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Thematic Analysis of *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon*

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Thomas Pynchon

Vineland – A Fictional Town

Vineland is a novel written by Thomas Pynchon in 1990. Its setting is Vineland - a

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fictional town in California's Anderson Valley. Pynchon's *Vinland* is a distant, romanticized land often related to a refuge. It is identified with Thule, the White Island, or Blessed Islands of Western mythology (Hawthorne, 1992). *Vineland* depicts the postmodern life of United States in the 1980's. It attacks the American politics in a hilarious way. It discusses how the country is ruined by the federal government and various political parties.



A Political Novel – A Political Satire

Vineland is controversially political. However, it cannot be considered as leftist literature. Pynchon makes satirical remarks on the counterculture and opposition movements. He expresses his anger on Reaganomics by producing the novel in such a way that it resembles George Orwell's *1984* in attacking political developments of the day and Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* in depicting the landscapes and social upheavals.

Orwell's *1984* is about Communism. Pynchon's *Vineland* deals with American totalitarianism, very typically Nixon/Reaganism.

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A Novel in 1960s

The novel occurs in 1984. However, most of the action takes place in the 1960s. This explains how America hasn't changed for twenty years. The novel reveals the shift of American rebelliousness from one generation to another. It criticises the left-wing politics in America. It depicts the lawlessness or political disorder in northern California. It mocks at the hippiedom, a culture disintegrated by Reaganomics. It brings out the horrible sides of the heart and soul of "middle America".

A Mixture of Various Motifs

In *Vineland*, Pynchon mixes classical works, mythologies, and popular cultural sources with contemporary literature. Pynchon's weirdness pervades the entire novel. The plot contains nightmares, dark fantasies, dull songs, movie mockery, political commentaries, etc. A few subplots remain unresolved. Musical interludes and Star Trek references make the novel a primetime soap opera. It expresses the themes of entropy, conspiracy, and quest in a satiric way. Symbolism and elaborate plot structure are not prominent in this novel.

Ugly and Unrefined Characters

Vineland contains a lot of ugly, unrefined characters. Many of them suffer from psychological imbalance and insanity. The novel contains strange people like female ninjas, astrologers, marijuana smokers, and television addicts. There are many references to contemporary life too. George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Nevil Maskelyne, Samuel Johnson, Thomas Jefferson, and John Harrison make appearances in *Vineland*, showcasing historiographic metafiction.

Techniques Adopted

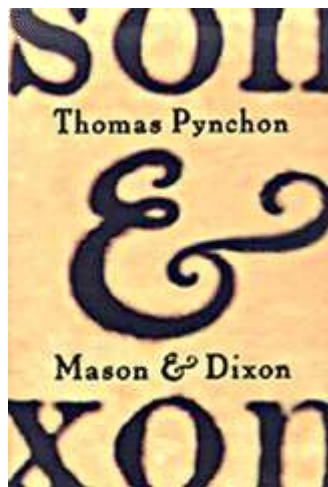
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Many of Pynchon's literary techniques appear in *Vineland*. The novel begins with a shift and slowly breaks into myriad narratives. Towards the end, all the fragments fit together to give a clear picture of what is happening. There is digression which leads to a digression which leads to another digression, but the main line of the narrative is easier to follow than in any of Pynchon's novels.

“Some die but rejoin the action. Some escape from the jail and the evil Brock Vond, only to appear in that jail again. Their experiences double back or leap forward, forming a loose web of complex digressions that are troubling, at the same time, fascinating” (*Amazon.com*, n.d). There is no linear narrative. Discontinuity and randomness are prominent in the novel.



***Mason and Dixon* - A Postmodernist Novel**

Mason and Dixon is an epic postmodernist novel by Thomas Pynchon. It was started in 1975 and completed only in 1997. The novel revolves around the lifelong partnership and adventures of the English surveyors Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon of Mason-Dixon Line fame. They travel around the world mapping and measuring through pre-revolutionary America of Native Americans.

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England and France are engaged in a power struggle for colonies in North America and India. The British East India Company has full control over the trade routes and commodities at Tenerife, St. Helena, and Capetown, South Africa. Property rights and control of commerce which are prominent during the eighteenth century form the setting of *Mason & Dixon*.

Contrasting Personalities

Mason and Dixon have contrasting personalities. Mason is a moody loner while Dixon is gregarious and hyperactive. Mason wears a powdered wig, and Dixon wears a red jacket with silver buttons and a three-cornered hat. Mason speaks in British vernacular (Kopps, 2004). The novel mixes Mason and Dixon's biographies, history, fantasy, legend, speculation, and instant fabrication.

Surveying Exploits

The novel occurs in the astronomical and surveying exploits in Cape Colony, Saint Helena, and Great Britain. It deals with the Mason-Dixon Line in British North America during the American Revolutionary War. Journeys are a major theme. During the course of their journeys to three continents, Mason and Dixon learn about different cultures, new foods, poems, and music sung by sailors, workers, and popular people.

Isolation and Alienation

The themes of isolation and alienation are evident in the novel. Isolation in Capetown drives the Vroom family to religious hypocrisy and sexual immorality. Helena drives Nevil Maskelyne to eccentricity and paranoia. Isolation on the frontier drives settlers like the Paxton brothers to violence and depravity.

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Mixing Classics and Contemporary

Pynchon mixes classics with contemporary literature. *Mason & Dixon* has the influence of Boccaccio's 14th century *Decameron* and Umberto Eco's *The Island of the Day Before*. Pynchon blends tragedy and satire, fiction and nonfiction, fantasy and realism, historical characters and fictional characters, etc. There are unresolved conflicts, flashbacks, poems, songs, anachronisms, lengthy dialogues, stream-of-consciousness, etc. The novel also contains philosophical discussions and parables of automata or robots, afterlife, slavery, feng shui, etc., showcasing the postmodern pastiche.

The opening lines of *Mason and Dixon* are very casual, showcasing postmodern play prominent in the novel.

"Snow-Balls have flown their Arcs, starr'd the Sides of Outbuildings, as of Cousins, carried Hats away into the brisk Wind off Delaware,— the Sleds are brought in and their Runners carefully dried and greased, shoes deposited in the back Hall, a stocking'd foot Descent made upon the great Kitchen, in a purposeful Dither since Morning, punctuated by the ringing Lids of various Boilers and Stewing-Pots, fragrant with Pie-Spices, peel'd Fruits, Suet, heated Sugar,— the Children, having all upon the Fly, among rhythmic slaps of Batter and Spoon, coax'd and stolen what they might, proceed, as pon each afternoon all this snowy Advent, to a comortable Room at the rear of the House, years since given over to their carefree Assaults" (*Mason and Dixon*, 1).

A Narrative – Parallel Stories

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Mason & Dixon presents not the story of Mason and Dixon, but a story of Mason and Dixon through the narrative focal point of Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke. The Cherrycoke narrative shifts internally from one point of view to another, often relating events from the view of people Cherrycoke has never met. At one point, the first-person narrator Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke shifts to a third-person omniscient point of view. This shift in point of view is typical of postmodernism.

A parallel story is read by two cousins. It is an erotic 'captured by Indians' narrative. It works its way into the main thread of Cherrycoke's story. It blurs and obliterates the line between objective history and subjectivity (Hinds & Wall, 2005). What "really happened" is nothing more than a construction of several narrators, perhaps one of whom directly is the author. It demonstrates short circuit, a postmodern element.

Dated Spelling, Grammar and Lexical Use - Functions

Pynchon employs the spelling, grammar, and lexical use of an actual late 18th century document, emphasising the novel's intended anachronism. This makes the novel difficult to read. But Pynchon's use of language soon develops into a readable pattern. *Mason & Dixon* abides by Sterne's 18th-century diction, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and periodic sentences, and shares his delight in violating and mocking the novel's then-emerging conventions of structure, character, and verisimilitude (Keough, 1997).

Kaleidoscopic Themes

Pynchon presents kaleidoscopic themes in *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon*. Themes like entropy, conspiracy, quest, symbolism, satire, anachronism, fragmentation, digression, randomness, short circuit, shift in point of view, mixing high and low literatures, blurring the

distinction between high and low cultures, deconstruction, play, pastiche, historiographical, metafiction, etc., are evident in the two novels making them typically postmodern.

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