

# Identities and Themes in *Oscar and Lucinda* From the Post-colonial Perspective

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Peter Carey is “one of the most original and talented writers” of New Writing in Australia. *Oscar and Lucinda* is one of his novels, which sets in 19th century Britain and Australia and tells the bizarre, pure love story between these two persons. However, it is also interspersed with numerous depictions of Christianity, Australian aboriginal culture, and British colonial invasion. Therefore, many critics and even Peter Carey himself see it as an exploration and reflection on colonialism and Australia’s national cultural identity. Aiming at the colonial elements in the novel, this paper will proceed from the post-colonial theory, through the analysis of the hybridity of the protagonist’s identities and the inner themes of the novel, to explore the characters’ confusion about identity under the colonial era, and the cruel colonial reality hidden under the Christian civilization.

*Keywords:* Peter Carey, *Oscar and Lucinda*, post-colonialism

## Introduction

It is widely believed that Peter Carey is one of the few distinguished and profound Australian writers since Patrick White, and has twice won the Booker Prize. To date, Carey has published two collections of short stories, 14 novels, and three non-fiction works. According to Peng Qinglong, “His writing career can be generally divided into three phases-initiative period when being the Representative of New Writing (1964-1979), middle period when being spokesperson of Australian culture (1980-1988), and peak period when being Australian National Myth maker (1989-)” (2011b, p. 26).

“‘Oscar and Lucinda’ is one of Carey’s best, most powerful and most acclaimed works so far” (Peng, 2011a, p. 97). Lucinda was from Australia. After the death of her parents, she inherited a large fortune. While Oscar was originally a Christian priest in England, because of gambling, volunteered to preach in Australia to alleviate his guilty in the heart. They met and fell in love with each other. Lucinda asked Oscar to send a glass church to Bellingen. If Oscar succeeded, she would give all her property to Oscar and marry him. Lucinda hired Jeffris to escort Oscar, but Jeffris’ atrocities against the indigenous people along their way made Oscar unbearable and finally killed him. Oscar, who was in a trance, was seduced by a widow and married her. After awakening, Oscar came to the glass church on the ship to confess, but the hull broke, Oscar and the church both fell into the river, and he finally drowned.

The researches on *Oscar and Lucinda* started later than foreign. They mainly focused on its subject, feminist analysis of the heroine, irony, character analysis and narrative perspective. Besides, some other scholar interpreted it from the post-colonial perspective. Hua Juan exposed the “truth of ‘civilization’ process through

the colonizer and the colonized” (2011, p. 38) in that colonial period. She also employed post-colonialism to have a contrast analysis between *Oscar and Lucinda* and other novel. While the research on post-colonialism is not comprehensive, and there were few joint studies on the hybridity of protagonists’ identities and their hidden colonial themes from the perspective of post-colonialism. Therefore, this article will re-examine the novel *Oscar and Lucinda* from this point of view.

### Post-colonial Analysis

#### The Hybridity of Identities

The post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha first applied the concept of hybridity to the theory of post-colonialism, and comprehensively constructed the cultural concept of hybridity. Bhabha pointed that “In terms of cultural identity, hybridity means that different cultures are not separated from each other, but always collide with each other. Such collisions and communications lead to cultural hybridization” (Sheng, 2011, p. 114). That is to say, the relationship between the colonist and the colonized is not only a one-way operation of power, but in fact their relationship is intertwined, and it is difficult to strictly demarcate and distinguish them.

**Triple identities of Oscar.** “There are two issues that cannot be avoided in the discussion about Australian national identity. The first is the connection and disagreement between Australian and British culture, and the second is the relationship between whites and minorities, especially aborigines” (Zhou, 2005, p. 94). Oscar, who wondered between the two cultures of Britain and Australia, became a hybrid of triple identities. Oscar was born in England; after being sent to Oxford to study theology, he became a Christian minister. This is his first identity. However, as a Christian minister, he should have been upright and self-denying, but Oscar indulged in gambling, showing a deviation from the image of the minister. Oscar partly represented the corruption and degeneration of Christian civilization in Britain culture. When Oscar came to Australia, he became an ordinary employee of the company. This was his second identity. Oscar temporarily got rid of the image of a priest and devoted himself entirely to his colonial career. Originally, he wanted to realize his own value in this identity, but in the depressed working environment, he often thought of Britain and his former priest identity; this kind of hybridity made him gradually lose his cultural identity. When Oscar escorted the glass church across the Australian grasslands, his identity changed again. This time, he became the colonial invader of imperial culture. On the surface, Oscar thought he was trying to spread the Christian civilization to Australia’s uncivilized aboriginal people. When Oscar saw Jeffris’ atrocities against the indigenous people, he was extremely angry. He did not want to hurt these innocent indigenous people. But in fact, he took the role of a Christian priest in the British Empire, preached to the local indigenous people, and then unknowingly achieved the purpose of colonial control by invisible cultural invasion. His contradiction was the embodiment of the hybridity of his identity.

**Double identities of Lucinda.** Lucinda’s hybridity of her identity firstly reflected in her family. Lucinda’s parents were all authentic British, later immigrated to Australia; Lucinda was born and raised in Australia. So she had both British origin and Australian cultural background. By constructing national identity, one can find one’s own origin and orientation, while the lack of national identity will lead to the confusion of subject without goals and the strong root-seeking complex. After Lucinda’s parents died, she lived alone in Australia, and was confused with this patriarchal, restrained society. Therefore, Lucinda decided to return to the “home country” Britain to find her own national identity. However, when she arrived in London, she realized that it had become the factory of the world, and it was not her home at all; she could not find her identity here. The

intertwined national identities of Britain and Australia made Lucinda at a loss. As an Englishman, she was regarded as a colonizer by the indigenous people; while as an Australian, she was a colonized person in the eyes of the British. This could better explained by Bill Ashcroft; he pointed that in the post-colonial discourse, the hybridity phenomenon was neither entirely on the side of the colonizer; it should be noted that it is also not entirely on the side of the colonized. Lucinda's hybridity was also reflected in some of her feminist thoughts. Lucinda's mother was a very independent, modern woman. She established a factory herself; the purpose was to offer an economic foundation for women to fight against social oppression. Affected by her mother, Lucinda also hoped to be able to gain an independent foothold in society, and not willing to be constrained by men, so she bought a glass manufacturing plant and became a female factory owner in the colony. However, when she made a bet with Oscar and wanted to give him all her property, it was clear that she was not entirely breaking out of the patriarchy. Because she wanted to use her wealth to enhance Oscar's social status, while she herself was willing to be a traditional woman who attached herself to her husband without any assets. Unable to find her own national identity, and often lingered between traditional and modern women, Lucinda's life had been full of hybridity.

### **Multiple Themes in Post-colonial View**

According to Ashcroft, there are three modes of post-colonial literary criticism: One is the native mode that emphasizes regional cultural characteristics; the other is the ethnic mode that emphasizes ethnic characteristics; the third is the comparative mode that emphasizes language, history, cultural characteristics, and their hybridity phenomena (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989, pp. 15-37). Therefore, from the perspective of literary themes in the third model, this part will explore the colonial conflicts and themes hidden in love story and Christian civilization.

**Conflicts between Christian culture and indigenous culture.** The glass church in the novel was not only a symbol of the love of Oscar and Lucinda, but also a symbol of Christian civilization and religious culture. Oscar took on the task of transporting the glass church; his role as a Christian priest also made him claim to carry the mission of God, went deep into the Australian outback, preached to the indigenous people, and brought them the gospel. Mr. Borrodaile was unimpressed by Oscar's behavior and argued that it was a waste of time to convert blacks to God because the most striking thing about them was that they had no religious belief at all. This was a prejudice that white people had against aboriginal people in Australia. They measured aboriginal culture and beliefs by their own culture and beliefs, completely ignored or fundamentally denied aboriginal culture. In fact, before the white people arrived in Australia, the indigenous people had formed their own culture. Although Australia's vast territory and diverse languages had created cultural differences between different tribes, they still shared a common belief of "Dreamtime". Over tens of thousands of years, indigenous people had created a rich culture and formed highly developed and complex religious beliefs. Oscar brought his Christian culture and the huge dazzling glass church to the aborigines of Australia. He thought he was spreading faith to the aborigines, while he did not realize that this was actually a kind of cultural invasion.

**British imperial colonial expedition.** The journey of transporting the glass church was actually a typical imperial colonial expedition. The cruel, violent expedition representative was Jeffris; the glass church was his excuse for indiscriminate killing of indigenous people and vandalism of environment. Jeffris was an avid explorer whose whole purpose was to measure and name unexplored wilderness; he thought this would make him a hero of the empire. While the attitude towards indigenous people was actually contempt, indifference,

and violence. In order to measure the height of the mountain, Jeffris cut down trees arbitrarily, destroyed forests, and plundered the living resources of the indigenous people. Jeffris' expedition wanted to cross a mountain that the indigenous people considered sacred and inadmissible. Angered by their beliefs, the white man shot one of the aborigines. They had no respect and awe for nature and indigenous people, but only violent conquest. The vicious, sinister, and hypocritical invaders represented by Jeffris were exposed completely. In the novel, Peter Carey corrected the deviation of the white perspective of the British invasion of Australia, justified the invasion and oppression for the aborigines.

### Conclusion

Beyond the main line of Oscar and Lucinda's love and the symbolic significance of the glass church, this novel revealed the huge impact of the Christian culture on the indigenous culture contained in the novel, as well as the destruction and pain of indigenous people caused by the violent and ferocious colonists. Peter Carey "subverted history", which was quite different from the previous colonization process that interpreted from the perspective of white people. This expressed his hope that in today's multicultural Australian society, various civilizations should coordinate and develop peacefully.

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