CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter consists of the background which prompts this study of narrative ambiguity in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965). After the background is established, it states the problems and formulates the research questions based on them. Then, it communicates the objectives and significance of this study. Next, it explains concisely the conceptual framework which this study applies in approaching the object. Last, this chapter mentions several studies related to the topic and explains the research gap.

1.1. Research Background

For the resolute minds used to the conventional narrative discourse, reading Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965) is a perplexing experience for a number of reasons. Although the novel with its one hundred and fifty-two pages is relatively a short one and is often more considered as a novella, the reading and understanding process of it may take a long time. The novel, which was listed in the TIME's Best English-language Novels from 1923 to 2005 (Time Magazine, 2005), repeatedly uses convoluted sentences built like labyrinths that oftentimes continuously run even after ten lines. Moreover, the narration of the novel alludes to numerous cultural references, hence readers who are previously unacquainted with them are occasionally left with only partial understanding. In fact, J. Kerry Grant wrote *A Companion to the Crying of Lot 49* (1994) in an attempt to help readers understand the references in the novel. Although neither the definitiveness nor the completeness of his attempt has been proven.

The more perplexing part of the reading process, however, is the fact that the novel does not offer any definite resolution, or in other words, lacks *denouement*. At first, the novel plays like a mystery fiction, introducing the main character Oedipa Maas who suddenly finds herself becoming a pseudo-detective after she is appointed as the executor of her former lover's inheritance when she discovers a possible conspiracy theory concerning two mail distribution

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companies. Yet, unlike the poster children of conventional mystery novels like those of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie, even until the last page the mystery remains unsolved.[1] The mystery is unsolved because there is no answer whether the conspiracy theory is just a theory or, is in fact, the reality of the novel. By the end of the novel, readers are left questioning which is true out of four possible conclusions regarding what actually happens in the novel. Those four possibilities are: (a) Oedipa has indeed accidentally discovered a secret organization; (b) she is hallucinating it by projecting a pattern onto various signs which are actually just randomly associated; (c) she is the victim of a hoax set up by her former lover, Pierce Inverarity, possibly as a means of preserving his existence in her mind beyond death; (d) or she is hallucinating such a hoax, in a semiosis of the second possibility. These four possible conclusions signify that the meaning of the novel can be interpreted in at least four different ways, and there is no way to tell which one is the true meaning.

The quality of being open to more than one interpretation, such as shown in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, is what we commonly called as *ambiguity*. As defined by the online Cambridge Dictionary, 'ambiguity' is "the fact of something having more than one possible meaning and therefore possibly causing confusion" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). Ambiguity is a common term and the adjective for it is 'ambiguous.' Its definition applies generally to anything, not only to novels. Therefore, a sentence someone says can contain ambiguity and a bruise on someone's face can create ambiguity for other people who see it.

In fact, not only is ambiguity a common term, it is also a common daily occurrence. Aided by the advancement of information technology, now humanity is constantly supplied by the proliferating of information which often create multiple interpretations. It is to the point that ambiguity has been chosen to describe the current state of the world. It is a part of the popular concept 'VUCA',

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[1] See Gilbert (1983) to read examples of conventional mystery fiction, including works by Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, and Steele (1981) to understand the structure of detective fiction. Also, see Delamater & Prigozy (1997), especially Chapter 1, to understand how some postmodernist writers employ detective story pattern in their works.

an acronym which stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. The concept was first introduced by the U.S. Army War College based on the leadership theories of Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus to describe the general conditions and states of the world (U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, 2021). Since then, the acronym has been popularly used not only in military, but is also applied in other major fields, from business[2] to government[3], and even education[4].

The fact that the concept uses uncertainty and ambiguity to denote two different ideas may seem confusing at first since both words tend to be used interchangeably as synonyms. However, uncertainty here refers to the state in which there is an unavailability of information relevant to produce a single conclusion. On the other hands, ambiguity means the relevant information is available yet it is difficult to arrive to a single conclusion since the information can be interpreted with multiple meanings. Thus, the difference lays on the provision of information. A simple illustration to help understand the two concepts is the situations of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). During the early outbreaks, there was a lack of information which led people to become uncertain about the virus and how threatening it is. Later when the pandemic began, the amount of information provided regarding the virus became too uncontrolled, often containing mixed messages, conflicting narratives, and conflicts of interest, which hence created an atmosphere of ambiguity (Simonovic & Taber, 2022).

In literature, ambiguity is a common technique used by authors, whether deliberate or undeliberate, which creates uncertainty or multiple possible meanings in a story or text. The use of ambiguity in literature can serve a variety of purposes. The most obvious purpose comes from the fact explained above that life is often ambiguous and uncertain. The ambiguity in literary works serves as a

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[2] See Buckley, Peter. (2019). *International business in a VUCA world: The changing role of states and firms*. Bradford: Emerald Group Publishing.

[3] See Covarrubias Moreno, Oscar M. (2021). *Coordinated Governance in the VUCA Scenario*. HKJU-CCPA, 21(3), 393–422

[4] See LeBlanc, P. J. (2018). *Higher education in a VUCA world*. Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 50(3-4), 23-26.

reflection of the uncertainty and complexity of real-world experiences, making a story more relatable and emotionally resonant. Thus, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* which shows a theme of ambiguity reflects the state of the world surrounded by ambiguity in the past decades after the advancement of information technology. As early Greek thoughts conceptualizes, art is an imitation (mimesis) of reality (Ming, 2005, p. 403). To put it in another way, art derives its material from real world. In the case of language art or literature, the theory gives birth to periodization in which each period produced literary works that reflect the state, condition, and influential thoughts of the reality at that time. Therefore, the literary works arising from mid nineteenth century America following the Civil War reflect the realist desires of depicting lives and everyday activities of ordinary people at that time (Barrish, 2001, p. 3), influenced by the huge changes in industrial, economic, social and cultural sectors (2011, pp. 2-7), and the rise of journalism (Connery, 2011). Then, in the beginning of the twentieth century America, works started to show more diversity in forms and meanings to better reflect modernity of the world (Bogan, 1950, p. 109). By the mid-twentieth century, the information age began and the proliferation of information which came along with it created the state of ambiguity when a set of relevant information allows for the root of inconsistent inferences (Fransman, 1996).

Both ambiguity in literature and ambiguity in textual information are the results of language exercise. Therefore, studying how the state of ambiguity is reflected in literary works may consequently help understanding the nature of ambiguity in general information. Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* is an appropriate object for the aforementioned study is since it excellently embodies ambiguity. Unfortunately, the discussion of ambiguity of *The Crying of Lot 49* tends to focus on semantics and pragmatics, as in the meaning of the text and its contextualities, rather than the form or structure of the novel itself. The reason is most likely come from the fact that the novel is always categorized as a postmodern work, which leads critics to often approach the novel through the lens of postmodernism with its incredulity towards structure and its focus more on ontological and epistemological, rather than methodological questions.

Another possible reason is many critics are fast to dismiss the novel as having no stable structure due to it unconventional narration. In fact, the same applies to other Pynchon's works in general. Luc Herman (2008) even daringly claims that "Pynchon is not a narratologist" and criticizes an attempt of seeing Pynchon's work systematically as a structure. He believes that analyzing Pynchon as having a possible structure is unsatisfying due to the limitedness of the current narrative structure theories, that they are "no match for the often-bewildering splendor" of Pynchon's works (p. 261).

However, this study argues that the existence of limitations does not mean that we cannot see a postmodern work employing ambiguous narrative like Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* as possessing any structure. Postmodernists may refuse to see the novel, or any novel in general, as a structure which creates an absolute meaning. Indeed, to view Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* with its ambiguity as an established structure which creates a single meaning may be almost, if not impossible. Yet, they may be too fast in making the conclusion as the work requires a slow and careful reading. Through slow reading, it is quite possible to see the narrative as a structure which creates an atmosphere of ambiguity, that there is a structure in such a work which can allow readers to arrive to multiple different meanings. Despite the seemingly randomness of chaotic complex system that is Pynchon's narrative, there are underlying patterns behind it, or simply put, there exists a structure behind the chaos of narration and ambiguity is the product of that structure.[5] After all, despite the ambiguity surrounding events happening in the world today caused by the proliferating and often contradicting narratives reporting the events, there is a system and structure which allows that ambiguity. Hence, it is unfortunate that there is a lack of studies which tries to understand the structure within postmodern literary works such as Pynchon's as most seem to disregard that ambiguity is a product of structure as if ambiguity relies entirely on the content.

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[5] Jo Alyson Parker elaborates about the structure of "chaotic" narrative in her book, *Narrative Form and the Chaos Theory in Sterne, Proust, Woolf, and Faulkner* (2007). She draws on the insights offered by contemporary chaos theory in support of analyzing the structure of narratives which may appear 'chaotic'.

In short, there is a need of a study attempting to discover and analyze the underlying structure which builds ambiguity in literary works such as Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, as dismissing the state of ambiguity as something beyond a comprehensible system or structure will not help us in understanding the nature of ambiguity and how to deal with it in reality. Understanding the structure of such work will help counter the notion that postmodern works deny structure or any established concept and also help in conceptualizing ambiguity.

1.2. Statement of Problem

Based on the background stated above, this undergraduate thesis studies narrative ambiguity in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* as an attempt to find a structure within the novel. Therefore, this study makes an attempt to answer the following questions:

a. How is the narrative structure built in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*?

b. How does the narrative structure generate ambiguity in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*?

1.3. Research Objective

Based on the background and research problems, thus this research has two main objectives as follows:

a. To analyze the ways the narrative structure is built in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*;

b. To analyze the ways the narrative structure in *The Crying of Lot 49* generates ambiguity.

1.4. Research Significance

This thesis hopefully can give a fresh perspective from literary study in approaching the concept of narrative ambiguity by offering explanations on its structure, specifically through the structure of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. Moreover, as this thesis uses a postmodern novel as the object of study, it

can give more understanding on what constitutes as postmodern works and help in determining the narrative structure unique to postmodernist works which creates ambiguity. Indirectly, by understanding how ambiguity is created through the structure of a fictional narrative, it may help explain the structure of ambiguity-creating narratives we find in real every-day world.

1.5. Conceptual Framework

This study implements a textual analysis to answer the research questions concerning the object, the novel *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965) by Thomas Pynchon. Since the object is a literary work, therefore this study is treated as a literary criticism. According to the framework conceptualized by Abrams (1989), there are four major approaches to literary criticism based on the relationship among four elements: text, artist, audience, and universe. Those four major approaches are the mimetic, pragmatic, expressive, and objective approach. The mimetic approach focuses on the relationship between text and universe. Universe here refers to everything in reality apart from the text, audience, and author. The pragmatic approach focuses on the relationship between text and audience. The expressive approach focuses the relationship between the text and author. Meanwhile the objective approach focuses solely on the analysis of text in isolation.

Since this thesis tries to answer the textual questions about the narrative structure and devices which help build the theme of the text, it uses the objective approach. Furthermore, in objectively approaching Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, it uses the framework of structuralism. Structuralism is a theoretical framework that emerged in the field of linguistics in the early 20th century, and later expanded to other disciplines, including literary theory, anthropology, and psychology. It emphasizes the importance of underlying structures and patterns in human culture and behavior. In literary criticism, structuralism focuses on the formal structures and systems of a literary work, rather than its content or meaning. Structuralist critics seek to identify the underlying rules and patterns that govern a text's language, plot, and symbolism. They often use methods of analysis

borrowed from linguistics, such as the identification of binary oppositions (such as good vs. evil, or male vs. female) and the exploration of how these two oppositions structure meaning in the text. Structuralism is also concerned with the larger cultural and social systems that underlie individual literary works. For example, a structuralist critic might explore how a particular literary work reflects or challenges the dominant cultural values of its time and place. Overall, structuralism emphasizes the importance of analyzing the formal structures and underlying systems that shape human culture and behavior.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of this study.
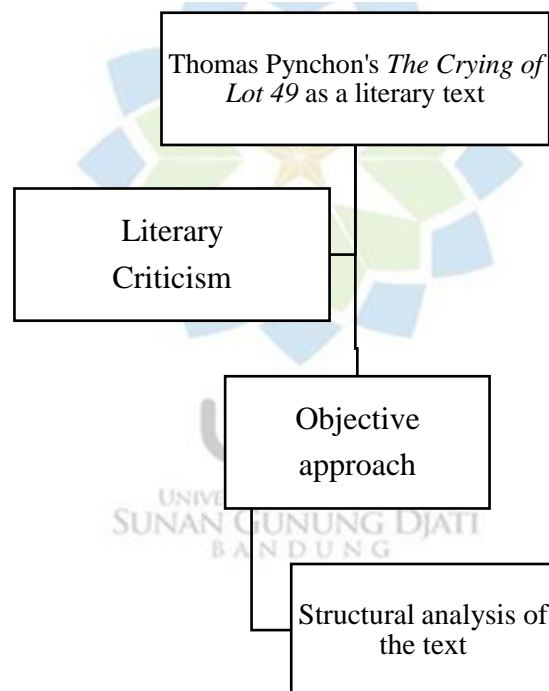
1.6. Previous Studies

Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* is one of the most notable and the most studied postmodern works. Most of the studies on the text agree that it is ambiguous in meaning, although sometimes they use different names such as "enigma", "mystery", "unreliability", and "paranoia". However, they focus more on the content and contextual analysis of the novel in order to explain the ambiguousness, especially the first few decades after the novel is published. For

instance, Couturier in *The Death of the Real in The Crying of Lot 49* (1987) discusses how the protagonist in the novel represents an individual who is lost in the proliferation of information to the point that she cannot distinguish what is real and what is not. Although he mentions devices such as symbol and parody, he does not put emphasis on them but more on how the content relates to the condition of the world, and barely makes any comment on the structure. Moreover, he focuses on describing state of confusion among the proliferation of information rather than elaborating how the form and structure create that state. The case is also the same in Decker's *A Proliferation of Bad Shit: Informational Entropy, Politics, and The Crying of Lot 49* (2001) where he focuses on comparing the similarities between the novel and the state of the world without elaborating on the form and elements that make it so. On the other hand, this study will attempt to answer exactly that part which studies like those done by Couturier and Decker fail to explain.

There are some studies which attempts to focus on the formal and structural analysis of *The Crying of Lot 49,* though they are little in number. As mentioned by Merrill in *The Form and Meaning of Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49* (1977), there have been only a few formal discussions regarding Pynchon's novels (pp. 53-54). Formal discussions here mean any discussions related to the form of the novels. Although, the statement was made decades ago, it is still relevant today since the situation has not improved much. Merrill observes the reason lays in the fact that people are still in doubt at that time about the form of the novels, including *The Crying of Lot 49*. Therefore, Merrill attempts to evaluate the formal elements in the novel. However, Merrill does not elaborate in-depth about these elements beyond treating the novel as an allegory of feeling lost in the chaos of contemporary American life. He does not explain thoroughly each element which builds the allegory. He also almost does not touch anything related to ambiguity. Thus, this thesis attempts to fill the emptiness of his proposal by identifying and elaborating one by one the formal elements in a structural manner to discover what constructs ambiguity.

Another attempt to explore the form and structure is done by Johnston (1991) in T*oward the Schizo-Text: Paranoia as Semiotic Regime in The Crying of Lot 49*. He uses the semiotic approach to explore the theme of paranoia experienced by the protagonist in the novel. He proposes that the theme is built as Oedipa becomes lost in the interpretation of signs built by a constant pattern of imageries in the novel, hence he refers to the theme as a semiotic regime since it is built by a systemic sign interpretation. The signs here can be understood as information received by Oedipa. However, Johnston does not explore beyond the semiotic realm. Meanwhile, this study will endeavor not only that but also beyond.

There is, however, a comprehensive study regarding the structure and devices of narrative ambiguity. Carole Ellsworth Tallant (1980) in her dissertation, *Theory and Performance of Narrative Ambiguity in Selected Novels by John Hawkes*, theorizes narrative ambiguity and analyzes its devices in several novels written by postmodern American writer, John Hawkes. She bases the theories regarding narrative ambiguity on universally recognized theories of narrative form, that is by analyzing the large units, i.e., plot, character, setting, and point of view. She offers explanation on special types of narrative within which ambiguity-creating devices can function within and from those large units of analysis. This study uses a similar approach, except that it applies the approach to a different work, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. In the discussion, it will also attempt to find any similarities or differences in the devices of ambiguity between the two writers' works.