


Tyrone Slothrop and Roger Mexico: Anti-Heroes in *Gravity's Rainbow*

Jialu Song^{1*} ¹MA Student in English Literature, School of Foreign Studies, University of Science and Technology Beijing, Beijing, ChinaDOI: [10.36348/sijll.2024.v07i06.001](https://doi.org/10.36348/sijll.2024.v07i06.001)

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*Corresponding author: Jialu Song

MA Student in English Literature, School of Foreign Studies, University of Science and Technology Beijing, Beijing, China

Abstract

Black humor emerged as a distinctive fictional genre in the United States in the 1960s. In the creative process, novelists tend to emphasize the unique charm of this genre through the portrayal of anti-heroes. Thomas Pynchon is a forerunner in American black humor novels during the 1960s and 1970s, and his masterpiece *Gravity's Rainbow* is an outstanding example of this genre. This article focuses on two representative anti-heroes in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Tyrone Slothrop and Roger Mexico. Through a thorough analysis of Pynchon's humorous descriptions of the difficulties faced by these two characters, the black humor characteristics of this novel are interpreted, and readers can gain a deeper understanding of Pynchon's creative style and the essence and appeal of black humor.

Keywords: *Gravity's Rainbow*; Thomas Pynchon; anti-heroes; black humor.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Thomas Ruggles Pynchon (1937-) is an American author representing postmodernist literature and winner of the National Book Award. Along with Don DeLillo, Philip Roth, and Cormac McCarthy, Pynchon was named by Harold Bloom as one of the four major novelists of his time (Pierce, 2009). From 1963 to the present, Pynchon has written eight full-length novels and one collection of short stories. His fantastically conceived and complex novels, known for their wide range of topics, styles, and themes, have attracted the attention of critics since the day they were published. In addition, Pynchon is often presented as a spokesman for American black humor novels, together with Joseph Heller and Vladimir Nabokov. The novel *Gravity's Rainbow* is one of the representatives of his black humor novels.

Among his works, the novel that best exemplifies his artistic attainments is *Gravity's Rainbow* published in 1973. It is regarded as a classic of postmodernist literature and has a unique position in 20th-century literature in the world. At present, there is a wide range of studies of this novel, mainly focusing on its postmodernity, use of "entropy", and modern mysticism. There is relatively little research on the black humor of this novel, and the analysis of the black humor feature of the novel from the perspective of characterization is not enough. Therefore, this article focuses on Pynchon's portrayal of two representative

anti-heroes, Tyrone Slothrop and Roger Mexico. By analyzing Pynchon's wry and humorous description of their plight in the novel, this article can interpret the novel's black humor characteristics and help readers enrich their understanding of Pynchon's creative style and the essence and appeal of black humor.

II. Black Humor and Anti-Heroes

Before conducting a detailed analysis of the black humor features and anti-heroes in *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the relevant concepts.

2.1 Black humor

In the 1960s, American black humor novels gradually emerged. André Breton, a French Surrealism poet and critic, used the word "black humor" for the first time in his *Anthology of Black Humor* (1940) in response to a literary movement. According to Breton (1940), this movement cannot be a matter of explicating humor and making it serve didactic ends. Later, Knickerbocker (1964) employed "black humor" to describe this trend as a national mood that was terrible to many people and marvelous to others. This marks the establishment of the literary school of American black humor novels.

The term "black humor" does not have a fixed definition. Hasley (1993) argues that black humor combines humor and pessimism, employs incongruities ranging from the ridiculous to the grotesque, and carries

an overall sense of metaphysical disillusion and nihilism. In *The Harper Handbook to Literature* (1985), black humor is defined as humor discovered in pain, despair, horror, or a generally pessimistic view of the world. In most cases, this term applies to the authors and their works after World War II. Moreover, in *Literary Terms: A Dictionary* (1989), black humor refers to writing in which grotesque or horrifying elements are sharply juxtaposed with humorous or farcical ones. Novelists of black humor consider the objective world to be irrational. For some novelists, the world is ridiculous, so instead of picturing a struggle against the harshness of reality or suggesting a surrender or resignation to reality, they show the desire to find truth and meaning in the absurd world by wresting laughter from pains, just as Hassan (1964) describes it, the deflection of laughter toward anguish. Based on the above definitions and explanations, black humor can be summarized as the humorous treatment of the absurdity and sickness of reality and not guiding or showing the exit of painful realities.

Moreover, American black humor novels share a common underlying theme that the world is absurd and that one's desire to find meaning and truth in this world is helpless, distorted, and meaningless. They share the belief that the world should be portrayed with grotesque effects. This is why black humor writers need to use specific types of characters, such as anti-heroes, to create a humorous effect.

2.2 Anti-heroes

As Pratt (1993) notes, the protagonists of black humor literature are typically picaresque anti-heroes, caricatures of the innocent, inept, depraved, or insane. They are portrayed as clownish people whose weakness, confusion, lack of dignity, and wisdom are completely different from the traditional heroic characters. They cannot change the absurd and terrible situation they encounter, and all they can do is fight against reality helplessly and absurdly, which reflects the mentality of modern people and the dilemma they face. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the main characters, Tyrone Slothrop and Roger Mexico, are representatives of anti-heroes. This article focuses on the black humor features in the characterization of the novel through the analysis of these two main characters.

III. Anti-Hero: Tyrone Slothrop

Tyrone Slothrop is a U.S. Army Lieutenant, a clue character in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and a typical anti-hero in this black humor novel. Through the analysis of his absurd fate, the lack of heroism, and the tragic end of his life, one can appreciate the author Pynchon's prominence of black humor in characterization.

3.1 Absurd fate

Unlike traditional heroes, Slothrop's transformation from an unknown figure to a center of attention for people is related to his absurd fate.

While stationed in England in 1944, he found his sex life restricted, and the places where he had sex with women often became targets of German bombing in the following days, and the history of his affairs with women was the history of German rocket bombing in Allied territory. Because of this situation in connection with the fall of the V-2 rocket, Slothrop became the prey of the American and German authorities and went from being an obscure minor figure to the center of attention. There is no shortage of precedents in literature for becoming a hero because of petticoat affairs, but in contrast to the traditional heroes, the tragedy of Slothrop is that these erotic encounters were because he was sold by his father as a child to the German biologist Dr. Laszlo Jamf to be used as a subject for his sexual conditioning. Due to the use of Imipolex G, Slothrop also had an erection when the rocket was launched. Therefore, his eroticism is an experimental after-effect, a reflex that has not yet disappeared. In this sense, Slothrop is the typical clown controlled and played within the context of black humor. He absurdly becomes the subject of experiments by numerous technological maniacs and war lunatics, while also being involved in the absurd task of pursuing rockets and mutual secrets.

3.2 The lack of heroism

In contrast to traditional heroes, the lack of heroism in Slothrop can be felt in the novel's depiction of his trip to the toilet and his first meeting with the Dutch triple agent Katje Borgesius.

The main character of the British side, Pointsman, was in charge of the PISCES, and he injected Slothrop with a drug that sent Slothrop into a fantasy world with a surreal trip to the toilet. In the illusion, Slothrop returned to his college life, to the familiar Roseland Ballroom. In his memory, he drank too much and ran to the men's room to vomit, but when he was about to retrieve the harp that had accidentally fallen into the toilet, he felt that "the Negroes all over wasted Roxbury wait" (Pynchon, 49). In order to retrieve the harp, Slothrop, knowing the potential danger, turned "his face down in some fetid unknown darkness" (ibid). Then, the black people, led by Malcolm, a black man who usually shined Slothrop's shoes carefully, were ready to sexually assault him. At this moment, in order to save himself, Slothrop had no choice but to prepare to enter the toilet. He was comical and embarrassed, "even though he has succeeded in getting far enough down now so that only his legs protrude and his buttocks heave and wallow just under the level of the water like pallid domes of ice" (49). This is a laughably unlucky look for Slothrop, and the author Pynchon goes on to describe in detail Slothrop's journey through the toilet pipes. No one in the world is more unlucky than Slothrop, who is now a foolish clown than a hero. This is where the anti-heroes in the context of black humor differ from the traditional heroes portrayed by writers, who are not revered but ridiculed.

When meeting the Dutch triple agent Katje Borgesius for the first time, Katje is caught by a giant octopus and Slothrop tries to save her by luring the octopus to go for the crab:

“O. K.” Shaking Slothrop waves the crab at the octopus. “Chow time, fella.” Another tentacle moves in. Its corrugated ooze touches his wrist. Slothrop tosses the crab a few feet along the beach, and what do you know, that octopus goes for it all right: dragging along the girl and Slothrop staggering for a bit, then letting her go. Slothrop quickly snatches up the crab again, dangling it so the octopus can see, and begins to dance the creature away, down the beach, drool streaming from its beak, eyes held by the crab (140).

This scene fully reflects that Slothrop’s personality and image are anti-heroic, lacking charm, clumsiness, and clown-like. Different from rescuing the lady in danger with the sword or any other kind of artificial weapon, which has been an archetype of heroes for centuries in literature, Slothrop rescues Katje from “the biggest fucking octopus” by luring the beast with a large crab offered by Teddy Bloat. Moreover, before succeeding in throwing the crab, Slothrop hesitates about knocking the octopus with a broken bottle or not, which fully shows his clumsiness and makes him laughable. The rescue scene is grotesque and absurd because it is so different and even contrary to the usual ones readers have enjoyed in the traditional depiction of a hero’s brave deeds. This humorous scene fully embodies the black humor of the novel.

3.3 The tragic end of life

The heroes in traditional novels often have a heroic sacrifice or death for the pursuit of some kind of justice, so that people are in awe. Slothrop, on the other hand, has a tragic end to his life.

There are no scenes of admiration as Slothrop’s absurd fate comes to an end. There is even no language in the novel that directly indicates his death. For Slothrop, death is naturalization. As Pynchon quotes Wernher von Braun: “Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death” (3). As a symbol of the “all-powerful” science and technology that people were convinced of at the time, Jamf’s research on sexual conditioning did not bring any benefit to Slothrop’s life, but completely ruined it. He became a typical clownish anti-hero, whose fate was ridiculous, and at the same time, one could not help but feel bitter.

IV. Anti-Hero: Roger Mexico

British lieutenant Roger Mexico is a statistician in the intelligence analysis organization “The White Visitation”. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon focuses on

Mexico’s tragic love affair and his alternative rebellion, successfully creating a typical anti-hero image.

4.1 Tragic love affair

Unlike traditional heroes, in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon exposes the cruelty of reality and its devastating impact on people’s ability to love through the tragic experience of love between Mexico and Jessica, showcasing Mexico’s powerlessness.

Roger Mexico is, as Olderman notes, the representation of “the most important counter-entropic force in the book,” that is, love (1983). “Roger is Pynchon’s spokesman for love” (225), and his affection for the British Army girl Jessica reveals Pynchon’s concerns for the future of this entropic world. Mexico’s affections for Jessica are essentially disparate from those of Slothrop’s for Katje in the way that Mexico is truly in love with Jessica. This love means much more to him than the mission of finding out about Slothrop and the war -- “If she leaves, then it ceases to matter how the rockets fall” (133). However, all he can do is face the fact that “the coincidence of the maps, girls, and rocket falls has entered him silently, silent as ice, and Quisling molecules have shifted in latticelike ways to freeze him” (133). By creating tension between Mexico’s helplessness and his love for Jessica, Pynchon once again exposes the cruelty of reality and its devastating impact on people’s ability to love, making Mexico another tragic anti-hero. This can also be observed in a scene of Mexico meeting Jessica at the end of the war:

He hadn’t thought he’d cry when she left. But he cried. Snot by the cubic yard, eyes like red carnations. Presently, every time his left foot hit the ground walking he’d get a jolt of pain through half his skull. Ah, this must be what they mean by the “pain of separation!” Pointsman kept showing up with armloads of work. Roger found himself unable to forget Jessica, and caring less about Slothrop (473).

In this scene, Mexico’s pain of losing Jessica is accompanied by his realization and knowledge of the nature of the war, that is, it has never ended. This clear vision of the situation he is engaged in does not help him release the pain of losing the one he truly loves at all but instead magnifies the fact that his feelings are trivial and he is powerless to face reality. All he can do is cry, with “snot by the cubic yard, eyes like red carnations” (473), which makes him look funny just like a caricature figure. The adoption of this anti-hero thus adds black humor to the characterization of this novel.

4.2 Alternative rebellion

Unlike traditional heroes, in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon portrays the anti-hero Mexico in an alternative way of avenging Pointsman with urine as the weapon.

Pointsman is the biologist in *The White Visitation*, and in this novel, Mexico is referred to as the “Anti-Pointsman”. He had always opposed Pointsman conducting human experiments on Slothrop. When Mexico’s colleague told Mexico that Pointsman had been monitoring Slothrop, Mexico suddenly realized that “Nothing is beyond Pointsman, he’s worse than old Pudding was, no shame at all. He would use anyone—Gloaming, Katje Borgesius, Pirate Prentice, no one is (*Jessica*) exempt from his (Jessica?) Machiavellian--” (475). He told Pointsman that the monitoring of Slothrop was meaningless, as the falling points of rockets had been verified in the Poisson equation, and all the falling points had been verified by science. The disappearance of Slothrop also allowed Mexico to fully see the madness and cruelty of Pointsman, and Mexico suddenly realized that Jessica was also under Pointsman’s control.

Mexico was mad and bent on killing Pointsman. On the one hand to defend the sanctity of his expertise and on the other to free his girlfriend who was under Pointsman’s control. So Mexico, who had stormed into Pointsman’s office, after teasing Pointsman’s secretary and assistant, found Pointsman. Faced with Pointsman and a group of elites, who he hated to the bone, Mexico “has unbuttoned his fly, taken his cock out, and is now busy pissing on the shiny table, the papers, in the ashtrays and pretty soon on these poker-faced men themselves” (478). Such a way of revenge is completely disconnected from the familiar actions taken by those revengeful people whose hearts are full of murder. Readers cannot imagine that the author would let an adult character take such revenge on a hated opponent. Using urine as a weapon, readers cannot connect Mexico with a hero. What is even funnier is that Mexico originally hoped to seek revenge on Pointsman, but all of this urine went to someone else. So Pointsman apologized to Pointsman and said “Goodness, I don’t seem to have any urine left, here. Not even a drop. I’m so sorry. Nothing left for you at all. Do you understand? If it means giving my life” (479). This childlike provocation seems like his urine is some kind of ultimate weapon of great lethality, summing up his battle with a self-satisfied mindset. The author Pynchon absurdly portrays Mexico, a highly educated statistician, as a social character in this scene, which possesses the typical rebellious characteristics of anti-hero characters in black humor novels.

V. CONCLUSION

The manifestation of black humor in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, like other black humor novels, is assisted by characterization. Portraying the protagonists as anti-heroes is a common adoption of black humor novels since the personality and characteristic traits of an anti-hero coincide with the purpose of black humor. With his (her) personality as well as his (her) experiences so disparate from the traditional hero (heroine), an anti-hero serves to create black humor by showing the lack of courage, wisdom, intellect, charisma, and significance. This is fully reflected in the portraits of the two protagonists of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Both Tyrone Slothrop and Roger Mexico are depicted as clown-like common people who are facing the harsh reality in which they are just trivial casualties. Slothrop and Mexico take action to fight against their destiny, however, their attempts only magnify the meaninglessness of their efforts and the ridiculousness of their actions.

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