we here, what is our significance, and what will our joy, pain, and suffering mean when we're gone? In the twentieth century, postmodernist writers had an answer: existential nihilism, the belief that life is valueless and posits a crisis between purposeless suffering and nonexistence. Viewing *The Crying of Lot 49* through this lens illuminates the journey of its protagonist, Oedipa Maas, as she sensitizes herself and struggles to find meaning in a meaningless world, resisting the existential nihilism suffocating her. As she uses her newfound sensitivity to weave a world of countless connections and fantastic conspiracies, Oedipa's arc follows her quest to create order and avoid the anguishing existential nihilist crisis of facing meaninglessness or nonexistence. The story concludes with her eventual collapse into, and subsequent overcoming of, existential nihilism.

Originally published in 1966, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* follows the journey of 1960s housewife Oedipa Maas as she leaves her insulated, insignificant life in the town of Kinneret to execute the will of her former lover, the late Pierce Inverarity. She ventures to San Narciso, where she discovers clues that hint at the existence of the Tristero, a vast, anti-government conspiracy involving private postage, black-clad assassins, forged postal stamps, and more. Desperate to make sense of the world around her and barraged by vague clues and cryptic conversations, Oedipa investigates, speaking to countless people and following endless leads in a dogged attempt to uncover the truth. This leads her on a journey of self-discovery and initiates her struggle against existential nihilism.

The ultimate metaphor for Oedipa's arc as she attempts to escape her existential crisis is the 1961 painting *Bordando el manto terrestre* by Spanish surrealist artist Remedios Varo. Born in Spain in 1903, Varo spent her life traveling around Europe, fleeing conflict after conflict, including the Spanish Civil War and the German occupation of Paris. Her paintings explore spiritual and psychological journeys, culminating in her most personally reflective work, *Bordando el manto terrestre*.¹ The triptych depicts a group of young maidens trapped in a tower amid a vast nothingness, weaving golden cloth that flows out of the windows. This cloth becomes the world, and it projects the only light in a vast, gray void.² Oedipa's world closely parallels this scene. The stoic-faced, dark-robed figure watching over the maidens in the painting echoes Oedipa's musing that "Such a captive maiden . . . realizes that her tower . . . [is] like her ego only incidental: that what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all."³ Several other times, she laments that she's trapped in a tower—in her marriage and in her life. "She had looked down at her feet and known, then, because of a painting, that what she stood on had only been woven together a couple thousand miles away in her own tower."⁴

Thus, she begins her journey like the maidens; trapped in a tower, going through the repetitive motions of her life just as the women weaving in the painting. Her marriage to her husband, Mucho, is one-sided and unhappy, and her daily responsibilities confine her. Oedipa spends her life in Kinneret doing mundane tasks like attending Tupperware parties, going grocery shopping, and making dinner for her unfaithful husband. Her days are monotonous and repetitive, blurring together. "Through the rest of the afternoon . . . she wondered, wondered, shuffling back through a fat deckful of days which seemed (wouldn't she be the first to admit it?) more or less identical. . ."⁵ A sense of pointlessness and entrapment in an unpleasant, mundane existence permeates every aspect of her life. This resonates deeply with existential nihilism which, according to existentialist scholar Alan Pratt, posits that "existence itself—all action, suffering, and feeling—is ultimately senseless and empty."⁶ Thus, Oedipa feels insignificant in a vast and complex world, her suffering occurring for no reason at all. As Oedipa drives down a highway in San Narciso, comparing the road to a "hypodermic needle . . . nourishing the mainliner L.A., keeping it happy, coherent, protected from pain . . ." the narrator comments: "But were Oedipa some single melted crystal of urban horse, L.A., really, would be no less turned on for her absence."⁷ If she didn't exist, the world itself would change very little. In describing existential nihilism's view of individual life, Pratt draws on the writings of Empedocles, an early Greek philosopher, who asserts "'the

life of mortals is so mean a thing as to be virtually un-life.”⁸ The life and suffering of Oedipa Maas, a mere mortal with a mundane life, mean nothing in the face of the vast world around her.

As a result, Oedipa has numbed herself to avoid the anguish of meaningless suffering, her lack of response to the world around her leading to existential depersonalization. According to existential philosopher Steven Crowell, “the self is not something simply given . . . but is something *made* or constituted through my choices and commitments. My inclinations and instincts, for instance, are not brute facts but . . . are present in my experience ever only as opportunities or challenges that take on meaning—become *mine*—through my identification with or refusal of them.”⁹ Heidegger, as well, posits that the self is created only through our responses to the world around us, and thus how we choose to live determines who we are; or, in Sartre’s later writing, existence precedes essence.¹⁰ Thus, Oedipa’s unresponsiveness to the world around her saves her from creating a “self,” allowing her to stay numb and oblivious. Instead of weaving golden cloth or facing the void, she simply stays in her tower and steadfastly refuses to look out the window. “Empty-commodity signs” such as pop songs and Muzak, which “require no existential engagement” and are “‘safe,’ emotionally insulating, non-threatening,”¹¹ ultimately enable her to grow detached without any consequences, unhappy but comfortable in this insulated world.

However, it is Oedipa’s decision to numb herself, not the insulated nature of her surroundings, which ultimately saves her from existential engagement, an unresponsiveness and existential depersonalization that shields and numbs her. As a result, she lists the many details of her life impassively, with very little commentary or investment in what is happening. “There had hung the sense of buffering, insulation, she had noticed the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix.”¹² As a result, she reacts very little or not at all as the world goes on around her, her detachment and aloofness acting as defense mechanisms as she refuses to respond to the challenges that come her way. When she meets for lunch with her lawyer, Roseman, to discuss the will, “Roseman tried to play footsie with her under the table. She was wearing boots, and couldn’t feel much of anything. So, insulated, she decided not to make any fuss.”¹³ Her apathy and inaction in this scene represent her withdrawal from almost everything that happens to her. As our self is created by our reactions to what happens around us, in becoming unresponsive, Oedipa has eschewed her “self” and sealed herself in existential depersonalization. She functions like a robot, going through the motions and only half present. She even rejects the idea of sensitivity, the antithesis to her numbness, when she tells her husband Mucho, as he laments about his own suffering, “‘You’re too sensitive.’”¹⁴ In this way, she sees sensitivity and the resulting creation of a self as a problem or a source of misery, and depersonalization as the solution. While contemporary fiction scholar J. Kerry Grant asserts that, “Given Oedipa’s later attempt to discover whether she is enough of a ‘sensitive’ to make Nefastis’s Maxwell’s demon machine work, there is a certain irony to this charge,”¹⁵ its significance does not stop there. Even more than creating irony, this line reveals how Oedipa changes after she leaves Kinneret. Whereas in a meaningless world, sensitivity was the problem, in her new world hopeful of meaning, sensitivity is the solution. According to Grand Valley State University English professor emerita Lois Tyson, adopting this mindset is how she is able to move “from existential blindness and bad faith to existential awareness and engagement.”¹⁶

Her decision to execute Pierce's will, and her subsequent departure from Kinneret, mark the beginning of this journey.

After she leaves Kinneret and sheds her numbness, Oedipa uses her newfound sensitivity to transform chaos into order, establishing her existential "self" and using Nietzsche's championed pursuit of insight to overcome the nihilism and meaninglessness that threatens her. "She would give them order, she would create constellations. . . ." ¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche names "three ways of transcending the plan of fundamentally animal existence," or a higher humanity that he claims is the true path to meaning—creativity, self-mastery, and insight. ¹⁸ Oedipa pursues insight. She tries to make herself into one of those "rarest and most valuable of exemplars" that Nietzsche speaks of—the finders of the truth, the readers of the Word, the ones who glimpse the light and can lead others down the right path. ¹⁹ Various characters in the novel, including Yoyodyne employee Stanley Koteks and Berkeley inventor John Nefastis, call this a "sensitive," someone who can take in massive amounts of information and make sense of it. ²⁰ This is the purpose, the goal, the drive, that ultimately pulls her up; her pursuit of meaning itself is what ultimately gives her meaning. "If it was really Pierce's attempt to leave an organized something behind after his own annihilation, it was part of her duty, wasn't it, to bestow life on what had persisted, to try to be what Driblette was, the dark machine in the center of the planetarium, to bring the estate into stelliferous Meaning, all in a soaring dome around her?" However, the narrator laments, "If only so much didn't stand in her way: her deep ignorance of law, of investment, of real estate, ultimately of the dead man himself . . . she wrote, Shall I project a world? If not project then at least flash some arrow on the dome to skitter among constellations and trace out your Dragon, Whale, Southern Cross. Anything might help." ²¹ This echoes Nietzsche's musings on "to what extent one can endure to live in a meaningless world because one organizes a small part of it oneself." ²² Thus, she resolves to at least organize as much as possible, still upset that she cannot see more. Her "self" becomes this pursuit of truth, of "constellations," of ordering the world around her and shining light on whatever parts of the darkness she can, no matter how small.

Oedipa's response to the fictional play *The Courier's Tragedy* demonstrates this newfound purpose. The play itself is an embodiment of absurdity and horror, nonsensical snippets of Jacobean plays piled on top of each other, where graphic suffering and death occur in almost every scene. The purpose behind this suffering appears at first unknown, at least to the outside eye. However, within this parade of tragedy, Oedipa latches onto small, recognizable details that connect to the real world outside of the play, hinting at a greater purpose: the black-clad assassins, the bones made into ink, and most of all, the mention of Tristero. ²³ *The Courier's Tragedy* is a metaphor for her own life and the lives of those around her—her emotionally scarred husband, her insane shrink, and everyone else she sees suffering for no apparent reason. By finding evidence of a greater purpose within the play, she finds evidence of a greater purpose within life itself. Believing this gives Oedipa and her life meaning, since she alone can unravel this mystery. It gives her purpose, importance, and meaning, allowing her to truly be a messenger of insight. The seemingly empty world filled with random suffering—Why did Pierce choose me to be executor? Why does my husband cheat on me? Why do terrible things keep happening?—suddenly

becomes meaningful, and each plight she suffers becomes purposeful and explained. She creates her own understanding of this life and why everything happens, fully establishing her instinct to respond to the world and create her “self.” While Grant calls this a “liberation from her Rapunzel-like life in Kinneret” that “exposes her to the possibility of revelation, sensitizing her to the potential existence” of meaning,²⁴ Oedipa still has not yet been fully liberated from her tower. She has been freed from her lack of sensitivity and her life in Kinneret, but from the perspective of Remedios Varo’s painting, she is still trapped in her own tower trying to create meaning to fill the void around her. Collado-Rodríguez writes, “Varo depicts some girls who are actually embroidering Earth’s mantle from their tower; that is to say, they are projecting the world, a notion that anticipates Oedipa’s self-reflection many pages later.”²⁵ Thus, just like the women in *Bordando el manto terrestre*, Oedipa begins to weave a fantastic tapestry of connections to fill the gray void around her. She constructs order without realizing its fragility, insisting that the world must have some sort of inherent significance that she can access. As she wrote in her journal, “Shall I project a world?”²⁶ In this way, Oedipa has taken her existential crisis—meaningless suffering or death—and created a third option: to fabricate meaning.

However, this optimistic streak does not last long, as Oedipa’s sensitivity soon spirals out of control and inundates her with an overabundance of information, so much so that she is unable to process it and it becomes unintelligible. Like Mucho in the beginning of the book, Oedipa has become too sensitive, leading her to take in every detail and every possibility until she is exhausted and overwhelmed. “‘It’s over,’ she said, ‘they’ve saturated me. From here on I’ll only close them out.’”²⁷ This recalls the beginning of the story, where she numbs herself to the rest of the world; however, instead of blocking out her own empty existence, she’s blocking out the overwhelming fullness of the world around her. She has found so much evidence of a deeper significance that it becomes inaccessible. Just as Pynchon’s puns, according to Frank Palmeri, “signal our position between inaccessible fullness and profane emptiness of meaning,”²⁸ the very conflict itself places Oedipa on the line between these binaries while she searches for a “position between.”²⁹ In this way, she has embarked on a quest to find a middle position in a dichotomy: the world as empty and purposeless or so full of hidden significance that it becomes overwhelming and incomprehensible. The complex nature of the possible evidence she finds is, in the end, beyond her understanding, a concept reminiscent of French philosopher Albert Camus’ notion of absurdity, and his insistence that “the world . . . maintains a total and ‘unreasonable silence’ in the face of our efforts to understand it,”³⁰ whether this means the world is devoid of significance or we simply cannot access it. This is not the first time she has lamented the world’s overcomplexity, as earlier she marveled at a flying hairspray can and wondered if it was possible to predict its erratic and irregular flight path.³¹ The sheer density of information eliminates the possibility of finding meaning even if she happens to be in a world where it exists. Despite the appearance of two choices, neither way leads to enlightenment; she always ends up lost and without an explanation, either due to the world’s true meaninglessness or her inability to understand it. Without a middle ground, every road in this outlook leads back to nihilism.

Thus, she is caught in a binary, not sure of whether life does or does not have value, echoing Nietzsche’s writings on absolutism and a “Yes or No” determination

of overcoming or falling into nihilism. Oedipa's sensitivity has opened her up not only to an overabundance of possible meanings, but also to the true possibility of meaninglessness, what she has been running from this entire time. She learns that her understanding of the world is fragile and only mentally constructed; in her despairing isolation, it now collapses. She recognizes the duality—religious meaning and mundane meaninglessness—surrounding everything in her life, including death. Thinking back to her experience in Vesperhaven House (a San Narciso nursing home), Oedipa faces two outcomes: “. . . either an accommodation reached, in some kind of dignity, with the Angel of Death, or only death and the daily, tedious preparations for it.”³² The end of life could either be religious and meaningful or simply an insignificant and inconvenient end. She finds herself suspended in a dichotomy, “trapped . . . in a systemic necessity to choose between true or false, historically accurate or invented clues.”³³ Her world “has resolved itself into a set of binary opposites, an either/or equilibrium. . . .”³⁴ Every possibility collapses into two diametrically opposed options. She applies this to her quest for enlightenment, wondering to herself whether she has found a true purpose to life or she's simply making it all up. She tells herself:

Either you have stumbled indeed . . . onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream; onto a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating . . . maybe even onto a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise of life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know, and you too, sweetie. Or you are hallucinating it . . . in which case you are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull. . . .”³⁵

Nietzsche warned of this absolutist binary; as Crowell explained, “The key to overcoming nihilism, Nietzsche came to understand, is . . . by coming to understand and freeing ourselves from the (false but seductive) ‘God or bust (“nothing matters”)’ dichotomy, and from the absolutism addiction that disposes one to give up on and disparage anything that does not satisfy the craving for it.”³⁶ Oedipa is then faced with a choice: “So, Nietzsche writes, a genuine philosopher ‘demands of himself a judgment, a Yes or No . . . about life and the value of life,’” and saying no “is what Nietzsche takes the nihilist fundamentally to be doing.”³⁷ Oedipa must decide whether life has value and meaning, or whether it is meaningless; whether she can survive this crisis, or whether she will fall into nihilism. In her complete state of isolation from others and from meaning, “[t]hat night she sat for hours, too numb even to drink, teaching herself to breathe in a vacuum. For this, oh God, was the void.”³⁸ For the first time, she truly stares nihilism in its face, the collapse of her commitments finally exposing her to its possibility. After stripping away her imaginings, she is faced with a void. “Nothingness reveals each individual . . . barred forever from knowing why yet required to invent meaning.”³⁹ And thus, her sensitivity brings her to the anguishing realization that she most feared, that she trapped herself in a numb, insulated life to avoid: that everything—her suffering, her life, and even her death—could be meaningless.

At the beginning of this collapse, Oedipa realizes just how critical this quest has become to her identity; thus, not only her happiness but her entire essence depends on finding meaning. After her midnight walk through San Narciso, where she is barraged by an overabundance of senseless clues and a succession of revelations about death and

destiny, she is lost and afraid, both striving for meaning and terrified of its possibility. A desperate Oedipa returns to Kinneret and confronts her therapist with this dilemma. “‘I came,’ she said, ‘Hoping you could talk me out of a fantasy.’ ‘Cherish it!’ said Hilarius, fiercely. ‘For what else do any of you have? . . . Whatever it is, hold it dear, for when you lose it . . . You begin to cease to be.’”⁴⁰ In this way, by finding and being part of a purpose greater than herself—unraveling Tristero—she has made herself exist. However, as soon as she stops, she falls back into the void, her entire essence collapsing when she realizes that what she has been working toward since leaving Kinneret—shining light, making constellations—could be a lie. Meaninglessness and nonexistence become synonymous. If she fails to create meaning, or some sensible interpretation of the world around her, she loses herself. The pursuit of the Tristero has become her only significance in an otherwise meaningless world. To give it up is to give up herself and, as Hilarius put it, cease to be.

Symbols of “ceasing to be” follow Oedipa throughout her journey, as she slowly begins to lose herself. Death, the void, and nonexistence permeate the story, but Oedipa does not start to take it seriously until she takes a half-drunken midnight walk through San Narciso. She wanders through the city and is given the name tag of another person, Arnold Snarb. She doesn’t object; she allows others to call her by this false name and gets swept along with them.⁴¹ Later in the book, Oedipa insists that Mucho’s boss, Caesar Funch, call her Edna,⁴² an alternative name given to her by Mucho, ironically right after he tells her to “just be [her]self.”⁴³ The request is frustrated and sarcastic, but unlike her previous mindless compliance as Arnold Snarb or simple confusion at being called Edna Mosh, it is a conscious choice. As Couturier writes, “When she cried out to herself ‘Where am I?’, we understand that she really means ‘Who am I?’. It is around this time that Oedipa begins to have doubts about her real name.”⁴⁴ This connects the loss of her name with the loss of her identity, but she loses even more. By eschewing her own name in favor of those given to her by others, such as Arnold Snarb and Edna Mosh, she symbolically loses not only her identity, but also her meaning, and thus, her personal ties to existence. She knowingly recedes once again into depersonalization.

Oedipa has tried to overcome this loss of self just as philosophers have, and her solutions mirror those put forth by Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Both Kierkegaard’s beliefs about God and Heidegger’s views about relationally established identity may be valid solutions to nihilism, but Oedipa is ultimately incapable of attaining either. The elusiveness of God and Oedipa’s failure to make a continuous spiritual or religious connection throughout the book (despite her best efforts as she looks out over California or walks through Vesperhaven House) renders Oedipa unable to make the “leap of faith” that singlehandedly supports Kierkegaard’s solution to nihilism.⁴⁵ While she does make several religious connections throughout the book and brushes up against the possibility of God and religion in many of her musings (repeating the name of God, sensing a “religious instant”⁴⁶), she still falls short of the strength of faith and religiousness necessary to embrace Kierkegaard’s Christian-centered faith.⁴⁷

Oedipa also attempts to overcome nihilism by making social connections with others, drawing on Heidegger’s belief that the unique condition of human existence—referred to as Dasein—is a “social creature” that cannot exist in isolation; however, isolation is exactly where Oedipa finds herself, and she subsequently falls into despair.⁴⁸ Heidegger writes that the self can only be maintained in relation to one unconditional commitment that defines one’s identity—for example, a knight defines himself by his love for a princess, a metaphor mentioned repeatedly in the novel.⁴⁹

Oedipa defines herself by this as well, likening herself to a princess waiting for a knight to rescue her from her tower, her identity having as much to do with her quest for meaning as it does with using the men around her to pursue it.⁵⁰ This is the solution posited in Varo's painting as the maiden escapes the tower with her lover.⁵¹ However, when Metzger, Oedipa's lover, leaves her, her husband descends into delusion, and all of the other men around her either die, stop believing in her, or abandon her, this solution becomes impossible. "They are stripping from me, she said subvocally—feeling like a fluttering curtain in a very high window, moving up to then out over the abyss—they are stripping away, one by one, my men . . . Where am I?"⁵² Her identity, once determined by the men around her, has collapsed with the disappearance of these relationships. After those who have helped her construct meaning die or fade, she is high up in her tower, alone. Looking out the window over the void as her golden cloth disintegrates, she realizes that she can't possibly hope to fill it with meaning.

This demonstrates the nihilistic view of the absolute isolation of each person within the universe, and the resulting collapse of the self in the face of this realization.⁵³ Since, as Patricia Bergh argues, "Oedipa's identity has been defined by the reflected light of the males surrounding her . . ." their disappearance strips her of all sense of direction and leaves her disoriented and lost.⁵⁴ "[Oedipa] tried to face toward the sea. But she'd lost her bearings."⁵⁵ When Oedipa asked Driblette about his production of *The Courier's Tragedy*, he prophesied, "If I were to dissolve in here . . . be washed down the drain into the Pacific, what you saw tonight would vanish, too. You, that part of you so concerned God knows how, with that little world, would also vanish."⁵⁶ Similar to the third panel of Varo's triptych, where a woman escapes the tower with a man,⁵⁷ Oedipa has clung to men to deliver her from the tower of meaninglessness. Bergh writes that "The mythical male rescuer, protector, or guide for whom Oedipa waits never appears to offer her aid,"⁵⁸ and the men in her life are not the typical knights in shining armor. However, she believes them to be, and this idea grounds her as she weaves meaning into the void. After they disappear, however, that meaning disintegrates, revealing that her deliverance was only illusory and temporary. Oedipa is alone, and her meaning dissolves; escaping from the tower leaves her not free in a meaningful world but isolated in the void. Much like existential nihilism, where "nothingness is the source of not only absolute freedom but also existential horror and emotional anguish. . . . Nothingness reveals each individual as an isolated being 'thrown' into an alien and unresponsive universe."⁵⁹ After even the man from Inamorati Anonymous abandoned her, Oedipa "stood . . . in the night, her isolation complete. . . ."⁶⁰ She is finally free of her tower, but her liberation is not how she imagined. It is isolation. It is nothingness. Her very existence begins to evaporate as she faces existential death.

In a last-ditch attempt to avoid this meaninglessness, Oedipa turns to an extreme solution: suicide. Existential nihilism offers this idea of death as the alternative to a terrible, meaningless life,⁶¹ and Oedipa considers taking it. She provokes death, her reckless actions bordering on suicide attempts. As she tells the Inamorato Anonymous, "I got drunk and went driving on these freeways. Next time I may be more deliberate."⁶² However, with each attempt she is terrified of her own actions and by what her success would mean, realizing what faces her after death: the unknown. This is a staple of existential nihilism, as the only alternative to a meaningless existence is nonexistence, nothingness. It becomes a "to be or not to be" dilemma as Oedipa struggles with the meaninglessness of her own life and whether nonexistence would be

better or worse. Earlier, she had been confronted with the possibilities of death and what comes after. In a movie she watched with her soon-to-be-lover, Metzger, a dying father told his child, “Your little eyes have seen your daddy for the last time. You are for salvation; I am for the Pit.”⁶³ In the beginning, she didn’t think much of it at all, allowing the movie to go on with little commentary or emotional response. The movie played out like a dramatized caricature as Oedipa engaged it with amusement rather than distress. However, as the novel progresses, people disappear and fall dead around her: Metzger elopes with another woman, bookseller Zapf burns down his store, and Mucho and Hilarius start hallucinating and go mad. When she discovers that Driblette has committed suicide, Oedipa is struck again. “Death glided by, shadowless, among the empties on the grass. . . .”⁶⁴ She finally acknowledges and fully understands mortality when she cradles the dying sailor at the boarding house: “. . . the set of all men who had slept on [his mattress], whatever their lives had been, would truly cease to be, forever, when the mattress burned. She stared at it in wonder. It was as if she had just discovered the irreversible process . . . where death dwelled in the cell though the cell be looked in on at its most quick.”⁶⁵ Death becomes real and immediate.

Thus, much like Sophocles’ Oedipus, Oedipa’s attempt to escape her fate brings her right back to where she started: trapped in a self-constructed tower, trying to create meaning out of a meaningless world, facing the death and nothingness she tried so desperately to avoid. Every path she could have taken led back to her tower, so in a way, she never left, and she never can leave. “If San Narciso and the estate were really no different from any other town, any other estate, then by that continuity she might have found The Tristero anywhere in her Republic, through any of a hundred lightly-concealed entranceways, a hundred alienations, if only she’d looked.”⁶⁶ No matter where she went or what she did, she would always be led to the same destination—the promise of meaning and its inescapable devolution into meaninglessness, death, and, ultimately, nonexistence. Some scholars, such as Phillip Gochenour and Stephen Cox, posit that the clicking lock of the auction room door in the very last scene is indicative of a symbolic entrapment, wherein Oedipa is once again locked in her tower.⁶⁷ While American author Terry Caesar claims that “this Oedipa is no Oedipus, or only at the earnest reader’s peril,”⁶⁸ this connection is not perilous, nor is it earnest. Both Oedipa and Oedipus struggle to rewrite their own stories and escape that which they most fear; however, in doing so, they both end up in the same place they were trying to avoid, revealing that their fear was inescapable. After Oedipa spends the entire story constructing meaning and avoiding an existential nihilist crisis, she finally realizes that this is impossible and is forced to face the fact that her fabricated meaning could be just that: fabricated.

However, at the end of the book, Oedipa emerges from her darkest moments, picks herself back up, and overcomes her collapse into nihilism by disposing of her binary worldview, choosing to believe that life does have meaning and accepting the concept of life as a process of always becoming. After the night of her breakdown, she returns to her next lead, but she has changed. Oedipa has moved past her absolutist viewpoint. While before she lamented the obstacles in front of her (“if only so much didn’t stand in her way”⁶⁹), and the failure of her investigations, she now embraces the struggle, the waiting, when she “settle[s] back” to await her next revelation.⁷⁰ Whether she fully understands that she will constantly be struggling against her ignorance and the

complexity of the world in her quest, and that this in itself is what gives her power, is unclear; however, she exhibits a newfound sort of contentment with her situation. “Cox asserts that Oedipa finds herself in a state of ‘new-found equanimity [that] suggests something that the ancient skeptics called *epoche*—a wise suspension of belief produced by the contemplation of equally plausible but contradictory ideas, by a liberating “revelation” of the limits of human knowledge.’”⁷¹ This is much different from her earlier yearning for answers that she could not (and, according to existentialist writer Albert Camus, would never) have. Even further, this is not just recognizing the limits of human knowledge, but a patience that allows her to wait for it. Cox argues that this knowledge is not inaccessible, just always impending. Thus, Oedipa remains in a constant state of becoming.⁷² Finally, in the last sentence of the book, she settles back “to await the crying of lot 49,”⁷³ awaiting her revelation, her answer, always just on the cusp of her experience. It is this forward inertia, this movement toward something yet never arriving, that permeates the novel and, as Pierce put it, “keep[s] it bouncing.”⁷⁴ The lack of resolution at the novel’s conclusion, and thus its entire thematic structure, echoes this sentiment.

Postmodernist scholar Geoffrey Lord “suggests that the ‘general “logic” of the novel, which is dictated by Oedipa’s search, certainly urges reading the end as gesturing outwards . . . in the direction of an always impending revelation.’”⁷⁵ Thus, her destiny of remaining locked in her tower contrasts with the inescapable lack of a destination in her quest, symbolizing a sort of freedom from this locked tower to which she always returns. As a result, Oedipa finally overcomes nihilism by acting as an agent of knowledge. She searches for meaning and understanding as a philosopher, someone in pursuit of the truth. As she has been doing for the entire book, she fashions herself into an intrepid heroine on the quest for truth, dedicating her life to “consecration to culture,” as Nietzsche puts it.⁷⁶ However, she has now accepted the infinite nature of this quest and has made peace with the always-impending revelation. Now she is fully aware and engaged in her world, untethered by earlier delusions or detachments. Instead of avoiding nihilism, she faced and overcame it; she survived and continued.

While Oedipa has not accepted this meaninglessness—far from it—she has learned to live with its possibility while not giving up her quest to defeat it. This demonstrates the cyclical nature of her story, as she journeys through crises and epiphanies, hope and doubt, the pursuit of meaning and the anguish of the void, always returning to hopefulness and subsequently falling into despair. English professor Thomas Schaub maintains that *The Crying of Lot 49* is “forward-looking, bursting with subcultural alternatives and subversive energies.”⁷⁷ However, this ending contains a dichotomy; it is optimistic about our dogged intentions to make ourselves and the world around us significant but remains cynical about their true outcomes. Our relentless search for meaning is both admirable and foolish. Even when we are faced with our own existential crises and feel like Oedipa trying to make sense of our world, our lives, or an opaque novel, we have little choice but to keep moving and do what everyone in this world must do: live on.

Notes

1. Ricki O’Rawe and Roberta Ann Quance, “Crossing the Threshold: Mysticism, Liminality, and Remedios Varo’s *Bordando el manto terrestre* (1961–62),” *Modern Languages Open* (2016), <http://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.138> (accessed August 23, 2018).
2. Remedios Varo, *Bordando el manto terrestre*, oil on masonite, 1961, 39 1/2 x 48 1/2 inches, <https://www.gallerywendinorris.com/remedios-varo/> (accessed May 30, 2018).
3. Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1966), 11–12.
4. *Ibid.*, 11.
5. *Ibid.*, 2.
6. Alan Pratt, “Nihilism,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/nihilism/#H3> (accessed May 29, 2018).
7. Pynchon, 15.
8. Pratt, “Nihilism.”
9. Steven Crowell, ed., “Existentialism and its Legacy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Companion, 2012), 8.
10. William Blattner, “Heidegger: The Existential Analytic of Dasein,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. Steven Crowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 158.
11. Lois Tyson, “Existential Subjectivity on Trial: *The Crying of Lot 49* and the Politics of Despair,” *Pynchon Notes* 28–29, (1991): 8–9, <http://doi.org/10.16995/pn.254> (accessed May 5, 2018).
12. Pynchon, 10.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 4.
15. J. Kerry Grant, *A Companion to The Crying of Lot 49* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 18, ProQuest e-book, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uwoshkosh-ebooks/reader.action?docID=3038971&query=#>. In the novella, Oedipa meets a scientist named John Nefastis who had built a perpetual motion machine he claims is operated by “sensitives,” who separate fast and slow air molecules while staring at a portrait of the scientist James Clark Maxwell.
16. Tyson, “Existential Subjectivity on Trial: *The Crying of Lot 49* and the Politics of Despair,” 6.
17. Pynchon, 72.
18. Richard Schacht, “Nietzsche: After the Death of God,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. Steven Crowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 130.
19. *Ibid.*, 131.
20. Pynchon, 84.
21. *Ibid.*, 64–65.
22. Schacht, 128.
23. Pynchon, 57–58.
24. Grant, *A Companion to The Crying of Lot 49*, xiii.

25. Francisco Collado-Rodríguez, "Meaning Deferral, Jungian Symbolism, and the Quest for V. in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*," in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. 56, no. 3 (2015): 260, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2014.888047> (accessed May 31, 2018).
26. Pynchon, 64.
27. *Ibid.*, 146.
28. Frank Palmeri, "Neither Literally nor as Metaphor: Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and the Structure of Scientific Revolutions," *ELH* 54, no. 4 (1987): 985.
29. *Ibid.*
30. David E. Cooper, "Existentialism as a Philosophical Movement," in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. Steven Crowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 31.
31. Pynchon, 25.
32. *Ibid.*, 150.
33. Collado-Rodríguez, 255.
34. Grant, xiii.
35. Pynchon, 141.
36. Schacht, 119.
37. *Ibid.*, 120.
38. Pynchon, 141.
39. Pratt, "Nihilism."
40. Pynchon, 113.
41. *Ibid.*, 88–89.
42. Pynchon, 115.
43. *Ibid.*, 113.
44. Maurice Couturier, "The Death of the Real in *The Crying of Lot 49*," *Pynchon Notes* 20– 21, (1987): 23, [https://pynchonnotes.openlibhums.org/articles/abstract/10.16995/pn.331/\(accessed May 31, 2018\)](https://pynchonnotes.openlibhums.org/articles/abstract/10.16995/pn.331/(accessed%20May%2031,%202018)).
45. Schacht, 116.
46. Pynchon, 14.
47. Schacht, 116.
48. Blattner, 162.
49. Hubert L. Dreyfus, "What a Monster then is Man," in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. Steven Crowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press),104.
50. Pynchon, 11–12.
51. Varo, Remedios, *La huida*, oil on masonite, 122 x 19 cm 1961, Acervo Museo de Arte Moderno, Ciudad de Mexico, http://library.artstor.org/asset/AWSS35953_35953_31192044 (accessed May 30, 2018).
52. Pynchon, 125–26.
53. Pratt, "Existentialism."
54. Patricia A. Bergh, "(De)Constructing the Image: Thomas Pynchon's Postmodern Woman," *Journal of Popular Culture* 30, no. 4 (1997): 4, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1997.3004_1.x (accessed May 31, 2018).
55. Pynchon, 146–47.
56. *Ibid.*, 62.
57. Varo, Remedios, *La huida*.58. Bergh, 5.
58. Patricia A. Bergh, "(De)Constructing the Image: Thomas Pynchon's Postmodern Woman," 5.

59. Pratt, "Nihilism."
60. Pynchon, 146.
61. Pratt, "Nihilism."
62. Pynchon, 146.
63. *Ibid.*, 30.
64. *Ibid.*, 125.
65. *Ibid.*, 105–06.
66. *Ibid.*, 48.
67. Gochenour and Cox in Grant, 166.
68. Terry P. Caesar, "A Note on Pynchon's Naming," *Pynchon Notes* 5, (1981): 5, <http://doi.org/10.16995/pn.485> (accessed May 31, 2018).
69. Pynchon, 64.
70. *Ibid.*, 152.
71. Grant, 166.
72. *Ibid.*
73. Pynchon, 152.
74. *Ibid.*, 148.
75. Lord in Grant, 167.
76. Schacht, 131.
77. Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman, and Brian McHale, *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 4. Kindle edition.

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- _____. *La huida*. Oil on masonite 1961, 122 x 19 cm. Acervo Museo de Arte Moderno, Ciudad de Mexico. Accessed May 30, 2018. http://library.artstor.org/asset/AWSS35953_35953_31192044.