



## THE THEME OF ENTRAPMENT IN PETER CAREY'S "OSCAR AND LUCINDA"

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### ABSTRACT

*Oscar and Lucinda* is a satire about two star-crossed lovers that takes place in the mid-nineteenth century. Oscar Hopkins is a contradictory man, both pious and corrupt. He was raised by a strict, religious father, but he abandons his father's religion in favor of Anglicanism. He spends the rest of his life wondering if his decision has damned his soul to hell, as his father believes. Oscar further endangers his soul when he takes up gambling while in divinity school. Oscar justifies his vice by philosophizing that believing in God is a gamble anyway. How could God condemn a man for having a bit of fun at the racetrack? Locked in an inner conflict between his fears of damnation and his need to gamble, Oscar decides that a little suffering might go a long way towards redeeming him in God's eyes.

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### INTRODUCTION

The important analysis "post colonial" writing, Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin have agreed for the centrality of metonyms to that enterprise. Post-colonial writing in "settler" countries – Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States – has differed from its counterparts elsewhere. In Australia in particular, the theme of entrapment or imprisonment- reflecting white Australia's origins as a penal colony- has been a major metonym.

Carey's fiction, both literal and figurative entrapment are invoked; and while naturally one must be careful not to see figurative entrapment everywhere, Carey is usually quite overt in that respect. His fictions abound with actual prisons and cages, which perhaps serve as metonym for Australian society. Carey has indicated in an interview that *Illywhacker* marks his attempt to come to terms with Australia, but many of the themes and motifs of *Illywhacker* and of *Oscar and Lucinda*, are anticipated in *Bliss*, including that of

imprisonment or entrapment in the novel *Oscar and Lucinda*.

Peter Carey's novel *Oscar and Lucinda* of the undeclared love between clergyman Oscar Hopkins and the heiress Lucinda Leplastrier is both a moving and beautiful love story and a historical tour de force. Made for each other, the two are gamblers- one obsessive, the other compulsive- incapable of winning at the game of love.

Colonial Sydney might be besotted with gambling, but only as a concession to the dominance of rigid, antique codes of living. An illicit hand in a Chinese den at sundown compensates for a life in which the outcomes are always the same: injustice for blacks, suppression for women, and ridicule for innovators. But gambling is another game entirely for *Oscar and Lucinda*, an expression of their desire for real change and reformation. In that sense, gambling is also an expression of their innocence. The walls of social obstruction rises around them with fatal inevitability, and the two toss everything on one

fantastic, final wager: to transport a glass church across the continent to an isolated missionary outpost.

Peter Carey is a complete writer. He has all the skills, and knows all the tricks. He can combine a genius for stark, under-stated comedy, with a nearly Dickensian generosity of description; the result is that hardly a character passes through this novel without Carey enlightening us to the peculiarities of physiognomy, psychology and personal history that establish that character's unique and lasting patent over a portion of the reader's memory. It is hard to forget the colonial farmer you meet on a ship: the fellow is curious about your opinion of Charles Darwin, and always smells of llama-hairs. Equally memorable is his traveling companion: a fat bully with a gift for devastatingly accurate impersonations of his victims.

Carey can create landscape like he can create people. He knows the startling beauty of an evening in the Southern Hemisphere: clouds in the sunset shine in "a thin swathe of soft gold, like a dagger left carelessly on a window sill". Most of all, his genius comes across in the formal structure of the novel--the swiveling perspectives, the brilliant use of free indirect third person, subtle and summary alterations in tone, lyrical set-pieces, the structuring metaphors. The net result is a prose narrative that is a technical marvel; equipped with trap-doors and lifts, it can drop readers at will into a character's mind, lift them as unexpectedly into another's, rotating them freely about the spectacle of now-opening, now-closing inner lives of them characters, in a show as kaleidoscopic as the glass made in Lucinda's factory.

It tells the story of Oscar Hopkins, the Cornish son of a Plymouth Brethren minister who becomes an Anglican priest, and Lucinda Leplastrier, a young Australian heiress who buys a glass factory. They meet on the boat over to Australia, and discover that they are both gamblers, one obsessive the other compulsive. Lucinda bets Oscar that he cannot transport a glass church from Sydney to a remote settlement at Bellingen, some 400 km up the New South Wales coast. This bet changes both their lives forever.

The novel begins with the narrator describing his own life, but he disappears as the story unfolds. It is possible Carey became so involved with Oscar and Lucinda's lives that he forgot about his narrator. If that were the case, he could have erased the first two chapters and solved the problem by having no narrator at all. However, the narrator must exist to assure the reader that people depend on this story for meaning. His mother lives for telling the story: "My mother told the story of the church in a way that embarrassed me. There was an excess of emotion in her style. There was something false. We must have all known it, but we never spoke about it" (2). The narrator overlooks the story's artificial quality because he needs to believe in it just as his mother does, because there is nothing else to believe in. The mother's desire to make Lucinda part of her own history makes sense simply because Miriam's life does not offer a story the mother can be proud of. The false narrative allows the family to believe in their history having significance.

Between the beginning and the end, the narrator's voice returns to dominate the text once, in the chapter "Christian Stories" (60-61). Just as his family made "a star of Bethlehem from cardboard and silver paper," they create order in their lives by believing in stories. Depending on whether the author or narrator titled the chapter, the narrator may still believe in this list or he has lost his faith in miracles and stories. However, the reader never solves this puzzle. Indeed, Carey quiets the narrator just before the story turns to Lucinda, the woman the reader falsifies as the narrator's great-grandmother. After this point, the narrator only intermittently talks about his mother or uses a possessive voice when telling the story. The narration overtakes the voice of the narrator so that he exists only in relation to the story itself. Ironically, the narrator's problematic disappearance illustrates the danger of stories shaping one's existence. The story initially needs the narrator to claim it as meaningful; once the reader assumes the connection between the storyteller and story as valid the story the dependency rotates and the story creates the one who tells it.

After Oscar signs the marriage document, he "disappeared forever from my great-grandmother's life" (424). Miriam inherits the Lucinda's fortune, and receives a letter from Lucinda, who writes "I made a bet in order that I keep my beloved safe" (427). Miriam meets Lucinda only once, "outside the court in Sydney" (427). Finally, a letter is found in Miriam's petticoat from Lucinda returning the check for ten guineas (429). From these few remnants of Oscar and Lucinda's lives, how could a story be constructed? Ironically, the story could not have been passed on through Oscar's child because the mother never hears it. *Oscar and Lucinda* seemingly lacks an explanation of the pieces of the story coming together. Even if enough clues existed to build a story, the unbelievable detail the narrator provides about the characters' actions and thoughts falsifies the story. For example, the narrator brings Wardley-Fish back into the story looking for Oscar after Lucinda leaves Longnose Point (429). This piece of the story must be fabricated in order to complete the narration. The remarkable glass church Oscar and Lucinda construct provides a symbolic metaphor to this puzzle.

When Oscar and Lucinda first conceive of the glass church, "all of their emotions were fused together in this glass vision in which they saw that which cannot be seen" (324). The glass signifies meaning for Oscar and Lucinda because it brings them together. Lucinda describes the building of the church as living: "we are alive on the very brink of eternity" (355). The physical qualities of the glass parallel the pieces of the story the narrator artificially pulls together. The panes of glass don't hold up under the pressure of the water. As the transparent beauty shatters, the glass traps Oscar inside, sinking him with the church:

The tilting platform became a ramp and the glass church slid beneath the water and while my great-grandfather kicked and pulled at the jammed door, the fractured panes of glass behind his back opened to let in his ancient enemy. He could see, dimly, the outside world, the chair and benches of his father's study. Shining fragments of aquarium glass fell like snow around him. (432)

Carey prophesizes the destructive nature of stories when telling them assumes power over meaning in an individual's life. Ruskin asserts that a solid building must serve the purpose of the building and stand strong; the glass church does neither of these, but it provides meaning to Oscar and Lucinda while they believe in it. Indeed, the transport of the church destroys life in its path until Oscar prays for the Church's destruction. In the same way, the narrator's mother believes in the story even though it destroys her relationship with her husband. When stories fall apart, as this one does, the people who found meaning in them must falsify them in order to continue believing in them.

Although the novel breaks down the relationship between stories and meaning, Carey does provide solutions that order the novel. He accomplishes this partly by allowing a character to find meaning in work rather than stories or transparencies. Lucinda loses her fortune to Oscar's wife, which allows her to escape the delusion of the glass church and begin her life.

Lucinda was known for more important things than her passion for a nervous clergyman. She was famous or famous at least amongst students of the Australian labor movement. One could look at this letter and know that its implicit pain and panic would be but a sharp jab in the long and fruitful journey of her life. One could view it as the last thing before her real life could begin. (428-429)

Unable to contain Lucinda, the narrative leaves a possibility for the past to become nothing more than history. The cheque Lucinda sends back to Miriam serves as an example: "By the time it was found, her letter was as fragile as the body of a long-dead dragon-fly. Its juice was dry. It was history" (428). Just as the church gets carted away because "it was not of any use," the past becomes meaningless as Lucinda lets go of it. The narrator fabricates the story, but unlike the other two novels, the author presents a possibility for escaping fantasies and living a productive life of one's own.

The novel's centre are two gamblers (the chief difference between them, the narrator informs us, is that one is an obsessive gambler, the other merely compulsive). There shouldn't be, on the face of it, anything unconventional about Oscar Hopkins or Lucinda Leplastrier. Between the two of them they represent the Church and Capitalist Enterprise, the twin bulwarks of Victorian society. Oscar is an Oxford-educated, High Anglican priest, while Lucinda, the inheritor of a substantial fortune, and is the proprietor of one of the colony's pioneering glassworks factories. And yet they gamble.

Oscar Hopkins is a high-strung preacher's kid with hydrophobia and noisy knees. Lucinda Leplastrier is a frizzy-haired heiress who impulsively buys a glass factory with the inheritance forced on her by a well-intentioned adviser. In the early parts of this lushly written book, author Peter Carey renders the seminal turning points in his protagonists' childhoods as exquisite 19th-century set pieces. Young Oscar denied the heavenly fruit of a Christmas pudding by his cruelly stern father, forever renounces his father's religion in favor of the Anglican Church. "Dear God," Oscar prays, "if it be Thy will that Thy people eat pudding, smite him!" Lucinda's childhood trauma involves a beautiful doll bought by her struggling mother with savings from the jam jar; in a misguided attempt to tame the doll's unruly curls, young Lucinda mutilates her treasure beyond repair. Neither of these coming-of-age stories quite explains how the grownup Oscar and Lucinda each develop a guilty passion for gambling. Oscar plays the horses while at school, and Lucinda, now an orphaned heiress, finds comfort in a game of cards with an odd collection of acquaintances. When the two finally meet, on board a ship bound for New South Wales, they are bound by their affinity for risk, their loneliness, and their awkwardly blossoming (but unexpressed) mutual affection. Their final high-stakes folly—transporting a crystal palace of a church across (literally) godforsaken terrain—strains plausibility, and events turn ghastly as Oscar plays out his bid for Lucinda's heart. Yet even the unconvincing plot turns are made up for by Carey's rich prose and the tale's unpredictable outcome. Although love proves to be the ultimate gamble for Oscar and Lucinda, the story

never strays too far from the terrible possibility that even the most thunderstruck lovers can remain isolated in parallel lives.

The theme of imprisonment in *Oscar and Lucinda* is carried somewhat differently by the two title characters. Lucinda finds the entire world a prison, entrapped in the conventions and expectations of her society "even without (the) whalebone and elastic" that she refuses to wear the conventional clothing that would inhibit it automatically—compare Honey Barbara in *Bliss*, whose stride is contrasted to the hobbled walk of city women and who strikes David as disconcertingly "wild and untrammelled."

Inadequately socialized as a woman (according to her mother's mea culpa), Lucinda must be kept in her place by the gaze of men in groups and by the Foucauldian "capillary" surveillance of everyone—the lawyer, Ahearn, the glass blower, Phelps, and even her maid, Mrs. Smith—admonishing her to stay within accepted boundaries.

Oscar, on the other hand, experiences a series of prisons of various types. Throughout the novel he is entrapped in his religious belief, making a series of extremely painful and important life decisions on the basis of throwing lots or flipping coins. Traveling to Australia from England by boat, he is trapped below deck by his fear of water, and has to be hoisted onto the boat initially in a cage.

Working in a room full of clerks for d'Abbs, Oscar is subjected to the "panopticonic" oversight of Jeffries, under which everyone works silently even though there are no articulated rules. During the journey to the outback with the glass church, he is literally Jeffries's prisoner, and is confined to a wagon designated "the Ladies compartment" to add to his ignominy. Finally, of course, he dies entrapped in the glass church as the river water rises through cracks in the glass and the door to the church jams.

Oscar and Lucinda together conspire to construct an entrapping misunderstanding as elaborate and cleverly constructed in its way as the glass church itself. As in a classic romance, they deepen the misunderstanding in a minuet of steps, the differences being that the classical romantic resolution fails occur, Lucinda eventually prays for

Oscar to release her from “the prison her foolishness had made for her,” but divine intervention is not forthcoming.

Lucinda, afraid that Oscar will think she has him in mind for marriage, pretends to a continuing and exaggerated passion for Hasset well after he has left her life both physically and emotionally, including keeping letters on the mantelpiece, so she will not lose Oscar’s company altogether. When she thinks he might be ready to reciprocate her interest in him, conventions as well as the fear of appearing too bold hold her in check, and she waits for Oscar to speak first.

Oscar is crushed by her deception concerning Hasset, as he loves her already. He fears revealing his love for her, lest she be offended and withdraws or even refuses to see him. Indeed, assuming himself to be in competition with a clever, “manly” Hasset, Oscar sees his only hope pressing his suit. His Christianity compounds this approach, leading him to hope that self-sacrifice may be the road to desires fulfilled.

Lucinda and Oscar conspire, then, to invert each other’s meanings to maintain the edifice of misunderstanding. They enter into the wager of whether or not Oscar can deliver the Glass church to Hasset in the outback by Palm Sunday, which ends in his journey into the heart of darkness with Jeffris and his death trapped in the glass church.

“*Oscar & Lucinda* is a novel of extraordinary richness, complexity and strength – it is a peopled world, humming, buzzing, dancing with life and liveliness; it brings the past, in all its difference, bewilderingly into our present. It fills me with wild, savage envy, and no novelist could say fairer than that.”

—Angela Carter, *The Guardian*

“It is Thomas Wolfe one is reminded of most when reading Peter Carey...they share that magnificent vitality, that ebullient delight in character, detail and language that turns a novel into an important book.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

#### WORK CITED

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