

## MYSTERY AND THE POSTMODERN SCENE: PYNCHONEAN VIEW

### Abstract:

In the postmodern scene, there exists a range of views that make this period different from earlier ones. This article presents a descriptive depiction of the postmodern concept of mystery presented by the postmodernists and Thomas Pynchon as to portray a dramatic scene of the two main participants in an enigmatic conflict involving good and evil. The postmodern mystery is mainly seen in the perception of religion and the recognition of good and evil in it. The latter is discussed in the article.

**Key Words:** MYSTERY, POSTMODERN SCENE, PYNCHONEAN VIEW.

**Amira Halim**

Faculty of Letters and Languages  
Department of Letters and English  
University of Mentouri  
Constantine

### ملخص:

في مشهد ما بعد الحداثة، هناك آراء متعددة جعلت هذه الفترة مختلفة عن سابقتها. يصور هذا المقال هيئة تفصيلية عن مفهوم الغموض في هذا العصر لدى ما بعد الحداثيين و توماس بينتشون كتصوير لمشهد مسرحي يتضمن الصراع بين الخير والشر. يهدف هذا المقال الى مناقشة مجرى المشهد و اثبات العلاقة بين مفهوم الغموض ما بعد الحداثي و الغموض لدى توماس بينتشون كتطرق لمفهوم الدين بالإضافة الى تحديد دور كل من الطرفين.

### Introduction:

It is considered as a common knowledge that Thomas Pynchon is a *postmodern* fiction writer and intellectual. However, this knowledge has to be distrusted as the writer withdraws from the postmodern scene gradually to become or to play the role of almost the enemy of postmodernists. It is almost because nothing is sure in postmodernism, enemies and friends can play the same role towards the other character in the postmodern play.

This article deals with mystery as an important issue that emerged with the birth of postmodernism. It divides mystery into four parts that portray the four different acts of the postmodern mysterious scene. The first part shows the exposition of the scene of mystery. It explains what mystery is and the difference between the concept of mystery currently and that of centuries. The second part demonstrates the reception and the recognition of mystery by the “so-called” postmodernists and the disillusioned vision. The third part depicts the welcoming of mystery by Thomas Pynchon and the apocalyptic pessimistic vision of the writer. Finally, the last part depicts the pursuit of mystery by both sides as to link between the two contributors in a final act of the postmodern scene.

### **1- Exposition of Mystery**

The concept of mystery is not a new-fangled idea appearing in human history. Hundreds of mysteries appeared meticulously to endow the unknown with a form of myth. This is what we call mystery: Mystery is not an explanation or a clarification; it has nothing to do with rationalization. It is against truth, certainty or firmness. It is all a conviction that tries to induce the receiver about something strange, unexplained or out of the ordinary.

Postmodernism is characterized by different concepts and understandings. This is the reason behind its mystery. The first understanding is that it is associated with the various fields and domains of life. It is an artistic, a musical and a literary movement. It deals with cinema, architecture, design, digital communications, political science and language. It is also a philosophical movement. Facts make it ambiguous, though, ambiguity is the reason behind its power.

The power of postmodernism is exposed in the divisive mystery that reveals the main thematic event of the postmodern scene. Religion has seemingly influenced postmodernists in general and Thomas Pynchon in specific. The postmodern religion is summarized in the vague understanding of society and its dealings with the self in addition to the ambiguous understanding of the individual and the self. Hence, ambiguity of the two made the mixture of mystery over which postmodernists and Thomas Pynchon’s scene is based possible.

Religion is a mystery in the postmodern scene for it marked a fundamental change in the reception and understanding of it. In *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche says: “*God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him*” (125). The suspicion of god being alive puts an end to the old understanding of religion. Nietzsche accuses men to kill God including himself. If it is really that the postmodern character killed God, the result is that no religion is available or obtainable. The fact paved the way for a speculative stream of religions under the title of postmodernism. The new alternative

## MYSTERY AND THE POSTMODERN SCENE: PYNCHONEAN VIEW

---

religion of the postmodern era is the conflict between self judgment and society judgment. This is postmodernism's biggest mystery, the one of religion.

Rationalization, frustration, and the thinking that there is no truth beyond the corporate opinion have resulted in the postmodern trend toward the belief that the global good is more important than personal interests. This is what we call the postmodern understanding of society. There is nothing superior to society and the pursuit of the global (Bertens 45).

Referring to the self, there are different terms that postmodernists use to speak about it and which address the issues of change and multiple identities. One of which is "multiphrenia." This refers to the many different voices in our culture telling us who we are and what we are (Steven 13). As Kenneth Gergen, a professor of psychology, says, "*For everything that we 'know to be true' about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even contempt.*" (qt.in Steven 13).

Our lives are multi-dimensional. The various relationships we have in our lives pull us in different directions. We play "*such a variety of roles that the very concept of an 'authentic self' with knowable characteristics recedes from view.*" (qt.in Steven 13). And these roles need an overlap or be congruent in any significant way. As Anderson says, "*In the postmodern world, you just don't get to be a single and consistent somebody*" (Qt.in Steven 13).

Postmodernists' opinion on religion is contradictory for they claim an opposite view to be true. While they claim the absence of an authentic self and impossibility of the existence of an individual without society, the college professor, Roger Lundin, states in *The Culture of Interpretation*: "*All principles are preferences, and only preferences.*" If all principles that an individual may rely on or refer to in decision making or self judgment are preferences, then the individual's freedom appears strongly. Postmodernism shows, in an opposed estimation of the issue, that the individual has the freedom to prefer whatever he sees preferable. Consequently, it divides postmodernists into two categories having two opposite opinions.

The scene is presented by two opinions that make the postmodern reception of religion mysterious. The first one is the global society and its importance and superiority to the self. The second one is the self and its importance in self judgment and life understanding. They are mysteries because of the two ambiguous contradictory concepts of society and the self. The following titles are going to discuss the recognition of the two postmodern concepts of mystery by the two participants of the scene: postmodernists and Thomas Pynchon.

### **2- Recognition of Mystery**

#### **a- Postmodernists**

The mysterious religion that characterizes the postmodern scene which is found in the contradictory superiority of society over the self, on one side,

and the superiority of the self over society, on the other side, regarding self judgment and decision making, is welcomed by postmodernists. A postmodernist is the one that manipulates the mysterious contradiction of the widespread conflict of self judgment to conceptualize the so-called loss of truth. Loss of truth is found in most ideological concepts that may characterize the construction of society and the recognition of reality.

Jean François Lyotard is an example of a postmodernist who celebrates the loss of truth. He says: "*Reason and power are one and the same. Both lead to and are synonymous with prison, prohibitions, selection process, the public good*" (qt.in Hicks 3). Lyotard compares reason to prison. By doing so, he denies the possibility of the existence of truth as a firm concept. The absence of truth in societies leads to the rejection of the old concepts of beliefs and religions.

One of the most controversial characteristics of postmodernism is the idea that all religions are equally invalid. If, as the postmodern thinking dictates, there is no absolute truth, then no one's religion offers a "*right*" way. *If no religion is true, then all religions are equally false, or equally invalid, depending on the person's point of view*" (Lefell 80).

If there is no true religion and no absolute truth, then each person's ideas on morality are equally false and invalid. This characteristic is most clearly seen in the common statement that people say, "*It is right for me.*" Every person's morality belongs to himself, and morality that is imposed by others such as old religions, governments, or another person, and anything that is claimed to be absolute truth is to be distrusted.

If society is superior to the self, and nothing can interfere in the individual's judgment but society, then society should choose the right religion for the individual. Postmodernists are not able to choose the right religion for the individual because they do not believe in religion, but they can offer instead the belief in the loss of truth. This is the postmodernists' manipulation.

If the individual should be superior to society, he has to choose the right religion for himself. The case cannot be achieved but by manipulation. This is the case of postmodernists too. Since the individual should choose his religion, and since no religion is valid, the individual is bound to believe in the absence of truth.

One of the main prominent postmodernists' figures of the postmodern scene is Michel Foucault. The latter is a French philosopher that says that the power of postmodernism lies behind the discussion of truth (Haws 5). The discussion of the postmodern truth results in the postmodern manipulation of it. Hence, postmodernists encourage and lead to the discussion of truth to prove its loss.

Mainly, the postmodernists' recognition presents a kind of manipulation. First, it gives the individual a total freedom that leaves him able

## MYSTERY AND THE POSTMODERN SCENE: PYNCHONEAN VIEW

---

to do whatever he wants as far as he sees that good for him. Second, it gives society a total dominance over the individual for the common good of people. Thus, the main objective is to conceptualize the holy concept of “*the loss of truth*.” For now, the postmodernists’ attitude seems to present the evil part of the postmodern scene for its manipulation.

### b- Thomas Pynchon

The postmodern mysterious religion is distrusted by Thomas Pynchon as well as the Postmodernists’ attitude towards it. Pynchon does not prefer to manipulate the mystery that covers the postmodern religion, but says that there is a conspiracy behind the conceptualization of the society and self judgment in terms of counterfeiting concepts. The fact is illustrated through his fiction. Thomas Pynchon has written eight *paranoid* novels and published a couple of short stories. The eight novels show that the new appearing concepts of absence of religion are no more than a conspiracy shaped by postmodernists and the concepts created by them.

In Pynchon’s early novels, it is an open question as to whether life is inherently meaningless or whether the meaning has been taken from the world by modernism. If the latter is the case, one should wonder about it being an accident or a conspiracy. Pynchon refuses to decide, offering instead plots that might be “plots,” in which various protagonists search for clues as to who or what causing chaos is. He wonders about the possibility of things happening randomly or happening for a reason (Allegoria).

On the one hand, Pynchon implies that a paranoid “hermeneutic” is preferable to meaninglessness, and that an imposed symbolic meaning is more comforting than nothing. On the other hand, Pynchon gives real influence, through his use of historical facts, to the possibility that the V, in his novel *V* is, indeed, a plot whose agents are trying to destroy the world, whether they know it or not. This is also the complex dialectic of the Zero, in his novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* and the one in his symbol of the V (Allegoria).

In Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the sense of conspiracy, the sense of the plot laid against the protagonist Tyrone Slothrop, is expansive. Round every corner there seems to be a conspiracy against him; drawing on every wall the little invisible “Kilroys” watch every one of his move. To what extent this plot, this conspiracy is a reality, however, is always in question. Whether stuck in a real global conspiracy or just the paranoid delusions of a man on the edges of sanity, or any other number of possibilities, the perceived plot reveals a lot about Pynchon’s belief in conspiracy (Payseur 1). One short exchange between Slothrop and exiled Argentinean Francisco Squalidozzi especially captures a basis behind perceiving conspiracy: “*In the days of the gauchos, my country was a blank piece of paper*” (Pynchon 264).

Thomas Pynchon refuses the postmodern manipulation and claims that there is a conspiracy behind it, the one of modernism. He sees that modernism

and postmodernism overlap in the sense of manipulating the concept of self freedom and society control to achieve their mistreatment. First, he presents his view as to give the individual a total freedom to doubt every single word that the postmodernists advocate for the excuse of conspiracy. Second, he withdraws from the scene by letting the themes of his novels speak for themselves and identify the conspired from the manipulator.

Thomas Pynchon's attitude seems to be pessimistic as he depicts the postmodernists' manipulation in terms of conspiracy. Thomas Pynchon's depiction of individuals as paranoid and the society as conspiring is an evidence of the apocalyptic vision of the world. In *The Decline of the West*, Oswald Spengler says that there comes a time where the western culture as a whole has to be doubted and even changed by other generations and other cultures (Spengler).

Thomas Pynchon doesn't believe that he is the savior of the west or the head of the new generation that can change and eliminate the old one, but indeed, he believes in the death of the western culture by the postmodernists. This is the apocalyptic vision of him and this is Pynchon's religion. Thomas Pynchon's religion is pessimism that comes by the solving of the conspiracy plan of postmodernists. It is pessimistic because he uses an apocalyptic conception, though; it is a means to destroy the postmodernists' attitude. One should wonder about Thomas Pynchon's attitude being evil or good. The answer is found in the following title.

### **3- The Pursuit of Mystery**

In the pursuit of postmodernists' and Thomas Pynchon's mystery, a kind of speculation appears. Postmodernists give the individual and society at the same time a total freedom for self judgment to validate their new concept and belief of the loss of truth. For Thomas Pynchon, the issue is the one of conspiracy and manipulation. He depicts postmodernists as manipulators in terms of juxtaposing concepts to withdraw later from the scene allowing the themes of his novels speak, discuss, and judge the postmodernists' attitude.

The German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel says that mysteries are speculative in their nature. When certainty is mysterious, it is meant to help the individual understand not to comprehend reasonably. Mysteries, for the philosopher, are rational just in the sense of being speculative. The understanding does not realize the speculative which is simply the real because it holds to the differences in their separation; their contradiction is indeed restricted to the mystery, which, however, is likewise the resolution of the same (Hegel).

Hegel's opinion on mystery being speculative naturally should explain the contradiction in the postmodern scene. The two participants of the scene, postmodernists and Thomas Pynchon, cannot be labeled as the good or the evil side of the scene. They cannot even be named heroes. The reason is that the

## MYSTERY AND THE POSTMODERN SCENE: PYNCHONEAN VIEW

postmodern scene does not mark stability or a steadiness that may be seen in other scenes. The postmodern scene shows a state of chaos where speculation controls all the events.

The two attitudes of the two participants wage a war against each other giving reasons and views that seem to have many things in common. What are we to understand or who are we to believe? Postmodernists or Thomas Pynchon? This is what we call in drama “an unsolved problem”. The postmodern scene has no ending. It just portrays mystery and let the audience in a tremendous ambiguity that lead to doubt and loss. Postmodern scene can be entitled “mysterious loss”. It is dramatic for the speculation that covers it. Truth is a mystery for postmodernists and the postmodernists’ conspiracy is a mystery for Thomas Pynchon.

### Conclusion

Postmodernism is a new concept that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century and continues to be controversial. It included and was treated by thousands of writers and philosophers. This article divides them in two attitudes: postmodernists and Thomas Pynchon. It is a division that relies on two different opinions that depict ambiguity for the audience. The two attitudes are presented in a scene for what they act as attitudes. It is difficult to identify the evil character and the good one in the postmodern scene. Postmodernists seem good in preferring society over the individual and bad in contradicting themselves. Thomas Pynchon plays the role of the good character in discovering conspiracy. However, he does not offer an alternative religion for the postmodern era but pessimism.

### Bibliography:

- 1-Bertens, Hans. *The Idea of the Postmodern; A History*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- 2-Haws, Worth. “Postmodern Epistemology in Foucault and Pynchon.” *All College Writing Contest*. 1993. 8 April. 2014. <[http://pdf458.xqhbbooks.com/the-paranoia-plot\\_86ayi.pdf](http://pdf458.xqhbbooks.com/the-paranoia-plot_86ayi.pdf)>.
- 3-Hegel. G. W. F. *Hegel*. Eds. Akach Singh and RiminaMohapatra. MeHicks, Stephen. *Explaining postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault*. New Berlin: Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 2011.
- 4-Leffel, Jim. “The Death of Truth.” *Our New Challenge: Postmodernism*. Ed. Dennis, McCallum. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2014.
- 5-Lundin, Roger. *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and the Postmodern World*. Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993.
- 6-Nietzsche, Frederich. *The Gay Science*. Ed. Bernard Williams. Trans. JosefineNauckhof. Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

- 7-Payseur, Charles. "Paranoia Versus Openness: The Need for Constructed Conspiracy in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*." *English* 448. Oct 22. 2007. 1 July. 2014. <[http:// pdf458.xqhbooks.com/the-paranoia-plot\\_86ayi.pdf](http://pdf458.xqhbooks.com/the-paranoia-plot_86ayi.pdf)>.
- 8-Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. London: Penguin Books, 1978.
- 9-Spengler Oswald. *The Decline of the West*. Vol.1.Trans. Chales Francis Atkinson. New York: Alfred A. Knof, 1944.
- 10-Sтивен J. Sandage, "Power, Knowledge, and the Hermeneutics of Selfhood: Postmodern Wisdom for Christian Therapists." *Mars Hill Review* 12. Litelton. 2 June. 2014. <[http:// cdm16120.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p16120coll37/id/694](http://cdm16120.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p16120coll37/id/694)>.
- 11-lbourne: re. Press, 2008.