



METAPHOR IN THE NOVELS OF THOMAS PYNCHON

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by

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## SYNOPSIS

Although there is a growing body of criticism on Thomas Pynchon, particularly in American literary journals, there are very few studies which attempt a methodology to explain the major aims of his three novels. Instead, particular aspects have been isolated for discussion, and generally these also tend to focus on one or other of the works. My research therefore, offers a reading which, while allowing the novels to be discussed for their individual differences, concentrates on the common thematic pattern which does not change.

Metaphor is the single most significant aspect of Pynchon's writing. His novels not only include a system of metaphors that extend and enrich the meaning of the action, but are themselves thematically concerned with metaphor as a structure of experience. Thus a distinction exists between the metaphors of the text and the message in the text about metaphor. Obviously the two are closely linked; individual metaphors illustrate Pynchon's theories about metaphor, while his ideas about structure influence the kind of metaphors used.

As a writer himself, one of Pynchon's concerns is with the literary use of metaphor as the primary analytical and descriptive unit. He closely identifies this with the general problem of interpretation, which he characteristically illustrates with examples drawn from literary criticism and more particularly, the Puritans' interpretative use of the Bible to uncover God's design.

The central theme of all the novels is that of the arrangement of knowledge. Pynchon's major characters are all engaged on quests which involve an interpretation of events and signs around them. As they struggle to order an essentially mysterious and hostile world - manmade and natural - they encounter various ways of perceiving. One of the most important of these is the scientific, and it is Pynchon's use of science which makes his work unique even in the fiction of the sixties. Scientific explanation is an extremely important means of structuring the universe. Several of Pynchon's characters learn from scientific analogy as a further example of the fertility of metaphorical thinking.

The third important region is that of historical explanation. The perception of the past strongly influences the view of the present, which in turn predisposes human beings to certain kinds of action. Events have no meaning, it

is the analysis of them, and the influence on them of analysis, which gives human history a meaning. With such a view, it is Pynchon's feeling that our commonly held beliefs have a more arbitrary aspect than is generally accepted.

Pynchon's radical and pessimistic vision of the twentieth century is contained within his use of metaphor, which reveals his view of the importance of interpretation and perception. In this study, I have attempted to show how this works through each novel, as well as discussing it as the major preoccupation of all of Pynchon's work to date.

The first chapter introduces some aspects of metaphor, and looks at some of the criticism that has sought a simple explanation for Pynchon's novels. The next three chapters deal in turn with the novels, in chronological order: V, The Crying of Lot 49, Gravity's Rainbow. The conclusion briefly places the novels in a contemporary context and suggests some critical problems in their evaluation.

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*This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university, and to the best of my knowledge, no material previously published or written by any other person except where duly acknowledged in the text and bibliography.*

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*All at once I understood how illusions and  
mistaken identities give rise to metaphor.*

Peter Handke Short Letter, Long Farewell

*I guess one of the reasons I've never been a  
very good private detective is that I spend  
too much time dreaming of Babylon.*

Richard Brautigan Dreaming of Babylon