



universität  
wien

# DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der Diplomarbeit  
“Peter Carey’s Short Stories”

Verfasserin  
Lisa Klauser

angestrebter akademischer Grad  
Magistra der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Wien, im Mai 2011

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt:  
Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt:  
Betreuerin:

A 343  
Anglistik und Amerikanistik  
o. Univ.-Prof. Dr. Margarete Rubik



**To my mother and father,  
with love and gratitude**

Thanks to Prof. Rubik for her inspiration, guidance and patience during the process of writing this thesis.

Thank you, Mark, Sabine, Gretl, Katharina and Kyle, for your care, encouragement, great help and love.



# Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>RECURRING THEMES IN COLLECTED STORIES .....</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1	TRAPPED IN COLONIALIST AND CAPITALIST STRUCTURES .....	5
2.2	BLURRED BOUNDARIES – GENDER IN CAREY’S SHORT STORIES .....	17
2.3	“TRUE” REALITY AND ALTERNATE REALITIES .....	25
<b>3</b>	<b>NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN CAREY’S SHORT FICTION .....</b>	<b>35</b>
3.1	SETTING: TIME, PLACE AND ATMOSPHERE IN COLLECTED STORIES .....	35
3.2	SUSPENSE AND CHRONOLOGY .....	41
3.3	NARRATIVE VOICES .....	46
3.4	NARRATIVE MODE AND GENRE IN CAREY’S SHORT STORIES .....	53
3.4.1	<i>An attempt to categorise.....</i>	<i>57</i>
<b>4</b>	<b>THE UNSETTLING AND DISCONCERTING QUALITIES OF PETER CAREY’S SHORT FICTION – A COGNITIVE APPROACH.....</b>	<b>61</b>
4.1	SHARED COGNITIVE ELEMENTS IN THE SEMI-ABSURD AND IMAGINARY STORIES .....	61
4.1.1	<i>Mental sets, scripts and schemata – plot expectations in Carey’s Collected Stories.....</i>	<i>61</i>
4.1.2	<i>Deictic shift theory and metalepsis .....</i>	<i>73</i>
4.2	THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE IMAGINARY AND THE SEMI-ABSURD STORIES.....	82
4.2.1	<i>What makes the imaginary stories disturbing and confusing?....</i>	<i>82</i>
4.2.2	<i>Why are the semi-absurd stories so unsettling?.....</i>	<i>90</i>
4.3	CONCLUDING WITH A HAUNTING LACK OF CLOSURE.....	99
<b>5</b>	<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>103</b>
5.1	PRIMARY LITERATURE.....	103
5.2	OTHER REFERENCES.....	103
<b>6</b>	<b>INDEX .....</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>GERMAN ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>CURRICULUM VITAE .....</b>	<b>111</b>



# 1 Introduction

Peter Carey is one of the best-known Australian writers of our times and the second of only two authors who have won the prestigious Man Booker Prize twice<sup>1</sup>. The very first books he published were two volumes of short stories and although they are less renowned than Carey's longer fiction they are not entirely fameless and their artistic quality is by no means inferior to that of his later novels. *The Fat Man in History*, published in 1974, "won him an enthusiastic public and something of a cult following" (Hassall 3). The second of the two collections, *War Crimes*, was published in 1979 and Carey was awarded the New South Wales Premier's Award for it in the following year. Since the publication of his first novel *Bliss* in 1981, Carey has become a successful novelist and his days of short story writing seem to be over, although some of his critics are of the opinion that short fiction is where his true talent lies (cf. Woodcock 37 and Rubik 169).

The stories in *The Fat Man in History* and *War Crimes*, published together in *Collected Stories* in 1995, share several distinct qualities, which will be fleshed out in the three main chapters of this thesis.

The goal of the first major section (chapter 2) will be to determine the socio-political issues Carey raises in his short stories. Although "his short fictions are generally resistant to simple allegorical readings," (Bennett 195) a certain concern about social ills can be identified. Having absorbed the hippy ethos of the 1960s and 70s, Carey was apparently most alarmed about the kind of future to which the roads of capitalism and globalisation might be leading. The hippy movement fought against authoritarian social systems repressing the individual and denying self-determination. The "hellish worlds" (Hassall 5) created in Carey's stories seem to portray an exaggerated status quo of the era or perhaps an outlook into a possible future, should the goal of social realignment not be achieved. To shatter seemingly hard and fast social

---

<sup>1</sup> Carey was awarded this prize for his novels *Oscar and Lucinda* in 1988 and *True History of the Kelly Gang* in 2001. The other novelist referred to here is the South African writer J.M. Coetzee, who has won this award for *Life & Times of Michael K* in 1983 and *Disgrace* in 1999.

norms was the zeitgeist of the 1960s and 70s and to break with traditional categories of identity was the agenda. Second wave feminism was at its climax when Carey first published his short fiction and the rigid social roles assigned to the two sexes slowly began to soften. The availability of television had gradually spread during the 1960s and developed great impact on the consumers. Artificially constructed notions of reality, conveyed by Hollywood movies, could now be consumed on a daily basis at home and the fictional world of movie characters started to seep into reality and thereby made the concept of reality itself vulnerable. Thus, to establish how Carey manages to integrate the social issues in his stories shall be the focus of this first main chapter.

The second of the three main sections (chapter 3), will deal with the narrative technique in Carey's short stories. The remarkable vagueness of his settings, never revealing when and where exactly the post-modern stories are set is equally absorbing as the high degree of suspense Carey manages to create. The invariably unreliable narrators keep the reader in the dark about the essential meaning or truth of the narratives, not supposing that there is such a thing as an essential meaning in these post-modern stories. This chapter will also examine why Carey's stories are so difficult to categorise when it comes to defining the genre. Science fiction, fantasy and even fable creep into some of Carey's realistic settings adding strangely unfamiliar elements to otherwise well-known worlds. Although I am aware that such a classification can only be made provisionally, the last sub-section of this chapter will nevertheless establish three categories among Carey's stories, dividing them into *imaginary*, *semi-absurd* and *realistic*. The first of these three groups comprises all the stories featuring elements of the popular and saleable genres outside realistic grounds and will be subject to close examination in the last chapter. The second group, the semi-absurd, also comprises stories the reader cannot fully contain in a mental representation of his or her perceived reality, but here different mechanisms are at work, which will, too, be explored in the last chapter. As they lack the Carey-esque reverberating effect, the six stories labelled as realistic in this chapter, will be treated in much less detail, but will be covered nevertheless for reasons of integrity.



In the last and concluding section of this study (chapter 4), an attempt will be made to analyse the semi-absurd and the imaginary stories through a cognitive poetics lens. This fairly new theoretical approach to literary works offers new insight into how narratives are processed in the reader's mind. Fundamental and subconscious psychological mechanisms are involved in both the perception of real-life situations and literary experience. The two ostensibly disparate experiences are processed in similar ways by our brains and the same systems of concepts and according reactions are activated. Innate survival strategies, like mental sets, as well as experientially and socially learned scripts and schemata can be conjured up by literature, although they have initially been developed to deal with real life threat and pleasure. This theory, however, also accounts for how the human mind is able to blend mental spaces, or frames, in order to be able to extract meaning from otherwise inconsistent information. This theory is applied to Carey's stories in an attempt to single out the unique unsettling and convulsive qualities that make his short fiction so "provocative and unforgettable" (Rubik 169).

What I expect to prove with this thesis, is that cognitive poetics can be a very useful tool for examining the "haunting aftertaste which makes [Carey's stories] lodge in the imagination long after the reader has put the book down" (Rubik 169). Cognitive poetics does not provide any deeper insight or revelation about the pending meaning of the texts in *Collected Stories*. Yet, this theoretical framework can be a means of elucidating how Carey conjures up such strong and often conflicting emotions in the reader, leaving him or her upset and shaken about the shocking and unexpected twists and turns.



## 2 Recurring themes in Collected Stories

This chapter is intended to give an account of the most salient themes in Peter Carey's *Collected Stories*. Although the different texts are not interconnected by a superordinate narrative frame or by the same alternate reality they are set in, many of them nonetheless share three major concerns: several of his characters are imprisoned in or confined to psychologically and/or physically arduous situations which they cannot escape from and have to suffer endlessly. Other characters experience great troubles with the gender identities inscribed onto them and react in ways that cause bewilderment in both other characters and the reader alike. The third major topic in the stories is the sometimes difficult role of art in societies steered by profit-greedy multinational companies and rampant consumerism. Social criticism is probably what unites all of Carey's stories and which shall be the thread running through the three different sub-sections of this chapter.

### 2.1 Trapped in colonialist and capitalist structures

The theme of confinement occurs in virtually all the narratives in Carey's *Collected Stories* and appears in numerous forms. Many of the characters find themselves trapped in inescapable and restrictive situations. Their imprisonment is frequently the consequence of capitalist or (neo-) colonialist power structures ruling the world or the society they are part of. "It is Carey's prime concern to show how our existing economic and social system has a corruptive and alienating effect on the individual" (Schulze 121).

The reasons for his overt and repeated criticism of a globalised profit-driven capitalist society are to be found in Carey's biography. Born in Australia in 1943, he witnessed the full impact Americanisation had on the insular continent during the Vietnam war. As Wilding states: "[the] government commitment of Australia as America's ally in the Vietnam War created a disruption to Australian insularity, drawing it 'out of a comfortable, non-political ease' into an international arena and the counter-cultural protests which characterised 1968 in America and Europe" (Wilding "The

Tabloid Story.” qtd. in Woodcock 6). Working in the advertising business while writing literature, he was able to observe how Australian culture was permeated by American products, values and identities. “With his ambiguous position as writer of adverts and short stories, Carey is almost the definitive product and critic of the post-modern experience” (Woodcock 11). As a result Carey left Australia in 1967, travelled Europe and ended up in London, where he absorbed “the cultural fervour of the hippy ethos.” (Woodcock 4) It was during and after this period of Carey’s life that most of his short fiction was written and it clearly shows traces of the inspiration Carey must have found in the hippy experience, a counter-culture busy to peacefully fight for self-expression, condemning violence and war and most of all rejecting adapted main stream middle-class values.

Indeed, the seemingly hopeless situations in which Carey’s characters find themselves often appear as if they could be overcome by taking action against the oppressive system. In the stories change *seems* possible and *almost* tangible by cultural agency, but whenever actually executed it takes its toll and this often means a dramatic transformation or even metamorphosis to the character, but not to their societies.

“Although Carey would welcome more self-responsibility, he also recognizes that the globalized world has a restrictive rather than stimulating effect on individual development” (Schulze 122). Thus, on the one hand Carey calls for agency and taking responsibility in his characters (and also in his readers), but on the other hand, he denies them any actual success in causing *real* structural change. It seems as if Carey was disillusioned about the actual feasibility of societal change. He shows, that alteration is only realisable in a character’s own nature, which often results in their dropping out of society instead of changing it from the inside. This phenomenon can be seen in the story “Crabs”, for instance, where the eponymous protagonist fantastically transforms into a tow-truck and therefore can escape the prison-like drive-in theatre, where he was stuck before. After his escape he cannot go back to be part of this society again – his becoming someone or rather something else is unacceptable within the structures he was part of before his metamorphosis, and he is “excluded from the only place where ‘life’ continues” (Hassall 14). This, too, perhaps is a reflection of Carey’s

Australian experience during the 1960s and 70s, that no matter how good the intentions are and how much individual freedom is pursued, the actual achievement never meets the high-flying ambitions. As Carey said in an interview with Van Ikin, “it is a relief to be able to blame the lack of confidence on a national characteristic rather than a personal failing” (Ikin “Answers to Seventeen Questions. An Interview with Peter Carey” qtd in Schulze 122).

As hinted at above, confinement in Carey’s stories is often a result of the social structures and change caused by agency is frequently prohibited by the same. Consequently, the socially critical theme-cluster of confinement, capitalism and (neo-) colonialism on the one hand and change, metamorphosis and agency on the other cannot really be separated and is therefore treated as an intertwined conglomerate of themes in the following, where the two stories “Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion” and “American Dreams” will serve as examples of the inseparability and interconnections of these themes.

The worlds Peter Carey creates for his characters to live in are mostly dystopian scenarios, or “hellish worlds” as Hassall calls them (5), in which he explores where rampant consumerism and exploitative capitalism will take mankind in a very near future or even a parallel present, when we read the stories published in the 1970s in the early 21st century. The suffering of his protagonists against their individual imprisonment take manifold forms and range from carrying out the unexplained task of preventing horses from falling into a sunken tank (“Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion”) to a whole town becoming the victims of touristic neo-colonisation (“American Dreams”), for example, but what they have in common is that the inescapability of the situations affects the characters’ bodies and minds.

It could be argued that the failure of the characters is only intended to depict a status quo drawn from the author’s experience and that Carey still asks the reader, as an individual and as part of society to show more effort than his characters and thereby cause alteration. In her article on Carey’s short fiction Cornelia Schulze came to quite a similar conclusion and wrote that “[the] helpless position of Carey’s readers, who become tacit observers incapable of acting, implies a certain complicity. This suggests that Carey

prefers those readers who intervene and thus, in a figurative sense, show courage.” (Schulze 128)

The protagonist in the story “Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion”, as a first example, is employed by “The Company” and his position is defined as a “Shepherd 3rd Class” (Carey 51). His original task, namely to be a shepherd keeping sheep, was altered by the anonymous authority (the nameless company) without so much as notifying him about the change in his position or task. The sheep have been replaced by horses before the reader plunges into the story and now the first-person narrator is insecure about both his position and his duty. He is “an unknown industrial prisoner, an isolated and alienated employee of a company that seems to represent his only contact with an external world” (Hassall 17). Hassall’s comment on this character’s situation points out very clearly Carey’s quite explicit criticism of capitalism. Carey criticises the alienation of the employee in a Hegelian sense. When production processes were more and more split up during the era of the Industrial Revolution, workers lost the connection to the end-product and the former producers of goods decayed to little wheels in the industrial machinery. Independence and self-determination decreased and the interdependency between the individuals of the industrial society grew. Carey’s characters live these nightmares of estrangement and seem to have come to accept their situations, most probably because they have never had a different experience, or as Carey put it in an interview with Ikin: “People often live in nightmares without knowing it. The nightmare creeps up on them and even when it’s at its most intense it feels quite normal to them. Not nice, but normal” (Ikin “Answers to Seventeen Questions. An Interview with Peter Carey.” qtd. in Schulze 121). In a different interview Carey said further that

[we] are alienated from each other, from ourselves, work, from our environment. We are denied access to information and given misinformation instead. We are raised within an authoritarian system and teach our children to look for leaders. [...] I don’t think people are mindless or stupid and no matter how fucked around we are by the values of late capitalism, I still think there is some residual human decency in most of us. (Neilsen “Waiting for the Barbarians: An Interview with Peter Carey.” qtd. in Schulze 121)

The narrator of the story, who is ignorant of the sense his work makes, what his exact function is and who he really works for, is for reasons of perspicuity an exaggerated representation of the alienated worker, detached from any sense of achievement. His uncertainty even surfaces on a psychosomatic level when he becomes convinced that his sexual relationship with Marie, the only other character of importance in this story, causes the death of the horses that drown in the pool-like tank. The narrator develops the theory that each time they have intercourse one of the horses drowns itself. His conviction grows so strong that shortly afterwards he is no longer able to perform sexually. Both his mind and body are affected by the lack of a meaningful occupation.

The power emanating from “The Company”, the embodiment of capitalist structures and the workers’ subjection to it, is demonstrated when the narrator describes that he has written to them in order to resign from his position but has not heard anything since. The “Shepherd 3rd Class” is trapped in his apparently meaningless task like in a waiting loop and cannot escape it. The only ones who can release him are the ones who put him in the situation he now wants to escape. He holds no autonomy whatsoever.

Marie, the narrator’s girlfriend and the one who helped him find the job at the South Side Pavilion, is also the one who wants him to quit it. She is the shepherd’s counterpart – she seems to be wholly independent and self-determined. Agency, in a Cultural Studies sense of the word, is what Marie could be said to embody.<sup>2</sup> She demands of the narrator that he leave the horses and escape with her from the dreadful pavilion, but he is unable to meet her demand and the thought of leaving seems to not even occur to him. The reason why he feels so obliged to stay remains unclear, but it appears to be either an insane concern about the horses or an absurd loyalty towards his employer.

When Marie leaves him, her absence restores him physically as he states towards the end of the story that “[her] absence has cured [his] limp

---

<sup>2</sup> The gender roles in their relationship are slightly distorted, but the theme of gender in Carey’s stories shall be the concern of a more detailed elaboration a little later in this thesis.

cock more quickly and effectively than either of [them] could have guessed,” (Carey 54) but her thoughts of flight keep haunting him and cause him to drive the horses into the pool with force “in a frenzied attempt to escape by making himself redundant” (Hassall 17). Unfortunately, his effort to take action against his imprisonment remains without any effect. The twelve dead horses are removed by other nameless and unknown workers, who bring twelve new horses to replace the dead ones. His pleas to release him from the limbo he is trapped in are ignored by the other workers, as they too only fulfil their tasks and most probably do not hold the power to make such a decision either, which is again a hint at the fragmented processes in the industrial structures of enterprises in a capitalist economy system, where responsibility for actions is held by very few very remote headmen. Additionally, this suggests that agency, which might produce an alteration of circumstances, cannot emerge from within the system. Ideas of change or at least escape are planted by individuals who are independent enough from the power-structures to be able to see what, in fact, is going on. Marie is an independent person, but the narrator is trapped and has to remain where he is.

Having to remain where they are, and especially who they are, is what the characters in “American Dreams” also experience. Their imprisonment is an immediate consequence of the neo-colonialist exploitation of a more or less native culture by American tourists, or to put it in Cornelia Schulze’s words:

The first instrument used by late capitalism to subordinate human beings is the unstoppable and worldwide expansion of “American imperialism and culture.” This mode of captivity is illustrated by “American Dreams,” a story that shows Australia’s increasing dependence on America and the attendant devaluation of its own national identity. (Schulze 123)

The inhabitants of the small country town of what seem to be the 1960s dream American dreams about all sorts of technical amenities like refrigerators and colour television sets. They dream American dreams about great wealth in the form of big motor cars and a jet set lifestyle at fancy nightclubs. The concepts the characters have of American living conditions



are concepts transported via the typical route of American cultural export: the big movies made in the Hollywood dream factory. This life seen in cinematic artworks has little to do with the daily life of the majority of Americans at that time (which is not meant to suggest that today's reality of Americans has more in common with the representations of lifestyle in Hollywood productions - quite on the contrary). But it is their goal all the same.

In the beginning of the story, the townspeople hunt for what is later going to be haunting them – their American dreams. This yearning for the American lifestyle is not a unique quality of the town which is the subject of Carey's short story, it is a mere example of how readily other cultures accept Americanisation. Jean Baudrillard wrote about this phenomenon that "whatever one thinks of the arrogance of the dollar or the multinationals, it is this culture which, the world over, fascinates those very people who suffer most at its hands, and it does so through the deep, insane conviction that it has made all their dreams come true" (Baudrillard, *America* 77).

In the course of the story, Mr Gleason, a peculiar retiree never much involved in the town's business, builds an exact plaster miniature of the town, which is only revealed to characters and readers alike quite at the end of the story. The first reactions to this piece of art are solely positive and it appears to be the longed for ticket to Hollywood, or at least to the lifestyle the townsfolk associate with it. The inhabitants of the town embrace their chance to commercialise their newly acquired sensation and thereby lure tourists from all over the world into the town. They eagerly look forward to the arrival of the American tourists especially as they hope that by spending their dollars, they will finance the American dreams of the townspeople. But when tourism strikes the town with its full force, not only do the anticipated status symbols fail to materialise but the town finds itself in an exploitative dependency on the American tourists, who they originally thought of as their saviours.

The tourists come to the nameless town to see Mr Gleason's unique artwork in combination with the model it is based on.<sup>3</sup> They look at the town through telescopes on Bald Hill, where Gleason's miniature is located, and compare art and reality. The act of looking through the telescope itself here becomes, as Fiske, Hodge and Turner claim in *Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture*, an act of "colonisation by looking [and] possession by the gaze" (qtd. in Woodcock 21).

As time passes, the inhabitants naturally grow older, but this causes the tourists to become more and more disappointed in the 'real' town, as the people resemble their representations in Gleason's model town less and less. The tourists' frustration is transferred to the townsfolk, who are imprisoned in their roles as tourist attractions, but cannot fulfil their ill-fitting and unsatisfactory tasks properly anymore.

Again, just like in the story "Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion" discussed above, the characters in Carey's story are robbed of any self-determination, and are utterly heteronomous and "unable to achieve autonomy even through [their] own cultural representation of [themselves]" (Woodcock 21). But the tourists suffer as well, which, following Schulze's argumentation, means that "Carey implies that American imperialism is harmful for both sides," (Schulze 125) and she substantiates her point by quoting the following passage from "American Dreams":

The Americans pay one dollar for the right to take our photographs. Having paid the money they are worried about being cheated. They spend their time being disappointed and I spend my time feeling guilty, that I have somehow let them down by growing older and sadder. (Carey 181)

Another resemblance to the "Shepherd 3<sup>rd</sup> Class", albeit in a slightly different way, is the effect the trapped situation has on the bodies and minds of the townspeople, which is also evident in the above. As their bodies naturally age the miniature copies do not, and this fact causes a downward

---

<sup>3</sup> The two meanings of the English word model and their significance in the story American Dreams will be dealt with at a later point, when the relationship of art and reality is elaborated.

spiral in the narrative, which gains more and more momentum the more time passes: due to the working of nature, the inhabitants' ability to fulfil their duties as confirmations for the craftsmanship of Mr Gleason decreases, which frustrates the tourists, who have only come to see the duality of model and reality; the annoyance of the tourists again frustrates the townsfolk as they are confronted with their growing 'flaw' on a daily basis. The following extract of the short story will confirm this claim:

To tell the truth most of us are pretty sick of the game. They come looking for my father and ask him to stare at the gears of Dyer's bicycle. I watch my father cross the street slowly, his head hung low. He doesn't greet the Americans any more. He doesn't ask them questions about colour television or Washington, D.C. [...] He does what they ask. They push him this way and that and worry about the expression on his face which is no longer what it was.

Then I know they will come to find me. [...] I do not await them eagerly because I know, before they reach me, that they will be disappointed. [...] I stand sullenly and try to look amused as I did once. Gleason saw me looking amused but I can no longer remember how it felt. (Carey 181)

It is obvious that the narrator's body has lost the ability to feel pleasure. Again, just like in "Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion", the strain on the mind takes psychosomatic ramifications and the characters suffer physically and mentally from their inescapable subjection to the tourist gaze.

The aftermath of their deliberate submission is that they are effete to such an extent that any power to regain autonomy is lacking. And Bruce Woodcock sums it all up with the words:

'American Dreams' is [...] notable for its distinct and suggestive political implications. It questions whether autonomy can ever be found through cultural activities which are tied to a multinational global economy dominated by one or two superpowers. It reminds us of the complex but continuing effects of unequal power, a political and economic reality which it displays disturbingly and effectively. (Woodcock 22)

As stated above, the idea that our social systems are failing in Carey's eyes occurs in almost all of his short stories in different shapes and sizes. Most of them focus more but by no means only on one of the aspects of the condition of late capitalism and its different consequences. To illustrate the

statement that a majority of the stories deal with colonialism, confinement, estrangement, change and agency, the following will very briefly single out these themes in several other stories.

The society in “Do You Love Me?”, for instance, could be interpreted as being so occupied with making lists and taking inventories of their possessions that emotional relationships even between family members seem to decrease in importance and therefore vanish, which makes the world they live in disappear too. One of the foci of this story lies on the manic possession-hunting of a world that defines itself over censuses. It also stresses the powerful positions some members of a society have over others, like the cartographers in the narrative who have a priest-like status in their society. “Do You Love Me?” is, like most of Carey’s stories not to be interpreted in a single and linear reading. “Withdrawal”, where the protagonist does not even recoil from selling corpses to make money, and “War Crimes”, in which the two protagonists are employed for putting a run down factory producing microwave meals back on its feet, are two stories that take the idea of egomaniac greed for gain to extremes and thereby graphically illustrate what the greed for profit does to human beings and their surroundings.

“Kristu-Du”, on the other hand, depicts the privileged, educated and incredibly autocratic white man. He is arrogant enough to think that the architectural self-realisation he is working on will be the long awaited cure for the bloody ethnic conflicts between the different tribes living in the same (supposedly) African country under the rule of an equally autocratical dictator, whose only wish is to increase his power and wealth. Here Carey’s criticism is clearly focused on the arrogance of the First World, who are still of the opinion that their achievements and ‘progress’ can be spread over the whole planet to help ‘improve’ people’s lives everywhere, but only from a very Western point of view. Critique at colonialism and its newer forms is also implied in “The Chance”, where an extra-terrestrial civilisation named the Fastalogians (the second part of the name suggests a philosophical tinge) succeeds the Americans as colonial power.

In “Exotic Pleasures” the extra-terrestrial colony strikes back in the shape of a bird that gives ecstatic pleasure when stroked, but whose

excrements destroy the mother planet. And in “The Puzzling Nature of Blue” a multinational company basically rules the slightly distorted Australia in which the two protagonists live, but where agency is again an issue. The meaning of the blue extremities, which are a side-effect of the usage of a drug called Eupholon, is transformed from at first being “the badge of exploitation” and “intended as a policing device” into “a badge of pride, independence and freedom, a new identity.” (Woodcock 36) Different from the other stories tackling the subject of colonialism, this one ends on a positive note, and, as Woodcock claims, “presents a fable of possible recuperation for post-colonial cultures, whose capacity to create a new hybrid culture from the impact of an exploitative history has been indicated by many post-colonial critics” (Woodcock 36).

The theme of confinement significantly features not only in “Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion” and “American Dreams”, but also in the stories “Room No. 5 (Escribo)”, “Crabs”, “The Fat Man in History” and “A Windmill in the West”. The narrator of “Room No. 5 (Escribo)” is trapped in a country where he does not know anybody and cannot understand the language. His companion, whom he met while crossing the border between his current residence and the country he actually wants to get back to, is the only one he is able to converse with. It is suggested that the political situation in the country he has left causes his imprisonment and he seems to be caught in a waiting loop until the leader of that country dies, which is obviously rather uncertain.

Very different to this story is the form the entrapment takes in “Crabs”, where the protagonist is trapped in his expectations of life on a meta-narrative level and physically at a drive-in theatre, as briefly discussed above.

The confinement of the fat men in the corresponding story can almost be experienced physically by the reader. The house they live in is filthy and suffocatingly hot, but they are also “trapped in unemployment, inactivity, poverty and dependence” (Hassall 27). Their confined living conditions recall accounts of the living conditions of industrial workers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and evoke a feeling of being trapped in a cage much too small. As in “Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion” and “American Dreams”, the characters in “The Fat Man in History” are also caught in repetitive loops of

action enforced by a repressive system. A woman the fat men call Florence Nightingale and who collects the rent pretends to be their friend throughout the narrative. A metaleptic comment at the end of the story, which will be discussed in detail in chapter four, reveals her real identity: her actual name is Nancy Bowlby and she works for the revolutionist government which constructs the fat as the enemy of the revolution and, thus, as the ultimate Other. The fat men are seen as the embodiment of capitalism and held responsible for all the wrongs of the pre-revolutionary society. Nancy Bowlby turns out to be a scientist paid by the government to conduct scientific experiments with the group of fat men around the focaliser Alexander Finch. The story is not actually a story but recounts the events during the first of as many as 23 runs through “*A Study of Leadership among the Fat*” [original italics] (Carey 205). The scientist’s report at the end asserts that the behaviour of the fat is the same in every run and that they kill their leader – who always inherits the name Fantoni – every single time:

From this point on, as I shall discuss later in this paper, the “revolution” took a similar course and “Fantoni” was always disposed of effectively and the new “Fantoni” took control of the group.

The following results were gathered from a study of twenty-three successive “Fantonis”. Apart from the “Fantoni” and the “Fantoni-apparent”, the composition of the group remained unaltered. (Carey 205)

Whereas the protagonists in “Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion” and “American Dreams” are able to see the repetitive loops of action they are trapped in, the account about the fat men depicts the very first run through the experiment and the reader can only guess at their frustration at some later point.

In “A Windmill in the West” the protagonist is trapped in a wide and empty desert where he should guard the borderline of American and Australian territories. His situation in the middle of a vast desert landscape seems to create a picture of freedom, but the opposite is the case. In this story Carey turns a notion of unlimited freedom into the ultimate trap. The soldier is utterly dependent on the benevolence of his superiors as he cannot leave the small caravan he lives in without dying of thirst and hunger. He is

completely isolated from any company, except the scorpions he collects, kills and counts. Just like the characters in the two stories discussed at greater length above, his mind and body are affected by the confinement he experiences. At one point he cannot differentiate between east and west and loses any sense of orientation, and consequently he cannot recall which of the two sides of the border belongs to which military territory. His physical sense of orientation gets contorted to such an extent that he even thinks the sun rises in the west and sets in the east. Since nobody ever crosses the line and his function is utterly redundant, he is denied any feeling of productivity and satisfaction. The soldier is, like the Shepherd 3<sup>rd</sup> class, an extreme archetype of the confined and estranged menial to faceless authorities.

## **2.2 Blurred boundaries – Gender in Carey’s short stories**

As everything else in Carey’s short fiction, gender roles are nothing linear. Sometimes they are conventional and sometimes Carey does what he does in most of his writing: he actively ignores social restrictions. The story “Peeling” is one in which the question of gender and identity is put to discussion most obviously, but it is also in the foreground in many others like “A Schoolboy Prank”, “Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion”, “The Uses of Williamson Wood” and “He Found Her in Late Summer”, to name just a few. “Peeling”, however, is the one story where gender identity is not only slightly distorted or questioned; in this story Carey makes use of archetypal role behaviour of men and women, in order to lure the reader into the comfort of knowing what to expect, only to then confront them with the instability of identity based on stereotypes.

The first-person narrator is an older, retired man who entertains an amicable relationship with his neighbour Nile at first. Nile, the young woman living above the narrator’s apartment, helps him keep the household and sometimes shares meals with him – in other words, she performs the typical tasks of a good housewife, except for sexual intercourse. She makes a living by helping in an abortion clinic, which is still a typically female task but does not quite fit the constructed vision the narrator wants to have of her. The

reader also learns that Nile has the bizarre hobby of collecting dolls, which she then rids of their hair, eyes and teeth to paint them white. The meaning of the white dolls and Nile's tampering with them can only be guessed at as there is no explicit hint at their symbolic significance.

As the story unfolds the reader is let in on the narrator's desire for Nile and how he imagines, constructs and plans their relationship. Early on in the story, he muses over the possible future event of having oysters for a meal:

The consumption of food is, for the moment, our most rewarding mutual occupation. [...] We discuss, sometimes, the experience of the flavours. [...] She has revealed to me a love for oysters which I find exciting. Each week I put a little of my pension aside. When I have enough I will buy oysters and we will discuss them in detail. I often think of this meal. (Carey 85)

What is striking here is that the narrator does not make use of the subjunctive but uses a future form, which suggests that the option that this might not happen does not exist, or at least it does not occur to him. It will happen, because it is the narrator's plan. This mode of talking about the future contributes to the matter-of-fact style of the narrative, which is also achieved by the frequent use of the present simple, which could be read as an expression of the male power he assumes over her. Nile's thoughts about the future of their relationship are of no relevance for the narrator whatsoever, which depicts the absolute sovereignty he is certain to have over his female companion. The overriding impression created is that he is not interested in a real relationship, where there are two (ideally equal) agent partners; what he wants is a white canvas to paint on – a canvas he can paint with his own picture of the person Nile and their relationship.

The male dominance over the woman climaxes at the end of the story, where the satisfaction of his physical sexual desire seems close enough to grasp when one of the shocks typical for Carey sets in. The narrator, who has so carefully planned even this stage of their relationship, finds himself acting against his own will by undressing the woman too early and quickly of ridiculously many layers of clothing. When she is finally naked except for an earring she tells him not to remove, he nonetheless pulls the earring and thereby the whole surface of her body peels off and a young man with her



facial features and another earring is revealed. At this point the narrator is as fascinated with the situation as Nile is, who curiously kneads her (to keep the narrator's style of expression) penis and watches how it grows. When he pulls at the young man's earring he peels away another layer of skin and another, smaller, young woman in stockings appears. When he removes the stockings, her legs vanish and the process continues until "a small doll, hairless, eyeless, and white from head to toe" is everything that is left (Carey 93).

The story ends at this point and the reader is left alone with a shocking and disturbing image that remains, most importantly, without any explanation. The young man appearing from underneath Nile's skin can relatively easily be linked with suppressed homoerotic tendencies and the young woman in stockings might represent the archetypical prostitute, whose occupation is to fulfil her customer's fantasies and comply with his wishes. But what does the small white doll stand for? Is it the canvas he paints with his imagination? Is it all a dream and the surreal white dolls are the symbolic attempt of his subconscious to remind him that he is fantasising? Are they a symbol of the doll-like ideal women strive to comply to in their lives? Or are the featureless dolls perhaps the *tabula rasa* every (female) human being is born as and onto which the most diverse (male) desires and wishes are projected and inscribed? The narrator does not really desire Nile as a person; what he desires is the doll he has blown up to his image of a woman. What the reader is confronted with could be interpreted as "a Lacanian insistence that there is no sexual relation, no place for the satisfaction of the desire which is continually being projected by men on to women as the desirable objects which should satisfy that desire" (Woodcock 32).

However, as he denies his character sexual satisfaction Carey denies us, his readers, any satisfaction and closure and therefore traps the reader in the limbo of competing interpretations, each and everyone of which not able to give one satisfactory explanation. The only thing that seems to be certain is that he wants us to ponder upon the significance gender has for our identities and relationships.

In this sense "A Schoolboy Prank" is similar. It also questions gender identities and performativity, but does so from the complementary angle and

therefore focuses on the (de)construction of masculinity and heteronormativity. At the centre of the narrative is Turk Kershaw, a former boarding-school teacher, who

has been cut and pruned and retained and restrained so that he has grown strong and old against the restrictions placed on him. He has grown around them like a tree grows around fencing wire. He has grown under them and his roots have slid into rock crevices, coarse-armed, fine-haired, searching for soft soil and cool water. (Carey 239)

This extract from the first page of the story implies that Kershaw's life might not have run along the lines society expects and that he was successful in finding ways to evade social restrictions in order to lead the life he wanted. The one day depicted in the story is the day when he is supposed to meet three of his former students, Davis, McGregor and Sangster, but it is also the day when he buries his dog. The dog's death succeeded the death of another beloved, as the third person narrator lets us know, and makes the protagonist recall memories of "a man who had died five years before and left his bed cold and empty" (Carey 239). The pet is a symbol of the love and softness within him and the loss of it functions as an outlet for his emotions, which he was accustomed to hiding in the past. In his school-teaching years, for instance, the protagonist was busy keeping up the appearance of being a 'proper' man. His 'genuine' masculinity of these days showed in his obsession with "teaching [the pampered little rich boys] the skills of survival" or in the fact that "[he] had forced the weak to become strong and the strong to become disciplined" (Carey 241). He helped his students on their way to becoming 'real men', and usually he enjoys encounters with them as successful adults, as "iron men who control companies and countries," (Carey 241) except on the day the story recounts. He is frightened to lose countenance and weep for his dog and other past losses in front of those who knew and loved him as the "rough old bastard" he had been (Carey 241). Of course, showing emotions would be against the rules of manliness, which is why "he didn't feel up to this meeting. He didn't feel he could be the Turk Kershaw they wanted him to be" (Carey 241). The protagonist's manifest diremption between the persona his former students know and the person he really is and wants to hide is characteristic of the struggle through

which virtually every homosexual lives before or while coming out of the closet.

It is when Davis puts his hand on Kershaw's shoulder in sympathy for his loss that he briefly, but all the same obviously loses control over his sentiment, "displaying a weakness he has taught his former students to suppress" (Hassall 42). And in an attempt to divert the attention from his misplaced emotionality, he more or less accidentally reminds his students of their past homoerotic experiences by inquiring about one of their schoolmates, with whom McGregor had been in love passionately. At this point the turn in atmosphere sets in, foreshadowed by Kershaw's fear of the meeting, and all of a sudden they feel threatened by Kershaw's knowledge about aspects of their past they had long tried to repress and forget about. They panic and turn their fear into aggression against him since the pictures they have constructed about themselves do not allow for such memories or the contingency of their being or having been homosexual in any way. Even if their sexual encounters with other boys were only part of an adolescent phase of experimentation, they do not fit into the heteronormative images of successful married breadwinners society expects them to be. These past events mean a break in their "carefully cultivated, conventionally masculine facades, contradicting the roles they have restricted themselves into" and are therefore utterly unwelcome (Woodcock 33). When they recall their schooldays they start to grasp that Kershaw "was an old queen" (Carey 247). The atmosphere suddenly turns into a showdown out of a Western movie, aptly staged at the "Golden Nugget Bar", and Kershaw receives some serious blows when Sangster, Davis and McGregor suggest that he lived out his paedophilic tendencies when he made the twelve-year-old boarding school pupils exercise in front of his bedroom window in their underwear. But the fight ends to Kershaw's advantage when he fires a last insulting memory-bullet at McGregor, referring to his friend's "firm little arse" (Carey 248). The three grown up business men are left behind to plan their retaliation, but to them "[it] was not a revenge at all, the way they discussed it. It was a prank" (Carey 248). And before Kershaw returns to his home they exhume his dog's corpse and nail it to his front door. But

[at] that moment they were not to know that they had made an enduring nightmare for themselves, that the staring eyes of the dead dog would peer into the dirty corners of their puzzled dreams for many years to come.

For the people they continued to make love to in their dreams did not always have vaginas and the dog looked on, its tongue lewdly lolling out, observing it all. (Carey 249)

We do not learn about Kershaw's reaction to the profaned dog, but what we learn is that the three men will be haunted by their memories of this evening and that their self-perception is irreversibly disrupted. "Their 'schoolboy prank' [...] is thus turned back on themselves. Their long-suppressed guilt, expressed in the nightmare they enact for Turk, is inscribed in their own dreams" (Hassall 43).

"Peeling" deals with the construction of female identity by men, while "A Schoolboy Prank" tackles the topic of the self-representation of men in a male dominated society. Considering the time in which this story was written, the significance and topicality of the issue become even more revolutionary than they are now. This "powerful social comment" (Hassall 43) unsparingly confronts the reader with their own rigid gender categories and expectations that cause people who do not fit into the grids of man or woman to feel that they are better off pretending to be someone else, instead of being the persecuted outsider.

Gender roles are also reversed in the story "Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion". While "the narrator is allocated typically 'female' qualities such as care, compassion and self-sacrifice," his partner Marie "acts in a way that is traditionally considered to be typically 'male'; she makes autonomous decisions and acts egocentrically" (Schulze 131f.). The narrator's "strong need to talk" is ridiculed by her and she is the one who shows initiative, while he passively accepts his suffering (Schulze 131f.). The sexuality of the couple is also an issue in the narrative and employed by Carey to restore a traditional role allocation. Before Marie leaves him, he is concerned that "the noise of fucking upsets [the horses] and they panic and lose their bearings" but Marie only remarks that "[he attributes] great power to [his] cock" (Carey 54). When his physical manliness is restored after Marie leaves him, he also gains an emotionally 'male' attitude, which becomes apparent in the

statement “[a]t this moment I am prepared to fuck until the pool is full of horses” (Carey 55). “While the impression is heightened that acted-out sexuality is *per se* destructive, Carey plays around with the cliché that masculinity is inseparably connected with egoism and autonomy, so that his previous reversal of ‘male’ and ‘female’ qualities is at this point being revised” (Schulze 132).

In “The Fat Man in History” a similar reversal of traditional gender roles takes place, when the metalepsis reveals that the group of fat men is subject to the scientific experiments carried out by a woman. The above described ‘typically female’ qualities of care and compassion are contradicted by Nancy Bowlby’s unscrupulous behaviour and her scientific detachment from her subjects. Here, too, Carey plays with these conventions by giving her the alias of “Florence Nightingale” (Carey 188). The fat men know her by this name only and consider her their friend and good Samaritan. Contrary to the story above, her role changes from typical to atypical and the story ends with the woman in the position of the ruthless scientist.

The protagonist and focalizer of the story “The Uses of Williamson Wood”, too, undergoes such a metamorphosis. Throughout the narrative the woman is the suppressed and abused victim of her male superior Mr Jacobs. She is verbally abused and brutally raped by him until in the end she liberates herself from her female role, acts against the familiar pattern and challenges him to a disgusting bet he cannot refuse due to his greed for money. Her act of liberation seems to fail when he keeps his promise and actually eats a dog’s excrements and afterwards tries to rape her again. But she escapes to the storage room of the Lost and Found and, when he comes after her, turns from victim into aggressor and kills him by dropping heavy cement bags onto him. As mentioned above, it remains unclear what actually happens within the fictional reality, as we only see the events through the confusing veil of the protagonist’s mental retreat. Nevertheless, it seems the most meaningful interpretation of her dream world that “the groaning snakes” she buries in concrete symbolise the dying Mr Jacobs (Carey 217).

In “The Chance” gender clichés are also inverted. While the male first-person narrator is passive and languid, his female partner is politically active and driven to change the world. Their atypical gender roles show most

obvious in the domestic environment. While “[s]he never mastered the business of tidying up” the narrator finally is “the one who [becomes] housekeeper” (Carey 274). “[He sweeps] the floor, [he tidies] the books and [washes] the plates. [He throws] out the old newspapers and [takes] down the posters for Hup meetings and demonstrations [...]” (Carey 274). His role as ‘housewife’ even causes the expected disputes, as can be seen from the following quote:

She sat at the table, staring out the window at the water. I washed the dishes. Then I swept the floor. I was angry. I polished the floor and still she didn’t move. I made the bed and cleaned down the walls in the bedroom. I took out all the books and put them in alphabetical order according to the author.

By lunchtime I was beside myself with rage. (Carey 286)

The frantic housekeeping seems to be his attempt to compensate for his lack in political commitment. However, in the end of the story, he celebrates his manliness by repudiating the woman he loves because of her newly acquired obese and obnoxious body. She returns to him after having taken a chance in the genetic lottery of the Fastalogians, the colonising power suppressing the fictional world, but he ignores her sitting beside his bed until she is finally gone in the morning and will never return.

Looking at these stories reminds us how the two different gender identities are socially constructed as very contrasting. While femininity is defined by lack or absence (the absence of the penis, the lack of intelligence, the absence of agency and strong will) masculinity is defined by presence (the self-evident presence of power and ability). These properties or characteristics determine whether a human being can be categorised as either the one (male) or the ultimate Other (female). Society does not readily accept a mixture of properties, like being sensitive and emotional as a man, or determined and active as a woman. Even if these boundaries have slowly started to soften and open up since feminism started to fight against them two hundred years ago, the process advances slowly and new explanations for the ‘essential’ differences between men and women are found and discarded almost every day.

### 2.3 “True” reality and alternate realities

Time and again since the days of classical antiquity, the primary concern of artists of any kind was to imitate reality as naturalistically as possible. In literature as well as in the visual arts the goal was to reach perfection in depicting ‘everything’ that can be seen and experienced in the one and true reality all people share. This doctrine once again began to crumble at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Freud introduced his perception of the human mind as subdivided into different layers of consciousness, when James Joyce wrote his *Ulysses* and thereby formed the stream-of-consciousness technique and when Expressionism hit the galleries depicting emotional rather than visual impressions. Modernism rejected the idea of mimicking reality all together and introduced the fragmented perception of the individual and his or her subjective reality as far more important. The individual perception of reality was still important in Postmodernism, but it went further down the road questioning reality itself, the potentialities of art and its actual importance, dismissing the concept of a single objective truth. As in Carey’s case, “[fiction] became metafiction, a commentary upon itself and its own position within – or rather, outside of – literary traditions” (Gelder 116).

Virtually all of Carey’s short stories are quite clearly post-modern: they question objective truth, the notion of reality and the meaning of art. Again there are some which do so more explicitly than others. “[This] ‘fabulous’ fiction now [makes] the real itself seem problematic, undecidable; the fiction [puts] it into question, inverting it and even, in some stories, erasing it altogether,” says Gelder about the “Report on the Shadow Industry” (Gelder 116), which, together with stories like “The Last Days of a Famous Mime”, “Do You Love Me?” and “American Dreams”, represents the ambiguous relationship between art and reality and comments on the role art plays in post-modern society.

Art is often employed to create a substitute reality and Carey certainly does so in his *Collected Stories*. However, the perception of an alternative reality is also what drugs can induce. Hallucinogenic or narcotic substances have frequently been used to trigger creativity in art production. Carey, being

a true child of the 1960s and 70s hippy culture, connects art and drugs to such an extent that it sometimes becomes difficult to be sure which of the two concepts he is referring to, which again is a strong comment on the post-modern condition of the death of the author. In the stories “Report on the Shadow Industry” and “Exotic Pleasures”, which shall be dealt with below, it is very hard to decipher whether Carey alludes to art or drugs. As will be shown, the shadows in the first and the pleasure bird in the second story could be read as references to either.

The first story examined here for art as a theme, however, is one of the very shortest and most baffling texts in his *Collected Stories*, or as Hassall put it

[...] ‘The Last Days of a Famous Mime’ is a self-reflexive narrative, exploring the nature and function of art, but [...] the emphasis falls on the artist rather than on the product or the audience. Even by Carey’s standards it is a cryptic and indeed a mysterious story, moving metafictionally between the inner art of the Mime’s performances, the outer story of his personal doubt, disintegration and death, and the implications for art in general, and for Carey’s own art in particular, both within this story and throughout his work. (Hassall 39)

Here, the one distinct characteristic Carey shares with his protagonist is that both invoke terror in their audiences very successfully. The Mime, however, after receiving a bad review in a provincial newspaper, questions his whole artistic life and “[ponders] ways to make his performance more light-hearted” (Carey 12). This instance right at the beginning of this story points out how much artists are at the mercy of their critics and how fatal it can be for them. What follows is the unsuccessful attempt of the Mime to comply with the assumed expectations and wishes of critics and audiences. This failure of fulfilling the wishes of the critics could either be read as a misguided effort to please everybody, which can only result in frustration as tastes naturally differ very much, or, on the other hand, it could be read as art selling itself to an unappreciative and unworthy audience, which of course can only end in the destruction of art by jeopardising its credibility. When the Mime “[throws] his talent open to broader influences” and announces that “[his] skills would be at the disposal of the people, who would be free to request his services for any purpose at any time” he becomes less popular



(Carey 13). "It was felt that he had become obscure and beyond the understanding of ordinary people" (Carey 14). Again, Carey comments on how destructive it can be for artists to leave their fate in the hands of their audience.

As the Mime kills himself at the end of the story, his comment could also be read as a call to artists to be self-assured about their work and not to lose belief in themselves because of a single pejorative piece of criticism. But apart from dealing out criticism about critics, Hassall also finds a critique of the uneducated and ignorant audiences in this story:

Among its many dimensions and resonances, "The Last Days of a Famous Mime" suggests that art imitates and provokes primal emotions like terror. Such art is also fragile because it is imperfectly understood by its practitioners, even when it is avidly consumed by its fickle, uncaring audience, whose members know only "what they like". (Hassall 41)

The audience only knowing "what they like" and the critic merely performing his task can both be very dangerous: they determine success or failure of an artist without even realising what it is the artist wants to convey. And regardless of the fact that "neither scrupulous concern nor vulgar curiosity about the social usefulness of art explains the needs it fulfils," the discussion about the purpose of art seems to be never ending (Hassall 41). "The Last Days of a Famous" Mime demonstrates that the arts suffer in quality and significance immediately when their *raison d'être* is questioned. And by consequently abolishing art for reasons of futility, humanity would lose one of the few small insights we have into the human condition, for art has always been a useful tool to understand more about the subliminal processes involved in organising a community.

In "Do You Love Me?" the connection with art is less obvious but nonetheless present, according to Ken Gelder. The cartographers, a group of people with almost clerical status, are responsible for representing "reality on paper" (Gelder 116). They are "engaged in a realist project, speaking to a culture which depends upon realism to define itself," (Gelder 116) but fail because of disappearing regions called "nether regions", places they cannot include in their census of the country. The project of the annual stocktaking

relies on the listing and mapping of everything the society represented in this short story call their possession. It hinges on a realistic representation of everyone and everything belonging to the country. This realistic depiction is what Gelder comprehends as the suggestion that Carey's goal here is not just to depict a society obsessed with their property but also a society still caught in the mind frame that the one reality can be represented on paper, in either written or painted form. "Realism, represented in this story as cartography, depends upon presence, laying out the real world on paper before us. The map becomes a kind of realist text: its project is to make the real world as present as possible in order for us to define 'exactly' our place within it" (Gelder 117). The disappearance of people, buildings and even whole regions upsets and unsettles this community and invokes great fear. The uncontrollable vanishing threatens the whole venture of stocktaking and thus also the role of the cartographers. Their clerical status is at risk, just like the status of the Catholic Church has been ever since secularisation started to emerge. The parallel between church and cartographers can be drawn even further – the cartographers' credibility is severely damaged by their inability to perform their task of mapping the land, just like the Catholic Church started to become less influential when alternative explanations for the existence of the universe arose and their absolute power was questioned. Additionally, when it was no longer unchallenged belief that the one true reality was a Christian God's Creation, it could not be seen as an act of blasphemy anymore to depict a distorted perception of it instead of naturalistic imitation.

On a metafictional level, Carey breaks with realism by introducing the mysterious disappearances. They are clearly a fantastic element and do not match the context of cartography and the style of the scientific text, produced by neat subheadings 'explaining' various topics like the "Behaviour when Confronted with Dematerialization" (Carey 4). Thereby, he "[confronts] realism with something it cannot deal with" and thus destabilises it (Gelder 117). Gelder argues that the story "is about the death of realism, replacing it with a new kind of writing and a new generation of writers," (117) whose art was until then not received by an Australian audience.

“American Dreams” is concerned with a different aspect of the relationship of art and reality: its main attempt is to expose the difficulties with any representation of reality. The model town Mr Gleason constructs is regarded as a ‘perfect’ reproduction of the real town, “a true imitation of reality” (Pons 399). The term ‘model’ is indeed a difficult term in visual arts. When speaking about a portrait, the model is the person depicted in the work of art, in other words, the model is the reality which is then represented. In architecture, on the other hand, the model is the reproduction of a future reality, and in Mr Gleason’s case it is not even a future but the present reality that is displayed in the miniature of the town. This difficult term already suggests the ambiguity between the model and the real town it is recreating. Thus the connection to the Hollywood movies Carey establishes is by no means coincidental. Movies are commonly recognised as an imitation of reality, but at the same time they change and shape our notion of reality significantly. They are a model ‘of’ and ‘for’ reality at the same time.

As Stuart Hall suggests in several of his works dealing with mass media communication, e.g. “Encoding/decoding”, the active reception of media contents and the discourse about them influence the way we perceive and deal with reality. The way we experience a romantic situation, for instance, has been influenced by Hollywood movies substantially, even though they claim to represent reality. As there is no inherent essential meaning to anything, meaning is always constructed and inscribed and what the media represent and how, has considerable effect on these constructions and inscriptions.

The town in “American Dreams”, just like the world influenced by mass media, becomes a “Baudrillardian shadow land between art and reality” (Woodcock 20). The ‘perfect imitation’ of reality is of course not perfect, as Gleason was only able to portray situations that had already taken place. And when the model becomes a tourist attraction, similar to an open-air museum, “it preserves an image which was once true but which becomes increasingly irrelevant with the passing of time” (Pons 399). The reality we live in is a constantly changing reality – at every single point in time it becomes an alteration of itself, which is why an imitation of it can never be accurate or true. What Baudrillard said in his *Simulacra and Simulations* about the

constant change in reality and the resulting deficiency of any attempt to mimic it, was that “[of] the same order as the impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real, is the impossibility of staging an illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible” (19). Reality itself loses its realness in “American Dreams”. The tourists even prefer the model to reality and claim their paid for the right to see the ‘real’ inhabitants of the town and feel cheated when confronted with the change due to the passing of time:

“But this is not the boy.”

“Yes,” says Phonsey, “this is him all right.” And he gets me to show them my certificate.

They examine the certificate suspiciously, feeling the paper as if it might be a clever forgery. “No,” they declare. [...] “No,” they shake their heads, “this is not the *real* boy. The *real* boy is younger.”

“He’s older now. He used to be younger.” [...]

The Americans peer at my face closely. “It’s a different boy.” [emphasis added] (Carey 181)

Suddenly, “an ironic reversal” takes place and “life imitates art which had originally copied life” (Hassall 23). The townspeople become slaves of their own past and have to relive the moments in which Gleason captured them— they are endlessly caught in the Möbius strip of the past. “And just as the warders are imprisoned in their roles as surely as the ‘prisoners’ are in gaol, so too the tourists and the indigenous exhibits are jointly imprisoned by the two-way glass that separates them and binds them together” (Hassall 26). The illusion, the artwork, the substitute version of reality becomes the preferred reality, and Gleason no longer “epitomises the artist revealing the ordinary as magical, seeing the significance of the commonplace” (Woodcock 19). Instead he becomes the culprit who caused the agony of the town community. The narrator posthumously accuses him of having planned their suffering all along and is convinced that he will be proven right. “One day the proof of my theory may be discovered. Certainly there are in existence some personal papers, and I firmly believe that these papers will show that Gleason knew exactly what would happen.” (Carey 177) In typical Carey

manner the story ends before such evidence is found, which, according to Woodcock, is a wry parody of “theories of artistic intention and the death of the author” (19).

“Report on the Shadow Industry” is the story in which the main symbol, viz. the shadows, could equally well be interpreted as an allusion to either fiction, as an art form, or drugs. The innuendo pointing towards fiction can be found in the very last sentences of the text: “My own feelings about the shadows are ambivalent, to say the least. For here I have manufactured one more: elusive, unsatisfactory, hinting at greater beauties and more profound mysteries that exist somewhere before the beginning and somewhere after the end” (Carey 139). In the Romantic era art and in particular literature were committed to “hinting at greater beauties and more profound mysteries” and even today we see the arts as ways of revealing ‘truths’ about the societies in which they are produced that could not be discerned otherwise. The rest of the story, however, somehow contradicts this last sentence of “Report on the Shadow Industry”, as it does not hint at greater beauties at all. Much rather, it portrays a quite decayed Americanised society of which the vast majority seems to be addicted to the enigmatic shadows. And although the society itself appears to be rather rotten, the modes of action of the shadows are not clear at all. They are described as having a variety of different effects on the users, which are seldom positive and strikingly similar to those of substance abuse:

There are those who say that the shadows are bad for people, promising an impossible happiness that can never be realized and thus detracting from the very real beauties of nature and life. But there are others who argue that the shadows have always been with us in one form or another and that the packaged shadow is necessary for mental health in an advanced technological society. There is, however, research to indicate that the high suicide rate in advanced countries is connected with the popularity of shadows and that there is a direct statistical correlation between shadow sales and suicide rates. This has been explained by those who hold that the shadows are merely mirrors to the soul and that the man who stares into a shadow box sees only himself, and what beauty he finds there is his own beauty and what despair he experiences is born of the poverty of his spirit. (Carey 138)

The first sentence of this quote alludes to the addictive quality shadows apparently share with drugs. The “impossible happiness that can never be realized” strongly reminds us of what users of hard drugs frequently report about their craving: that the whole addiction is a single hunt for the ‘happiness’ or pleasure experienced at the very first instance they used that substance. The addiction, especially to heroine and similarly addictive substances, by and by gets so dominant that it literally becomes “detracting from the very real beauties of nature and life” (Carey 138). The declarations that “shadows have always been with us in one form or another” and that they are “necessary for mental health in an advanced technological society” very much support the argument Günter Amendt campaigned for until his very recent death: he argued that drug use or abuse is an almost natural but nevertheless alarming consequence of meritocracy (cf. Feddersen). Even the research indicating “that the high suicide rate in advanced countries is connected with the popularity of shadows” (Carey 138), i.e. drugs, can be found on the homepage of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The newsletter of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration states that substance abuse is “one of the biggest risk factors for suicide” (Clay).

Another clue that the shadows might be a symbol for drugs is given when the narrator talks about the social stigma connected with the consumption of shadows: “‘Ah-hah,’ she said knowingly, tapping the bulky parcel I had hidden under my coat. I know she will make capital of this discovery, a little piece of gossip to use at the dinner parties she is so fond of” (Carey 139). The fact that the friend can gossip about the narrator’s shadow use clearly indicates that the part of society the narrator belongs to frowns upon it.

The only part contradicting the argument that shadow equals drug in this story is the last sentence. Since the Report itself is revealed as another shadow, drugs can hardly be what shadows represent. This much more supports Hassall’s argument that all the effects listed here are “the three classic theories of the effects of art” (8). However, at the end of such an elusive and extremely short story the reader expects some kind of disclosure and explanation about its final meaning, and it would be eminently atypical

for Carey to satisfy this expectation. The ultimate revelation of what shadows stand for is given but it might just be another disorienting move of the author. Both fiction and drugs remain possible readings, and the reader is left to contemplate them.

Although drugs can be found in more of Carey's short fictions, like "A Million Dollars' Worth of Amphetamines", "Withdrawal", "The Puzzling Nature of Blue", "He Found Her in Late Summer" and "War Crimes", playing more or less important roles, they feature in a similarly confusing way as in the "Report on the Shadow Industry" in "Exotic Pleasures". The story is set in a kind of parallel reality, where space travel is common and has already been used to colonise other planets in the same exploitative manner as it happened to the different continents of the earth. The protagonist Lilly buys an exotic extraterrestrial bird from a stranger on a parking lot, spending her last money only because it feels nice to stroke the bird. The animal then becomes a reason for conflict in Lilly's relationship with her fiancé Mort, as she rents a stand at a market frequented by poor people and offers caressing time for money, while dressed like a clown. Finally, the bird turns out to be the counter-colonial revenge of the planet Kennecott 21. It subsists on the dried seeds of the "Rock-drill Tree", a tree from the stellar colony which is highly destructive for the terrestrial environment. By excreting these seeds along the highways and streets Lilly and Mort travel, the foreign creature rapidly destroys the terrestrial infrastructure.

Stroking the exotic bird evokes a comforting pleasure comparable to "having your back rubbed," (Carey 220) lulling the caresser into a kind of trance. It makes the characters calm down, relax and feel better, i.e. it shows the same effects like many drugs or also, as Hassall argues, art:

Like the shadows in 'Report on the Shadow Industry' and the miming of terror in 'The Last Days of a Famous Mime', the pleasure the bird offers is a commodity that the public wants. Poor people will pay scarce money for it, and the financially desperate Lilly and Mort exploit it for profit. In a further suggestion that the experience the bird induces may be related to that of art, Lilly dresses as a clown and hires a stall to promote its pleasures. (Hassall 57)

Still, all these effects could just as well be compared to the impact drugs have on users, especially the addictive quality that the pleasure bird shares

with the shadows in the story discussed above: “The stroking rarely stopped now. It was as if she wanted nothing more from life than to stroke its blue jewelled back for ever [...]” Additionally, stroking the bird frequently does not only induce addiction, but also causes Lilly to drift off into some substitute reality, losing touch with the reality she shares with Mort:

“Are you listening to me?”

“Yes.” She hadn’t been.

“We’ll have to hand it in.”

“No we won’t.” There was no anger in her voice.

[...] No matter how he shouted or hissed, no matter what he said about the bird, there was only one danger to Mort and it had nothing to do with quarantine breakdowns. From the depths of the blue well she now lived in, Lilly acknowledged the threat posed by the Kennecott Rock-drill and in her mind she had fulfilled her obligation to the world by collecting the bird’s shit in a card box. It was as simple as that.”

Of course it is not “as simple as that, since the pestilent Rock-drill seeds destroy rocks and asphalt effortlessly and can of course not be contained in a card box. This extract only shows how Lilly has lost any grasp of reality, a doom she again shares with heavy drug addicts.

The story ends on the sour note: the revenge of Kennecott 21 was successful and Lilly and Mort encounter “their first forest of Kennecott Rock-drill [...] crowded with the birds” after they have just killed the one bird they had (Carey 238). Thus, the story dealing with art, drugs and realities can of course also be read as the ‘writing back’ of the empire – the post-colonial revenge of the colony on the coloniser. “Exotic Pleasures” is another typical example of a Carey story that cannot be reduced to one single message or meaning.



### 3 Narrative Technique in Carey's Short Fiction

This chapter will establish the general features of the narrative technique Peter Carey employs in his *Collected Stories*. The aspects of setting, suspense, various narrative voices and literary genre the author employs will be examined closely in an attempt to single out specific characteristics shared by a majority of the stories.

#### 3.1 Setting: Time, Place and Atmosphere in *Collected Stories*

According to short story theory, plot and action were once considered far more important elements of a narrative than that of space, which was held to function merely as the background of the action (cf. Brosch 123). Renate Brosch, however, argues that space is the most influential factor on the imagined world built in the reader's mind. In spite there usually being little room for extensive descriptions of fictional worlds in short stories, the textual element of space, nevertheless contributes most to the atmosphere of a narrative and stays in the reader's memory the longest (cf. Brosch 125). The places described, referred to or implied within a text influence the reader's imagination and the 'narrative geography', which, Brosch asserts, is by no means random, but rather, part of the internal logic of a text and, moreover, ideologically charged (cf. 124f.). As spatial territories often stand for identities and contribute to the construction of an imagined community like a nation, social class or ethnicity, the reader's cultural horizon and conventions play a major part in the interpretation of the location of a story (cf. Brosch 125,137).

The lack of detailed description of the spatial location in Carey's stories, above asserted as typical for the contemporary short story, allows the author to play with the assumptions the reader makes based on his or her cultural background. Trivial elements of the daily routine and the environment of Carey's characters are the only hints the reader gets about where and when the stories are set, which, as Brosch points out, makes the audience an accomplice in the construction of the fictional location (cf. 127).

Despite his complicity as a creator of the setting of Carey's fiction, the reader is hardly able to establish a precise notion about where and when the stories are set, especially in the case of Carey's early stories, published in the first collection *The Fat Man in History*. These suggest a vague sense of the 1970s, "the world in which Peter Carey began his writing career," but there is never an explicit mention of a specific date (Birns 103). Nicholas Birns claims that Carey's fictional world is a "dystopian, postrevolutionary world," pulled "straight out of the 1970s," an assertion ascribed to the political instability during the 1970s of many former colonies and third world countries, many of which were in the middle of struggles for autonomous democracy. For some of the texts this is certainly true, but Birns' claim does not hold true for all. Literary props like cars, aeroplanes and multinational companies contribute to a sense of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century; yet, many of the stories still seem current in the early 21<sup>st</sup>. This detachment from a specific historical period places some of the narratives in a symbolic sphere, giving Carey "opportunities to allegorize the human condition in general" (Bliss 98). Concrete spatial references feature in most stories, but mostly only to determine where the narratives are not set. In "Room No. 5 (Escribo)", for instance, Zurich, London and other real places are mentioned:

If the money were to arrive in an old sock I would have more confidence, but you say it is coming from Zurich and I have little hope. [...]

In my mind I rearrange the filing system in my London office. [...] I write the names of my districts: Manchester, Stockport, Hazel Grove. (Carey 59)

The textual reference to these places indicates that they exist outside of the location of the narrator, and as such, only function to ground the fiction in a realistic setting: an actual world with places familiar to the reader.

The stories "Peeling" and "The Puzzling Nature of Blue" are the only texts in *Collected Stories* in which a concrete locality can actually be determined. On the first page of "Peeling," the reader is confronted with several explicit references to London--examples of Fludernik's concept of "direct deixis" (42):

Bernard, who travels halfway across *London* to find the priest who will forgive his incessant masturbation [...].

Outside the fog is thick, the way it is always meant to be in *London*, but seldom is [...].

[...]

She buys the dolls from the *Portobello Road*, the north end [...].  
[emphasis added] (Carey 85)

Though these references clearly place the narrative within the well-known capital of the United Kingdom, references to real places do not “make a [narrative’s] setting less fictional” (42). Fludernik claims that “literary London in the novels of Dickens is not the real London” (42), yet, these references invite the reader to read a text as seemingly realistic apparently taking place in the familiar world. The fog, described as a weather condition typical of London and mentioned repeatedly throughout the story, also contributes to the realistic setting, since the real city of London is famous for its fog. This weather condition, however, also plays an important role in creating a gloomy and rather grim atmosphere: one that climaxes in the horrific twist at the end. The only indication for determining the time in which the narrative is set is the fact that the character of Nile, works for a female abortionist, who is not a doctor, but performs these duties at “a number of rooms around London” (Carey 89). This detail could indicate that abortion is not legal within the temporal framework of the story, which would date it to a time prior to 1968, when the “The Abortion Act” of 1967 came into effect (cf. “History of Abortion Rights”).

“The Puzzling Nature of Blue”, a story about a former “first rate economist” (Carey 147), contains several explicit mentions of actual places in Australia, such as Sidney, Melbourne, Coff’s Harbour, Lismore and Queensland. Upward Island, however – the location in which a revolution occurs, sparked by the fictional drug Eupholon – is as fictional as this narcotic substance itself, and cannot be found on any map covering the Australian land mass. This pre-revolutionary Australian setting contributes strongly to the dystopian 1970s atmosphere of the text. Yet, references to actual brand names like Wettex, Pierre Cardin and Land Rover, as well as

objects like a 25-amp fuse, place the story in a time frame ranging from the 1970s to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, since the companies mentioned still exist today.

As discussed above, most of Carey's stories are not as precise as these two when it comes to spatiality. The story's narrative suggests that "Kristu-Du", for instance, is set in an African country, but where exactly remains dubious. Birns argues that

[t]he name Kristu-Du itself is delightfully free of any geographic resonance. Its echoes, of Christ, christening, crystal – the Crystal Palace, perhaps? – combine with echoes of, say, the English fairy-tale writer Lord Dunsany's "Chu-Bu and Sheemish" to remind us distinctly of the Western fantastic. Yet the name Oongala sounds unquestionably African. (104)

The pre-revolutionary and dystopian atmosphere, which for Birns unequivocally derives from the 1970s history of movements for democracy and autonomy, has lost none of its momentum. Hardly isolated to African countries, autocratic dictators still exist today, who rule by means of fear and brutality, making it difficult to clearly conclude that this story is set in the 1970s.

Another example of a story that only provides suggestive rather than explicit hints of time and place is the story "Room No. 5 (Escribo)". The protagonist is trapped in a country neighbouring the one from which he has just fled, and waits anxiously for news of the death of the country's leader, Timoshenko, and the ensuing coup d'état. The leader's name clearly sounds Eastern European, but contradicting this spatial determination, however, are the title of the story itself and other references, such as a "Villa Franca" and "the Banco Nazionale," (Carey 63) which place the narrative in a Spanish-speaking country. Despite these references, it is not at all clear where or when the story is meant to be set. While the major political unrest in South America is largely relegated to history, more contemporary references to actual political tensions during the 1970s could still be topically resonant today.

"The Fat Man in History" includes equally vague spatial clues, but the names of some of the characters allow the story to be conclusively located in the English-speaking world. The central character is a certain Alexander

Finch, and the woman who collects the rent is called Florence Nightingale, alias Nancy Bowlby, all suggesting an Anglo-Saxon country. As in the examples above, the time could easily be the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century, as suggested by references to traffic lights and beer kegs. The atmosphere is dystopian, similar to “The Puzzling Nature of Blue”, but additionally evokes a strong feeling of suffocation and disgust in the reader. The “Fat Men Against The Revolution” (Carey 201), who oppose the indefinite revolution of a man named Danko, live under most appalling conditions:

The room has no insulation. And with each day of heat it has become hotter and hotter. [...] The heat brings out the strange smells of previous inhabitants, strange sweats and hopes come oozing out in the heat [...].

The window does not open. There is no fly-wire screen on the door. He can choose between suffocation and mosquitoes.

Only a year ago he did a series of cartoons about housing conditions. He had shown corrugated-iron shacks, huge flies, fierce rats, and Danko himself pocketing the rent. (Carey 187)

References to heat, mosquitoes and huge flies not only create a feeling of suffocation, but also suggest a subtropical climate, which, in English speaking countries, can only be found in Australia and the American South. The Americans, however, are construed as ‘the Other’ in this story, complicit with the characters of the fat men; thus, Australia becomes the most likely space in which story takes place.

While its mood is not dystopian, the story “American Dreams” is equally indefinite in time and place. Characteristics of the townsfolk in the unnamed rural town suggest the decades during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century through their aspirations a lifestyle resembling the American dream, and the harsher realities of the late 1960s have clearly not yet descended upon them:

We saw our big smooth cars cruising through cities with bright lights. We entered expensive nightclubs and danced till dawn. We made love to women like Kim Novak and men like Rock Hudson. We drank cocktails. We gazed into refrigerators filled with food and prepared ourselves lavish midnight snacks which we ate while we watched huge television sets on which we would be able to see American movies free of charge and forever. (Carey 179f)

As Kim Novak and Rock Hudson both were film stars in the 1950s and 60s, this is probably the time in which the narrative takes place. Since the characters dream of the American way of life, the place may not be the United States of America, although it must be an English-speaking country, as indicated by place names such as “Bald Hill” and “Mason’s Lane” (Carey 174). Though the reader cannot be absolutely sure, these details suggest that the fictional location of “American Dreams” may, in fact, be Carey’s home country of Australia, a hypothesis supported by the Chinese labourers coming to the town to help in building Gleason’s model town.

While in the examples above, the reader can fashion a rough idea of when and where Carey localises these texts, some stories feature even fewer indications about the temporal and spatial setting. In “Happy Story”, or “Conversations with Unicorns”, the only hint given to the reader regarding where these narratives are set is the English language the characters speak. Since Carey’s mother tongue is English, this, too, seems too weak an indication as to where the stories take place.

“Happy Story” is condensed into less than three pages, making it difficult to establish either a concrete atmosphere or an implicit indication about a place. The only mention of an actual city is Florence at the very end, but this is the destination the couple is heading towards in their plane, not their starting point. Time is also extremely difficult to determine, as there is no description of the world outside the relationship of the two characters. The fact that Marie’s partner is constructing “something for flying in” (Carey 68) raises the unanswered question about whether he invented the first vehicle capable of flying or whether it was his hobby to build his own.

In “Conversations with Unicorns”, the clearly fantastic setting allows for no speculations about a specific, realistic setting. A vaguely Western world is described by references to cars, car parks and weapons, but the fantastic element of the unicorn, examined more fully in the following chapter, removes it far enough from our reality that any spatial or temporal determination is impossible.

All these stories serve as illustrative examples for Carey’s hazy spatial and temporal localisation and show that part of their elusive effect is the reader’s uncertainty when trying to pin down their exact setting.

## 3.2 Suspense and Chronology

“Narratives, fictional and factual, commonly raise in their audience suspense” (Yanal 146), and in virtually all of his short stories, Carey is able to accomplish this to a high degree. The reading experience includes a constant cautiousness, or even anxiety of unexpected, disturbing and often horrible twists, leaving the reader constantly uncomfortable and uneasy. This feeling of uncertainty about the outcome of a story, according to Robert Yanal, is an essential and indispensable requirement for creating suspense (cf. 148), and, following Noel Carroll’s argument, is evoked “when the possible outcomes of the situations set down by the story are such that the outcome that is morally correct, in terms of the values inherent in the fiction, is the less likely outcome” (Carroll 137f.). Yanal argues that “[f]eeling suspense is an uncomfortable emotion. When we are in a state of suspense [...] we are in a state of discomfort [...]” (152). He further claims that “[o]nce the uncertainty is lifted, the discomfort goes with it” (152). With Carey, however, this lifting of uncertainty is usually the point at which even more discomfort begins.

Titles are also a well-used means of establishing confusion and suspense, Brosch claims (cf. 64), as they are often employed to lure the reader’s expectation in a certain direction in order to then confront him with his or her conventional schematic thinking. Disappointing the reader’s expectations is seemingly Carey’s greatest skill, as he consistently builds up and then destroys his readers’ suppositions, frequently in a shocking and utterly unanticipated manner.

According to Renate Brosch, time can only be perceived because of the human ability to structure narratives (cf. 167). By establishing relational and causal cohesion between events, we are able to organise information chronologically and thereby construct and access meaning. The chronology of Carey’s stories plays an important part in his short fiction, as it contributes to the great deal of suspense created. By narrating a story chronologically, suspense-creating devices, such as foreshadowing and so-called ‘Chekhov’s guns’ become available. Carey employs precisely these two devices to keep the reader in the uncomfortable emotional state of suspense, anxiously awaiting the implied, but not yet revealed, twists and turns. However, in some

stories, Carey does make use of one type of anachrony, namely the technique of analepsis<sup>4</sup>. In “American Dreams”, for example, the entire story is told in retrospect, slowly leading the reader towards a present that is only reached at the narrative’s end. In “The Uses of Williamson Wood”, an analepsis is employed to describe how the protagonist grew up and in “A Schoolboy Prank”, as the reader learns about events prior to the story’s temporal setting through the characters’ recalled memories. Nevertheless, anachronistic departures from the stories’ otherwise natural sequence of events are exceptions in Carey’s narratives.

“American Dreams” and “A Schoolboy Prank” will now serve as ideal examples of the high degree of suspense featured in virtually all of Carey’s fiction.

In the beginning of “American Dreams”, the reader is introduced to the characters and their relationships at great length. With the suggestive title, the detailed introduction amounts to two-thirds of the mere eleven pages of the narrative, and features a great deal of foreshadowing, serving to raise questions about the events to come. The American dreams referenced by the title are first introduced as the townspeople’s desires for an American way of life; in the end, however, their American dreams become their collective American nightmare. Foreshadowing is mainly achieved by the recurrent motif of guilt, introduced in the very first sentence: “No one can, to this day, remember what it was we did to offend him” (Carey 171). The reader plunges into the story in medias res, and no information whatsoever is given about the identities of “we” and “him”. The only conclusion the reader can make at this point is that there is or has been a conflict of some kind between these two parties, and the expectation of learning more about it is triggered. The feeling of guilt towards Mr. Gleason is shared by many of the townspeople, and each of them, in turn, feel victim to his revenge:

Dyer the butcher remembers a day when he gave him the wrong meat and another day when he served someone else first by mistake. Often when Dyer gets drunk he recalls this day and curses himself for his

---

<sup>4</sup> These terms are used according to Gérard Genette (cf. Genette 36-40).



foolishness. But no one seriously believes that it was Dyer who offended him.

But one of us did something. We slighted him terribly in some way [...].

When I was a boy I often stole apples from the trees at his house up in Mason's Lane. [...] And I was not the only one. Many of us came to take his apples, also and in groups, and it is possible that he chose to exact payment for all these apples in his own peculiar way.

Yet I am sure it wasn't the apples.

What has happened is that we all, all eight hundred of us, have come to remember small transgressions against Mr. Gleason, who once lived amongst us. (Carey 171)

The butcher curses himself for insignificant affronts, the narrator regrets deeply the trifle of having taken apples from Gleason's garden, all the inhabitants of the town remember "slight transgressions," and yet, by the vehemence of their regret, Carey indicates some great horror that must have happened between the narrated past and present.

"To raise suspense, a narrative [...] withholds information" (Yanal 146), and in "American Dreams", it is the consequence of the characters' transgressions that is withheld. Suspense is created in two ways here: within the story itself, since the reader does not learn the nature of Gleason's revenge, and also by creating a strong sense of identification with the characters. The only insults the townsfolk remember are common and familiar to virtually every reader; most of us have probably stolen fruit from a neighbour's garden when we were children, most of us know how it feels to be served later than we should be, most of us will probably remember an instance when we pushed in or jumped the queue, but we all wonder what kind of horrible rampage could result from such negligible affronts. If we return to Carroll's argument, the most morally correct punishment for children who steal apples from one's garden is probably to generously overlook their juvenile delinquency. Morally, the best reaction to someone jumping the queue is probably to politely remind the person that there are other people waiting. By no means would a healthy mind take revenge—at least this is what the narrator suggests by listing these ridiculous transgressions. That a

revenge of some kind has taken place, however, is clear, and thus, “the outcome that is morally correct [...] is the less likely outcome” (Carroll 137f.).

Apart from the collective guilty conscience, nostalgia is another motif that foreshadows Mr Gleason’s horrible revenge. Five years in the history of the town pass without much mentioning. The narrator, telling the story in retrospect, feels that nothing worth stating happened during that time, but, nevertheless, he conveys a feeling of nostalgia in the following passage:

But for five years between my twelfth and seventeenth birthdays there was nothing to interest me in Gleason’s walls. Those years seem lost to me now and I can remember very little of them. [...] Thinking of those years, the only real thing I recall is the soft hiss of bicycle tyres on the main street. When I think of it now it seems very peaceful [...]. (Carey 175f.)

Although these years were more or less boring, according to the narrator, he still looks back on them with woefulness. The narrator’s positive feeling about the ‘good old days’ tells the reader that an event or condition has manifested itself since which wipes out the memories of tedium and casts the past in the flattering light of retrospection. When it is revealed what Mr Gleason was doing behind his walls, the townsfolk are proud of the great artwork portraying every detail of their town. When they take a closer look, a second denouement takes place, and the details of the model first perceived as delightful turn into the frightening exposure of well-kept secrets – such as the affair of Mrs Cavanagh and Craigie Evans. Finally, the story takes another turn and veers off in a different direction. What is finally revealed is not the exposure of infidelity, but something much worse. The whole town finds itself trapped in former versions of themselves, ultimately becoming their own simulacra.

“A Schoolboy Prank” opens with the confusing line: “[i]t is Monday morning and the prank will not be played until seven o’clock tonight” (Carey 239). After this statement, the narrative continues, chronologically recounting the events of that day without further mention of a prank as the story of the retired school teacher and his meeting with former students unfolds. The nature of the prank mentioned in the first line and the story’s title, as well as who will be its victim remain in the back of the reader’s mind like an axe

waiting to fall. However, once the reader learns about Kershaw's past as a teacher, he comes to expect that the prank will be something rather benign belonging to these past days, which were so much happier than Kershaw's present. The prank itself thus becomes a true Chekhov's gun, ominously "hanging on the wall" in Act I and "[fired] in the last act" (Rayfield 203). Unlike Chekhov's stage gun, which remains visible to the audience throughout and which, therefore, cannot be easily forgotten, the prank in Carey's story hovers somewhere in the background of the narrative, only to reappear shockingly and surprisingly in the end. In the meantime, an interim climax reignites feelings of unease and uncertainty about the further course of the story when the issue is raised regarding homosexual experimentation between the former classmates. The aggression caused by this reminder of a long-repressed past forebodes a negative consequence and anticipates brutality. Ultimately, shocking cruelty becomes tangible when the story returns, almost casually, to the aforementioned prank, still hovering over the central character, yet to be played:

In the bar three successful men in their early thirties stayed to plan their revenge.

It was not a revenge at all, the way they discussed it.

It was a prank. (Carey 248)

That the conduct of the three men is not intended to be a payback but a "prank" evokes the concept of innocent children who lack the foresight to estimate the pain their actions might cause. The reader is almost tempted to think that they do not know better and that their impending actions will be forgivable. In some way, the characters do lack foresight, as they will only later realise how much harm they did to themselves by playing a prank on Kershaw. Apart from hinting at their short-sightedness, however, the clause "the way they discussed it" puts the statement that "[i]t was not a revenge at all" into a different perspective. This indicates to the reader that the men's actions to come are not 'a schoolboy prank' at all, but indeed the irrational and barbaric revenge of men who have not come to terms with their past.

The building of tension continues through the last section of the story and is mainly conducted via the character of Davis, who is "unsure and

worried” and “[loses] courage at the last moment” (Carey 248). He does not join his friends and “feels no appetite for what [is] planned” (Carey 249). The reader is not privy to what they are planning, but does learn that one of the conspirators chickens out because his conscience does not allow him to proceed with their plans. When the feeling of uncertainty about the prank is finally lifted, the reader’s discomfort does not go away at all; it is replaced instead by a new discomfort: the shock about the barbarity of the ‘prank’ experienced again through Davis’ eyes:

They made him come then, to admire their work.

The surgeon in the dark suit walked up the steps of the house where he joined a marketing director and a newspaper proprietor in looking at the body of a dead dog nailed to a door. (Carey 249)

The gun is finally fired; the men have dug up the corpse of Kershaw’s beloved dog, which “had clearly been an object of displaced affection for a lost lover” (Woodcock 33) and for “lost classrooms full of young faces” (Carey 239). For the three, now grown, men, the dog embodies “their own repressed homosexual desires, repressed in the process of being constructed as ‘men’, an experience through which their sexual potentialities were restricted and curtailed to fit the appropriate behaviour of the orthodox male” (Woodcock 33). However, the horror of the dead dog and the repressed homosexual tendencies does not end at this point, but keeps haunting the perpetrators endlessly in their dreams “[f]or the people they continued to make love to in their dreams did not always have vaginas and the dog looked on, its tongue lewdly lolling out, observing it all” (Carey 249).

### **3.3 Narrative Voices**

As Renate Brosch points out, the narrative voice has significant influence on the reader’s reaction to a text (cf. 143). The narrative’s point of view, the implicit perceptual perspective or the focalization on a character, functions as a filter through which the reader perceives the events in a story. Although Brosch claims that there are several counter examples, she quotes Gutmann’s observation that the mode of the short story does not allow for an

omniscient narrator—an assertion which is certainly true for Carey's stories (cf. Brosch 144).

There are two kinds of narrative situations in *Collected Stories*; of the twenty-seven stories in the collection, fourteen are first-person and thirteen are third-person narratives. First-person narrators are always embodied in the narrative as characters, most commonly the protagonists; therefore, their limited point of view is obvious, although they are located on both the external and the internal level of the narrative (cf. Fludernik 37). In third-person narration, however, narrator and protagonist are hardly ever the same character, and the narrator can theoretically be either an extradiegetic, disembodied voice or an intradiegetic character through whose perceptions and memories the story is filtered, which Fludernik calls the "focalizer" (36). Carey's third-person narrator is always an extradiegetic disembodied voice, but, despite what this may suggest, the narrator is by no means omniscient. The narrative voice is always focalized on the protagonist, giving insight into the thoughts and feelings of the main character while disregarding the others. Thus, the perspectives on the events within his short stories are always restricted, and the reader can never get a full and completely reliable view of every detail. Ryan-Fazilleau criticises Carey for "undermining the credibility of his narrator" as a constant reminder of the "unreliability of the story" ("One-Upmanship in Peter Carey's Short Stories" qtd. in Schulze 120).

By focalizing on a character involved in the fictional reality, Carey's stories achieve two effects: first, the reader is personally involved and identifies with the action, and second, the reader's expectations of consistency and plausibility are more easily frustrated. The first effect is also enhanced by the relation of the genre of the short story to the oral tradition of story telling (Brosch 73). Brosch claims that this evokes within the reader a feeling of actually experiencing and being present at the fictional event (cf. 146). Additionally, the limited perspective establishes a close relationship between reader and narrator. However, this relationship can also be undermined by an unreliable, unpleasant or suspicious narrator – a useful tool in causing a reader's irritation, forcing him to develop ambiguous concepts about a text (cf. Brosch 148f.). Carey uses the epistemological uncertainty evoked by an unreliable narrator to a great extent, and, according

to Brosch, thereby enhances the intellectual appeal of his short stories (cf. 149).

Of the fourteen of Carey's stories featuring a first-person narrator, some of these "[take] the form of a confession or self-justifications, journal-like in manner with broken numbered sections," such as the story entitled "War Crimes" (Woodcock 26). According to Hassall, the reader is overpowered by the vision of the narrator of "War Crimes", telling his shockingly brutal business strategies quite casually, despite his aggressive defence in the first section (59) predicting that "[i]n the end [he] shall be judged" (Carey 310). Throughout the twenty-eight pages the story comprises, the reader is granted insight into only the narrator's perspective of several shockingly cruel and inhuman events, which he describes coolly and almost distantly, although he plays the main role in these profit killings:

In the scrub the bodies of those who hated me were charred and smouldering.

I touched my arm, marvelling at the fineness of hairs and skin, the pretty pinkness glowing through the fingernails, the web-like mystery of the palm, the whiteness underneath the forearm and the curious sensitivity where the arm bends.

I wish I had been born a great painter. I would have worn fine clothes and celebrated the glories of man. I would have stood aloft, a judge, rather than wearily kept vigil on this hill, hunchbacked crippled, one more guilty fool with blood on his hands. (Carey 337)

In these final lines of "War Crimes", we can see the almost schizophrenic distance the narrator places between himself and the killing of human beings. While men are being burnt alive, he "[marvels] at the fineness of hairs and skin." And yet, there is some kind of confession in the very last sentence: an admission to being just "one more guilty fool with blood on his hands". A confession like this coming from a narrator who is free of empathy throughout the story, and only concerned about his success and profit, is highly perplexing and raises questions about his reliability. Was he, in fact, less distanced than he purports to be, or is the confession only another statement of self-pity by a character about his reputation in a fictional future? In the beginning of the story, he tries to convince the reader that he does not care about what will be said and written about him, but in the light of this

confession, we can no longer be sure about the narrator's emotional detachment or reliability. Because his restricted perspective is the only one we have on the events, we have to accept his point of view along with its inconsistencies, and, in light of Brosch's argument, must also identify with him to some degree. The resulting ambiguity of being both spectator and participant poses a great challenge to the reader's mind and conscience, as complicity in these events evokes a feeling of responsibility. The capitalist values motivating the accountant fall back upon the reader, implicating him in the action on two levels. On the one hand, the reader is the audience to the narrator's gruesome confession; on the other hand, he identifies with the events and can thus easily transfer a metaphorical meaning to his actual reality, which might reveal that we are all responsible for similar things, as we all accept the inhuman capitalist system and thereby take part in its iniquities.

In "The Journey of a Lifetime" the reader encounters an equally unpleasant and inconsistent first-person narrator, Louis Morrow Baxter Moon, and is yet again left with no choice but to either absorb his condescending and incongruously uppish way of relating the events of his train travel or put the book aside and stop reading the story altogether. The narrator's obsession with a seemingly prestigious train trip bestows a colonialist air onto the dislikeable narrator, and provokes an image of the time when only the rich and powerful travelled by train, a setting strongly reminiscent of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* once the climax is reached. However, the narrator soon seems to have an antiquated conception of travel, and the inevitable yet involuntary identification with the alienated and lonely man causes the reader to be ashamed of Moon's out-of-place behaviour. His "abrupt swerves of tone as he moves from cherished subservience to lonely, half-stifled self-pity, from one-upping his only confidant, the reader, to childish self-congratulation," which, according to Hassall, "portray the desperate poverty of the situation in which he is trapped, from which he mistakenly believes he can escape by earning at last (and at terrible cost) the right to travel on the train of his dreams," make it especially despicable to be forced to identify with Moon (34). As in "War Crimes", the confession is not made until the very end of the story, when the narrator admits that "now the price [he] had agreed to in passion and lust must be

paid on this cold grey morning when [his] lust seemed ugly and the blindfold of desire had been ripped away" (Carey 260). Because of this inescapable identification with him, the reader is torn between feelings of pity and malice towards Moon. Despite the extremely formal tone of the narrator inviting the reader to believe in his truthfulness, he turns out to be unreliable, as he concealed the ugly truth about the purpose of his journey. While he was busy with convincing the reader of his politeness, he knew all along that he only got the chance to make the train journey because at the end of it he would have to kill "a man whom even the professional executioner shrank from killing" (Carey 260).

The egocentric first-person narrator of "American Dreams" is equally uncongenial. As he makes generalisations and draws conclusions about the emotions of others based on his own feelings, it becomes apparent how self-centred he is: "[w]e thought, I suppose, he was a bit of a fool and sometimes he was so quiet and grey that we ignored him, forgetting he was there at all" (Carey 171). He refers to a time at which he is about twelve years old, raising the question of how he could, at the age of twelve, have had such thoughts about fellow townsmen and women. Of course, he is telling his story from the point of view of a young adult, but, nevertheless, this detail makes the narrator appear arrogant and biased about Mr Gleason and the other people of the community. He again reveals the bias in his perspective as he tells the reader what the whole town was feeling: "We became very keen on modernization" (Carey 175). How can he speak for a community of roughly eight hundred people? How could he know whether the others shared his eagerness for modernisation? He does not consider that the town failed to realise their dreams of a bright and wealthy future could possibly be due to their own actions. In his opinion, there is no room for doubt about Mr. Gleason being solely responsible for the great frustration and metaphorical imprisonment from which the whole town suffers. It is much easier to blame someone else for one's misery, and this is exactly what the narrator does; he blames another person for his life not being as he imagined it to be, and, conveniently, this person is no longer here present within the world of the narrative, ensuring that no alternative version of events be presented. Once again, a feeling of ambiguity is evoked in the reader when his only perception



of the course of events in the story comes from this obviously unreliable narrator's limited perspective. His self-assuredness about other characters' thoughts and feelings becomes suspicious early on, and confronts the reader with the problem of a limited perspective on the result of a complex sequence of events.

As elucidated above, Carey's stories told by third-person narrators offer similarly limited points of view in his fiction. Without exception, they are focalized on the main characters, and thereby achieve the same effect of forcing the reader into some kind of identification with the protagonists.

In "Crabs", the extradiegetic narrative voice focuses on the eponymous protagonist and gives insight into the workings of his mind. What distinguishes this narrator from an omniscient one, being able to shift "between the various locations where the story takes place" (Fludernik 38), is that the reader can only follow Crabs' movements in the fictional world. This becomes especially obvious, when at the end of the story the protagonist is excluded from the drive-in theatre where he was locked in earlier in the story. When Crabs drives off into the night after his surreal metamorphosis into a car and realises that he is completely alone, finding the gates closed and his entrance denied, the reader is simultaneously excluded from the society within the Star drive-in. Of course, the limited perspective also becomes apparent when the reader does not gain insight into the minds of other characters, such as Crabs' idol, Frank, or Crabs' girlfriend, Carmen.

Shifting focalization is also featured in "The Fat Man in History" and also in "A Schoolboy Prank". In both stories, the reader first gets insight into the victims' minds, with the focalization shifting to the point of view of the oppressor or aggressor at the end of the story. In these stories, the reader identifies with the victims for most of the narrative, later suddenly losing access to the feelings of the characters, a shift which causes an unsettling and reverberating concern about their reactions within the reader, and a question left unanswered by the author.

The story "Joe" holds a special position within Carey's short fiction when it comes to the narrative voice. Here, the first-person narrator is a single character, but speaks on behalf of a group in the "we"-form. Brosch states that "we"-narratives are fairly new among short stories and that they

imply a certain degree of group-affiliation in which the reader takes part (cf. 153). The distance between reader and narrator is especially reduced in this form of narrative voice, thus engendering even more feelings within the reader of complicity than in the stories detailed above. This “we” addresses the reader directly and immediately involves him in discriminatory practices against third parties (cf. Brosch 154).

In “Joe”, there are several forms of exclusionary practices. The eponymous character, who has been castigated because he supposedly raped a girl, is constructed as the ultimate Other by a narrator who speaks on behalf of their mutual family. The construction of him as the outsider and the scapegoat strengthens the identity of the group, which is enhanced by the narrator’s constant references to the family as “we”. Joe’s exclusion is not explicitly ascribed to his evil deed, but rather to unalterable bodily features, such as his conspicuous lack of the family nose:

We all have characteristic long noses; both Mother and Father have them, Roman noses we call them, and also pointed ears, which is why we have all been called Pixie at school or in our work from time to time. Joe has the ears, but not the nose. That is perhaps his one characteristic. Mother often says, Joe doesn’t have the family nose. Joe will point this out when various things are discussed. (Carey 141)

Group affiliation within the rest of the family is affirmed by the identification of their shared characteristics. Joe, who cannot alter the way his nose or ears look, is excluded by these characteristics, and functions as a comparative outsider against which the insiders of the group define themselves. Well aware of the criteria of his exclusion, and, thus, also well aware of his exclusion from the family identity, Joe seems to accept and celebrate his difference, as something he cannot change. Although this is never fully articulated, the narrator’s vehement strategies to construct Joe as different from the family function as a means of defence against their complicity in Joe’s crime. As readers, however, we find ourselves in the position of being pulled into this battle for identity. The intimate proximity between reader and narrator created by the use of the pronoun “we” evokes within the reader a feeling of being part of the family; as part of this group, we can see that Joe’s exclusion is based on superficial reasons, that indeed the

real reason is never explicitly articulated, and yet, we cannot interfere to correct the unreliable narrator.

It is clear that Carey's narrators are all unreliable to some extent, as even the narrators who appear to be omniscient ultimately have a perspective just as limited as a first-person narrator. This condition is typical for the post-modern denial of an absolute truth, which Carey himself confirmed when Andreas Gaile asked him about why his narrators can never be trusted:

[W]e're all unreliable narrators. I mean, if there is a God, God could be a reliable narrator, but no-one else. [...] Who could be reliable? In the context of a novel with an omniscient narrator, people want to have some stabilizing force in the narrative and they want to know who they can trust, or what they cannot trust. An unreliable narrator is fine as long as, in the end, you see the degree of their unreliability. If that's left out, if that remains a mystery, readers seem to become uneasy. [...] People keep on trying to decide which of my characters is the morally reliable force, but alas, there's nobody who is morally reliable. (Gaile 9)

### **3.4 Narrative Mode and Genre in Carey's Short Stories**

According to Brosch, the narrative mode<sup>5</sup> of the short story is the one most similar to the cultural practice of story telling (cf. 73). It has, since its beginnings, been a domain of experimentation and a means of exploring new and unusual perspectives (cf. 9). She further asserts that despite numerous attempts to define the short story normatively and prescriptively, and frequent comparisons to the novel form, even the question of length defies satisfactory denotation (cf. 9f.). While definitions have frequently employed word counts to determine this mode (cf. Brosch 10) and often stating that "[t]he Short-story (sic) is the single effect, complete and self-contained" (Matthews 73), a sound definition for the short story genre itself seems impossible to establish. However, if we consider William Peden's observation that "the short story, brief, elliptical, and unwinking, tends to ask questions rather than to suggest

---

<sup>5</sup> Here, the terms "narrative mode" and "genre" are used according to Peter Stockwell's classification in his *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (cf. 34).

answers, to show rather than attempt to solve" (*The American Short Story: Front Line in the National Defence of Literature* qtd. in Marler 172), Carey's short fiction seems to fulfil this criterion.

Hassall agrees that Carey's short fiction is a rather typical example, featuring "tight plotting, economical narrative development and usually, a surprise ending" (30). Clunies Ross even states that Carey's narratives "are true short stories, combining density with clarity" (178).

The length of Carey's stories certainly places them within the typical range of the short story genre, if only in the narrow sense of word count (cf. Brosch 10). They range between two and thirty-four pages, although only six stories exceed a total page count of twenty. The fictional time span covered in them, however, does not necessarily correspond with the actual length of a narrative, thus, the pace of the stories varies greatly.

The shortest stories, ranging between two and five pages, are "The Last Days of a Famous Mime", "Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion", "Happy Story", "Report on the Shadow Industry", "Conversations with Unicorns", and "Fragrance of Roses". These cover comparatively short periods of time, assuming that the amount of time that elapses within Carey's work is determinable by realistic standards. In "Happy Story", for instance, the reader does not learn how much time passes. While "Fragrance of Roses" does provide information about the past of the town depicted, it and "Report on the Shadow Industry" do not delineate time periods per se, functioning rather as portrayals of a certain status quo.

Despite their extreme brevity – each consists of only four and five pages respectively – "The Last Days of a Famous Mime" and "Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion" still cover a few days: a narrative span also featured in "Conversations with Unicorns".

In "American Dreams", however, a period of many years is recounted on eleven pages, a feat which Carey manages with rather big ellipses – once even skipping five years in only a few sentences: "[b]ut for five years between my twelfth and seventeenth birthdays there was nothing to interest me in Gleason's walls. Those years seem lost to me now and I can remember very little of them" (Carey 175).

The two longest stories, “The Chance” and “War Crimes”, both cover a span of a mere few months, in spite of their thirty-four and twenty-eight pages, respectively. Occasionally, they pause and linger in some moments longer, allowing deeper insight into the characters’ minds.

However typical the narratives are for the mode of the short story, many of Carey’s critics agree with Woodcock that these stories defy easy labelling when it comes to determining the genre.

Most of the early Carey stories mix ordinary and extraordinary experiences in a *surreal* manner, and the capacity to *mix narrative modes* becomes a characteristic feature of Carey’s fictional practice. He is an *eclectic writer* with a taste for the *transgressive in terms of forms, ideas and the supposed orthodoxies of genres*. Like his life, his fictions are often *hybrids, crossing and confusing genres*, juggling in the borderlands between the popular and the serious, the high and low [emphasis added] (Woodcock 12).

Are his stories fantasy? Are they science fiction? Or are they magic realism? While he calls Carey’s writing “*realistic*,” Pons also admits that “fantasy creeps in from the very beginning” (401). Hassall even goes as far as to say that the stories are “pointillist narrative fragments [...] which contain a heady mixture of nightmare, fantasy and science fiction” (7), and that the second of his collections, *War Crimes*,

continues Carey’s movement away from the dun-coloured social realism of the traditional Australian short story towards satiric fantasy and science fiction, Latin American style magic realism, stomach-turning Zolaesque physicality and Kafkaesque nightmares of terror and imprisonment. (30)

Clunies Ross, too, claims that they “have a flavour of science fiction” (179), and although he agrees with Pons that Carey’s writing cannot be pinned down to one genre, he objects to Pons’ statement that Carey’s narrative style is realistic, calling it quite the opposite. Ross asserts that Carey “is a rare case of a genuinely surrealist writer whose vision is rooted in an exact sense of reality” (179). Graham Huggan even claims that “there is in [Carey’s] fiction an element of the grotesque, in the sense that in setting up a connection between the fantastic and the real world, the grotesque creates dis-ease through the alienation of familiar forms” (qtd. in Pons 404). Woodcock calls Carey’s imagination “transgressive” and “[challenging to] the

reader's notion of the normal in literature and in life: it subverts any apparent division of fiction into separate categories such as realism, fantasy, science fiction; and it reveals the surreal beneath the surface of actuality" (14).

The question that therefore arises is this: why is Carey's short fiction so hard to categorise? What quality makes these stories so difficult to pin down to one category such as surrealism, magic realism, fantasy or science fiction? And what does Carey do to cause such disorientation in both professional and lay readers alike?

Despite the typically post-modern negation of a consistent notion and perception of reality, the answer to this problem is Carey's very special mixture of the familiar with the unfamiliar, not dissimilar to the concept of defamiliarisation in Russian Formalism or the alienation effect: the central device in Bertolt Brecht's plays. Brecht refused the ideas and traditions of Aristotelian theatre for its "smoothly interconnected plot" and the "sense of inevitability or universality" (Selden 32). He asserted that the social ills of industrialised societies should be displayed as something unnatural and shocking – not, as was traditional in an Aristotelian structure, as unalterable universal truths, fate, or natural disasters, such as earthquakes. In order to break with these theatrical traditions, Brecht demanded the constructed reality on stage to be destroyed:

To avoid lulling the audience into a state of passive acceptance, the illusion of reality must be shattered by the use of the alienation effect. The actors must not lose themselves in their roles or seek to promote a purely empathic audience identification. They must present a role to the audience, as both recognisable and unfamiliar, so that a process of critical assessment can be set in motion. (Selden 32)

As a distinctly dramatic technique, the alienation effect is not present in Carey's stories as Brecht delineated it, but the mixture of present or near future reality with science fiction, fantasy or fairy tale featured in Carey's short fiction exercises a similar function. The alien elements in Carey's stories remind the reader that the world he creates is only a fictional one, one meant to point out the alienating and imprisoning aspects of our late

capitalist<sup>6</sup> reality in order to make the audience assess them critically. At the same time, Carey does want the reader to identify with the characters to a certain degree in order for him to experience their various forms of imprisonment and perceive their miseries. The author achieves this modification of the alienation effect by providing

plenty of details that reassure the reader by implying that Carey's world and [his] own are basically the same. [...] These reality effects allow the reader not to feel disoriented. But they cannot maintain the pretence very long, and are soon forced to admit that they are, in fact, in no man's land – or, rather, Carey's country, which can be rather scary country. (Pons 393f.)

His reader strongly identifies with the fate of Carey's characters because his fiction "starts from reality, and [only then] pushes back its limits" (Pons 400). As a consequence of this modified alienation effect, the reader's mind is affected by simultaneous cognitive processes of identification and distance. These processes account for the unsettlement, disturbance and confusion Carey's *Collected Stories* evoke, and shall be the sole focus of the following chapter, which examines their characteristic haunting effect by employing the theory of cognitive poetics.

### 3.4.1 An attempt to categorise

Despite the difficulty of categorising Carey's fiction based on traditional literary characteristics, an attempt will be made to divide the narratives in *Collected Stories* into three rough categories in an effort to find groups within the twenty-seven stories that share distinct qualities. The three groups will be labelled *imaginary*, *semi-absurd* and *realistic*, and should be regarded not as distinct, but rather as points along a continuous line between the opposite poles of the fantastic or imaginary and realistic genres.

The imaginary stories comprise "Do You Love Me?", "Kristu-Du", "Crabs", "Peeling", "Concerning the Greek Tyrant", "Report on the Shadow Industry", "The Puzzling Nature of Blue", "Conversations with Unicorns",

---

<sup>6</sup> In chapter 2 the aspects of late capitalist society highlighted by Carey have already been elaborated on and will thus not be discussed again in this chapter.

“Exotic Pleasures”, “The Chance”, “He Found Her in Late Summer”, “The Last Days of a Famous Mime” and “Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion”. These stories all show some distinct quality that makes it impossible to place them in a mental representation of the actual extra-linguistic reality surrounding the reader. How exactly Carey manages to confuse the reader with fantasy or science fiction tropes will be elaborated in the next chapter, where the stories falling into the second category, the semi-absurd, will also be examined for their unsettling qualities. “War Crimes”, “The Journey of a Lifetime”, “The Uses of Williamson Wood”, “The Fat Man in History”, “A Schoolboy Prank”, “American Dreams”, “Withdrawal” and “A Windmill in the West” do not play with the different ‘imaginary’ or ‘surreal’ schemata in the way that the first group does. Nevertheless, they have an equally haunting and distressing effect on the reader, achieved by drawing upon slightly different cognitive processes.

In contradiction to some of the critics cited above, and in agreement with others, it is assumed here that the six remaining stories actually are realistic and do not feature any absurd, fantastical, surreal, grotesque or science-fiction elements. Unlike the stories dealt with in detail in the next chapter, “Room No.5 (Escribo)”, “Happy Story”, “A Million Dollars’ Worth of Amphetamines”, “Joe”, “Fragrance of Roses” and “A Letter to Our Son”, contain no elements that fiercely clash with or disappoint the schematic expectation built up in the reader’s mind about the predictable course of the story. While “Joe” and “Fragrance of Roses” do feature surprising or shocking elements, these stories are nowhere near as outrageous and twisted as the semi-absurd and the imaginary stories as outlined above, and for the purposes of this examination, are not as interesting in terms of reader response as the other categories.

In “Joe”, it is the dubious rape of a girl by the adolescent eponymous character that comes as a shock. As the rape is dealt with openly within the family – though the event itself is not described – it does not evoke a schema refreshment, as is the case in many of the stories discussed in the next chapter. The setting is a realistic small town, conveyed by the detail that everybody seems to know everyone else. There is a cinema in the town which establishes the typically Carey-esque mid-20<sup>th</sup> century time frame. The



only really astonishing thing in this story is the narrative voice, as examined in section 3.3.

In “Fragrance of Roses”, the shock element is that the character, described by a first-person narrator as living in some Spanish-speaking country and growing roses, turns out to be the former commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp. This, of course, is not historical in the sense that it is a proven event in history. However, it does lie within the scope of realistic possibility, as many of the high ranking Nazis did indeed escape into exile in order to avoid the Nuremburg trials. Thus, on a continuum from realistic to absurd, this story can be argued to be closer to the realistic pole.

“Happy Story”, not even three pages long, mainly provides fragmentary pieces of dialogue between the character of Marie and her unnamed male partner, who apparently builds some kind of aeroplane. Their roles within the relationship are traditional and not as controversial as those described in other Carey pieces, such as “The Chance”. Marie’s only concern seems to be that her partner could use his plane to leave her. In this story the title actually keeps its promise; there is a happy ending, and the two lovers sit in the finished plane, even with their dog aboard. As it is suggested by their dialogue that they live in an English-speaking country, it seems absurd that they plan to go to Florence in a self-made flying machine, as this city is rather far away from any English-speaking country. At the same time, we do not know whether the whole plan about actually flying in the self-made plane is not just a romantic fantasy or dream they share. Reading it as such, the story can again be called realistic, as everybody has fantasies and dreams sometimes.

The title of “A Million Dollars’ Worth of Amphetamines” also fulfils the reader’s expectations, as the story actually centres around the eponymous amphetamines. The narrative schema is not unlike “He Found Her in Late Summer”, and also features a much younger and active woman, Julie, who is found by the older passive man, Claude. She brings modern degenerate morals into his secure, old-fashioned world. Taking the path of least resistance, Claude adjusts to Julie, a move which ultimately leads to his usurping the incredible amount of amphetamines belonging to Julie’s aggressive ex-lover, Carlos. The narrative is quaintly reminiscent of a drug-

related action film, and the end, namely that Julie escapes once again, is rather predictable.

Already discussed in section 3.1, the setting and plot of “Room No. 5 (Escribo)” seem to step further toward the realistic end of the narrative spectrum. Furthermore, it can be said that within the category of the realistic stories this story seems even more realistic than, for instance, “Joe”. The implied South American political unrest, however, does place it in a tangible fictional reality. The plot does not have any severely unsettling element to endlessly confuse the reader, and the story’s conclusion could be called shockingly unspectacular. Since Timoshenko, the leader of the neighbouring country, does not die in the end, the situation of the narrator changes for the better and he can go back to his home country. The tension and suspense built up around the possible death of Timoshenko is not released in a climax, but rather, seems to merely dissolve before having reached a high degree.

“A Letter to Our Son” constitutes a category of its own among Carey’s *Collected Stories*, as it is the only one that can be established as utterly realistic. It has quite a personal air, and is supposedly directed to Carey’s real son. It describes the events around the son’s birth and the hours of insecurity about whether his mother will survive. In comparison to the other stories, this text holds a special position; it does not share a literary structure of the others and is not set in a fictional reality.

These six stories do not fit in with the others in Carey’s *Collected Stories*, as they lack the absurd twists and highly unsettling qualities shared by the other twenty-one stories. These qualities will be discussed at great length in the following chapter, as the cognitive processes they evoke in the reader will be examined and considered more minutely.

## 4 The unsettling and disconcerting qualities of Peter Carey's Short Fiction – A cognitive approach

While the previous chapter discussed Carey's short fiction as difficult to pin down to a certain genre, the introduction section of this thesis asserted that the theory of cognitive poetics might be a suitable tool for explaining the confusion of the reader of Carey's stories. The present chapter now attempts to introduce the reader to the terms and concepts important for a cognitive analysis and interpretation of Carey's short fiction, and will analyse the texts in *Collected Stories* from a cognitive perspective, examining both the haunting effect on the reader's mind and the seeming impossibility of achieving closure in their interpretation.

The first part of this chapter will explain the concepts of *mental set*, *script* and *schema*, *deictic shift theory* and *metalepsis*, and will show that these concepts are important for singling out some shared characteristics of the semi-absurd and the imaginary narratives in *Collected Stories*.

The second part is intended to show the differences between the stories in these two categories, and will illustrate why both are equally disturbing to the reader's mind as well as how each group achieves this effect.

### 4.1 Shared cognitive elements in the semi-absurd and imaginary stories

#### 4.1.1 Mental sets, scripts and schemata – plot expectations in Carey's *Collected Stories*

In *The Blackwell Dictionary of Cognitive Psychology*, Gillian Cohen states that "*schemata* consist of structured groups of concepts which constitute the generic knowledge about events, scenarios, actions or objects that ha[ve] been acquired from past experience" and that they "influence the way new information is processed in a number of ways" [emphasis added] (316). She claims further that "[a] schema can represent any kind of knowledge, from simple knowledge about, for example, the shape of the

letter A, to more complex knowledge about topics like political history or physics" (316). Thus, according to Cohen, activated schemata function as subconscious frameworks by which any new information is put into the appropriate category and then divided into relevant and irrelevant data, which often means that the first is stored and the latter discarded (cf. 316). Therefore, in order to fit into a schema, information becomes generalised and abstracted, i.e. "specific details drop out and the features that are common to other similar experiences are retained" (Cohen 316). She further claims that memories are often changed in order to match "the expectations derived from pre-existing schemata," and that this alteration can go as far as to add missing information to the "memory representation" (316).

To explain the term *script*, closely related to the concept of *schema*, Cohen refers to Schank and Abelson, who stretched the concept of schemata "to explain how knowledge of complex event sequences is represented" and called these structures "*scripts*" [emphasis added] (316). She claims that "[a] script consists of a sequence of goal-directed actions which are causally and temporally ordered and includes the actors, objects, and locations that are typically involved" (316). Every time we experience the constituent parts in events like going to a restaurant, the script is being reinforced. Minor details which are not part of the script and occur only irregularly or very rarely might get omitted from the memory of a single event (cf. Cohen 316). But, not only is incongruous information omitted, as already illustrated above, but "people often falsely remember having experienced stereotypical elements that are part of the script or schema, but which were not part of the actual experience" (Cohen 317).

In his *Cognitive Poetics: An introduction*, Peter Stockwell defines *script* as "a socioculturally defined mental protocol for negotiating a situation" and illustrates with examples how scripts act like "screenplays" for certain situations (77). But how do scripts become activated? Stockwell provides us with four types of *headers* to explain this. He names "precondition headers", "instrumental headers", "locale headers" and "internal conceptualisation headers", and claims that "at least two headers are required for a script to be activated" (78). He further states that "[a] script consists of *slots* that are assumed to pertain in a situation unless we are explicitly told otherwise:

*props; participants; entry conditions; results; and sequence of events*" [original emphasis] (78).

The term *schema* only features in his account when Stockwell illustrates how these concepts can be transferred from the psychological to the literary context. He claims that "[l]iterary genres, fictional episodes, imagined characters in narrated situations can all be understood as part of schematised knowledge negotiation" (78f.). He also states that textual coherence is only achieved in the narration of an event when the slots of the script are filled with expected and familiar items; for example, when we read about going to the cinema, we expect a box office and a snack shop to be there, we expect an usher checking the tickets before the screening room is entered, which we expect to be dark, etc. If we encounter expected script-appropriate information in a literary text it has a *schema reinforcing* effect and confirms the activated schema or script (cf. Stockwell 79).

Now that we know what schemata are and how they get activated, we may ask what happens when the reader of a narrative is confronted with information *not* fitting into the activated schema? Stockwell states that

[s]ometimes surprising elements or sequences in the conceptual content of the text can potentially offer a *schema disruption*, a challenge to the reader's existing knowledge structure. Schema disruptions can be resolved either by *schema adding* (the equivalent to accretion<sup>7</sup> [...]), or by a radical *schema refreshment* – a schema change that is the equivalent of tuning [...] or the notion in literature not so much of defamiliarisation as 'refamiliarisation'. [original emphasis] (79)

It will be shown in the following that in Carey's case, world schema<sup>8</sup> refreshment can evoke great shock and often forces the reader to reinterpret everything that has been read and interpreted before. The shock in Carey's stories is achieved by what Stockwell calls "third-order informativity" (80). "First-order informativity" is the kind of information that is "normal" and

---

<sup>7</sup> "*accretion* – the addition of new facts to the schema" [original emphasis] (Stockwell 79)

<sup>8</sup> Stockwell distinguishes three kinds of schemata: world, text and language schemata (80). Here only the world schemata, dealing with the content of a literary text – the constructed world, are of relevance. For detailed information about the other two types consult Stockwell page 80.

“unremarkable” and acts as a schema reinforcement (Stockwell 80). “Second-order informativity” data are “unusual or less likely things encountered in literary worlds” and cause new facts to be added to pre-existing schematic knowledge (80). “Third-order informativity”, however, is the introduction of “impossible or highly unlikely things [that] represent a challenge to schema knowledge as schema disruption” and can further “result in schema refreshment or radical knowledge restructuring if the challenge necessitates a wholesale paradigm shift, a change in worldview” (Stockwell 80). According to Margarete Rubik,

Carey – at least in his short fiction – is a master of shock effects, which do not merely derive from his Gothic plots, but in some of his best stories are based on a sudden and unexpected change of cognitive frames at the end of the tale, forcing the reader to reconceptualise and re-evaluate the narrative in entirely new terms. (Rubik 170)

If we take into account what Reuven Tsur wrote about cognitive poetics, it will become clearer why these shock effects are simultaneously so disturbing and appealing, and also why an analysis in terms of schema theory can be rewarding.

According to Tsur, the reading of literary texts and the handling of real life situations are processed similarly in our minds, which makes it much more comprehensible why unexpected information – information that makes the applied schema inoperative – creates so great a shock in some of Carey’s stories.

One major assumption of cognitive poetics is that poetry exploits, for aesthetic purposes, cognitive (including linguistic) processes that were initially evolved for nonaesthetic purposes [...]

The reading of poetry involves the modification (or, sometimes, the deformation) of cognitive processes, and their adaptation for purposes for which they were not originally “devised.” In certain extreme but central cases, this modification may become “organized violence against cognitive processes,” to paraphrase the famous slogan of Russian Formalism. (Tsur 4)

In *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics*, Tsur explains why human beings (and supposedly other animals, too) originally developed schematic memory or knowledge structure, labelling them *mental sets*. He claims that

“[a] *mental set* is the readiness to respond in a certain way. It is, obviously, an adaptation device of great survival value, and is required for handling any situation consistently” (11). He further states that it “is a typical instance of gaining pleasure from the saving of mental energy” [original emphasis] (11). Thus, what Tsur calls a *mental set* corresponds largely to Stockwell’s and Cohen’s concepts of *script*, but takes them down to a very primal level of (human) behaviour. His claim that it is a survival strategy explains why it is so important to be able to successfully apply a mental set or script, as a mental set is a learned way of ‘successfully’ dealing with a situation.

“Of no less great survival value is the adaptation device called *shift of mental sets*. This was defined as the shift of one’s readiness to respond in a certain way; it is required for handling *changing* situations in extra-linguistic reality” [original emphasis] (Tsur 12). Obviously, Tsur’s shift of mental sets corresponds to Stockwell’s schema refreshment in literature, and he argues further that “[t]he *shift of mental sets* yields a kind of pleasure that is derived from the certainty that one’s adaptation mechanisms function properly” [original emphasis] (12). He claims that a “grotesque effect” (featured in Carey’s stories, as we will see) is achieved by such a shift of mental sets. According to Tsur, “[t]he Grotesque is the co-occurrence of incompatible emotional tendencies, the most common of these being the co-occurrence of the laughable with some emotion such as the sublime, the pitiable, or the disgusting” (23). He states that “adaptive processes are disrupted” by the contradictory emotions (23), which result in “emotional disorientation,” as Thomson calls it (Thomson 58). Tsur claims “a conflict of opposite emotional tendencies, characterized by a sense of shock and emotional disorientation, [are] typical of the grotesque” (24). As emotions such as laughter, horror and disgust are defensive reactions to a threat (cf. Burke *The Philosophy of Literary Form* qtd. in Tsur 23), the aesthetic quality of some of Carey’s stories lies precisely in the adrenaline rush the reader gets from ‘experiencing’ life-threatening situations, while, in reality, sitting safely on the sofa in his own living room.

In the following chapter, we will see how Carey achieves these grotesque and shocking schema-refreshing effects, which do not only occur

at the end of Carey's stories, but sometimes provide more than one disruption in the course of the narrative.

The story "Do You Love Me?", for instance, first starts in the scientific tone "of the lecturer," as the first-person narrator describes the role of the cartographers in the society he belongs to in an anthropological manner (Hassall 35). The organisation of the story in numbered subsections helps to activate the scientific schema in the mind of the reader, which could arguably be part of the superordinate concept of a 'realistic text', or better: a text dealing with reality. The first schema disruption already takes place in section "2. *The Archetypical Cartographer*," when the reader learns that the narrator "always felt as if [he] had betrayed [his father]" because he is not as handsome as the father [original italics] (Carey 3). As this kind of personal information is not part of the scientific schema, it causes the reader to move away from the hypothesis that he is reading a scientific text. However, there is no indication yet that the script of reading a text having to do with the actual world needs to be re-evaluated. The third-order informativity causing the schema refreshment is not given before section "3. *The Most Famous Festival*," when the news on television states that "a large house had completely disappeared in Howie Street" [original italics] (Carey 4). In our actual reality things do not vanish in the sense of dematerialisation, thus, this information causes confusion in the reader and leads him to develop a new hypothesis about which kind of text he is dealing with. Despite the introduction of the imaginary or supernatural element of vanishing areas, buildings and people, the lecture tone is not discarded, but rather, reinforced. The introduction of scientific theories about the causes of the dematerialisation keep the science schema activated, which causes even more confusion and robs the reader of a chance to be able to apply a single schema to account for these actions. These contradicting frames of fantasy and science texts cause severe unsettlement, as the mind can never be at peace about how to react. To contain these contradicting kinds of information, a *conceptual blend* is necessary, a technique which will be discussed later in this chapter. According to Tsur's theory, a mental set is a means of faster categorisation of a situation and a tool that enables appropriate reaction once the situation has been assessed. The inability to



evaluate a situation thus evokes a feeling of defencelessness and danger, if we follow Tsur's argument that a mental set is a survival strategy and that schemata and scripts derive from these survival strategies and defence mechanisms.

In "Crabs", the reader is led to draw upon several semi-realistic scripts in the beginning of the story. A "vaguely dystopian setting" (Rubik 179) is achieved by the introduction of the "Karboys" and the information about how they "have come about slowly and become more famous *as the times have got worse*" [emphasis added] (Carey 39). The information about the Karboys and that the protagonist and his girlfriend are locked in at the drive-in theatre along with other visitors represent second-order informativity, which causes the reader to add a dystopian quality to the 1960s 'young wilds' schema. Nevertheless, references to a "1956 Dodge" (Carey 39), the "Playboy" (Carey 41) or a "1954 Austin Sheerline" (Carey 48) keep the story on realistic ground and act rather to preserve the schema. The shocking schema refreshment takes place on the last one and a half pages of the narrative. The text is set apart from the rest of the story by three little asterisks, but does not feature any type of descriptive heading to clarify whether it is supposed to depict a dream sequence, which could then be read against Freudian dream interpretation. The reader will probably pause and re-read the sentence, "Crabs has decided to become a motor vehicle in good health," the reader must pause and re-read, but its meaning does not become any clearer from reading it again. The realistic schemata of "refugee camp" or "prison camp" fiercely clash with a fantastic one about the metamorphosis of a human being into a car (Rubik 180). This third-order informativity forces the reader to re-interpret the whole story in the light of this surreal twist. Neither the realistic, nor the surreal, nor a Freudian dream interpretation schema can provide a thorough interpretation of this text, and the reader is again left alone with the task of making sense of contradicting information.

"Peeling" features a similar 'twist-in-the-tale'. The reader is led to draw upon a schema of a love story between a young woman and an elderly man. There are no headers or indications pointing towards a thriller or horror frame until the very end of the story, when the young woman is 'peeled' until nothing but a small white doll is left of her. The last scene starts as their first

sexual encounter and evokes an erotic schema which then “turns into a horror scenario, vividly imagined but so alien and unsettling that it cannot be fitted into a familiar schema” (Rubik 178). Again, the surreal last scene could be read as a dream sequence or the narrator’s sexual fantasy or desire, but, as in “Crabs”, Carey does not provide a solution or explanatory comments. However, if the action of it does not take place on the ‘reality level’ of the story, but rather in the narrator’s mind, what happens to the young woman, Nile, in the story’s reality? The story ends with the narrator discovering the featureless doll: “Bending down I discover among the fragments a small doll, hairless, eyeless, and white from head to toe” (Carey 93). Carey violates Grice’s cooperative principle (cf. Grice 41 -58) by refusing to provide a clarifying account for whether the story has moved to the level of the narrator’s dream or fantasy. This ambiguity causes confusion and again prevents any schema application, continuing to haunt the reader’s mind. We are left with the uncertainty of not knowing, trying to make up our minds about what actually took place and what did not. In “Crabs”, the ambiguous part of the narrative is at least set apart from the rest of the text, but in “Peeling”, the transition from the realistic story to its horrific ending is seamless and blurred. So if the story did move on to another level, when and where did that happen? These are questions which the reader cannot answer and the author refuses to.

“He Found Her in Late Summer” is about a lonely character named Dermott who finds “wild and mud-caked” Anna sitting in a cave by the river near his house (Carey 297). He brings her to his house and attends to her wounds and bruises. The schema evoked in the reader’s mind is one of the knight in shining armour rescuing the damsel in distress. Weeks go by and while her visible wounds have already healed, her soul still needs to recover from the traumatising events she experienced, but which are only hinted at in the story. At first, Dermott enjoys the company and his new task of helping Anna to recover, but after a while “his worry about her happiness [becomes] the dominant factor in his life, clouding his days and nagging at him in the night like a sore tooth” (Carey 305). But we are still in a schema about nursing and caring and no contradictory information has yet been introduced. The schema refreshment takes place when Dermott, “whose literary

expertise is limited" (Hassall 54), reads *The True Nature of Vampires* and becomes convinced that Anna is indeed a vampire. This gothic element is unexpected in the knight-in-shining-armour script, and represents third-order informativity, causing a grotesque effect and schema refreshment. The notion of the vampire is removed from the commonsense understanding of it, and transferred to a slightly more realistic level when Dermott learns "that vampirism does not necessarily involve the sucking of blood from the victim [...] but rather the withdrawal of vital energy, leaving the victim listless, without drive, prey to grey periods of intense boredom" (Carey 307). Nevertheless, Dermott's conviction that Anna is a vampire does not fade and until the end he "[does] not doubt that she [is] a vampire" but sees humane qualities in her too, therefore losing his fear. The contradiction of the realistic and the gothic frames is not lifted by any insight on Dermott's behalf that there are no vampires, and in order to achieve a meaningful interpretation of "He Found Her in Late Summer", the reader probably has to draw upon a schema of madness or naivety.

In "Conversations with Unicorns", two conflicting schemata are developed from the very beginning. The concept of unicorns clearly belongs to a fairy tale or fable script, which is contradicted by the modern-world script introduced in one of the first paragraphs:

I mention guns. But they have no knowledge of guns, or, it turns out, of weapons of any sort. So I describe for them the deep trench that runs across the top of the ridge. I describe the parking lot behind the trench and the cars that arrive, filled with men and guns. They have no idea of the nature of cars or of their purpose [...]. I explain [...] that the head of a unicorn is greatly prized by men who pay three thousand pounds for the privilege of shooting one. I explain how the men climb into the trench and wait for the unicorns to run across the moor. (Carey 166)

Men paying a lot of money and sitting in ambush waiting to shoot wild animals certainly evokes the schema of 'big-game hunting,' and is thereby not compatible with the fable schema the unicorns belong to. This conflict could quite easily be solved by a blending of these two schemata, if their combination leads to a meaningful interpretation. But the unicorns also show characteristics and qualities of a highly developed society and religious

community, which is supported by references to “blasphemy,” a “God” (Carey 166) and a “priest” amongst them (Carey 168). The narrator himself even refers to his actions as “missionary activities” (Carey 169). Taking the unicorns’ level of development into account, they resemble the anthropomorphic Houyhnhnms of Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* to a high degree. If we look at what they eat, for instance, we encounter humanoid behaviour: “I ask them what they eat. Mistaking this for a request, they bring me a meal: wild honey, brown bread, and milk” (Carey 168). Bread is clearly a comestible that does not grow wildly but needs to be produced in a complicated manufacturing process, as compared to the simple grazing of other hoofed animals. As there is no information about where the unicorns obtain the bread, we have to assume that they produce it themselves, which again does not fit into the commonly held picture of unicorns.

The unicorns also have a strong belief system, putting the responsibility for their existence in the hands of a God who “bestowed upon [them] [...] ‘the gift of death’” (Carey 167). The elements of a God coming into the world and bringing salvation is vaguely reminiscent of the salvation of the Christians through Christ’s death. In Christianity, however, God *gave* mankind eternal life and did not take it from them, as happens to the unicorns in Carey’s story. Thus, the schema of a salvation myth does not account for these actions either. The reader is again trapped in ever-conflicting schemata, which altogether do not provide any meaningful interpretation.

In the examples above, schema refreshments were partly brought about by imaginary or surreal elements shaking up an otherwise realistic narrative. The following examples will show that schema disruption and refreshment also take place in the stories labelled as ‘semi-absurd’ in the last chapter, which do not feature ‘unreal’ – but nonetheless grotesque--elements. In “A Schoolboy Prank”, for instance, the shocking element is the immature and cruel behaviour of the former students of Turk Kershaw. After the burial of Kershaw’s dog in the morning, the story moves on to late afternoon, when the reunion with his three former students, Sangster, Davis and McGregor, is supposed to take place. The worn-out former teacher meeting the three young and successful men of high social rank plays upon feelings of pity and melancholy for the lonely old wolf who looks back on

better days, with little reason to be happy and positive about the remaining quarter of his life. The former students are disappointed in him, but up to this point in the story, there is no reason for the reader to apply a thriller or horror schema (cf. Carey 242). The turn in atmosphere takes place when Kershaw inquires about Masterton, one of the students' former schoolmates. McGregor is clearly embarrassed about his own past--about the adolescent homoerotic boarding school memories connected with that name--and reacts with a counter strike by suggesting paedophilic tendencies in Kershaw's past as a boarding school teacher. Suddenly and unexpectedly, the reader finds himself on a battlefield or thriller scenario. Verbal blows from both sides follow, and the tension between the former students and their teacher is almost unbearable, until the attack on Kershaw loses its momentum "and the three students [are] temporarily marooned in the midst of battle, nervous, embarrassed by what they had done" (Carey 248). When, after dealing McGregor a final blow, Kershaw leaves the battleground seemingly triumphantly, the three men stay behind to plot their revenge. As discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, they exhume the dog that Kershaw had buried that very morning and nail it to his front door. So, from the battlefield we move on to a horror schema with the unexpectedly nauseating cruelty of the desecration of the dog's corpse.

In "The Journey of a Lifetime", the schema refreshment works very similarly to the one in "A Schoolboy Prank". The story is about Louis Morrow Baxter Moon's long awaited journey, and thereby evokes the schema of a travelogue. It starts out on the positive notion that after longing for it for many years, his dream of – or rather obsession with – a train journey will finally come true – a schema which is also evoked in the title of the story. The first-person narrator's expectations are quite high, and he has saved all his money for the day he is to go on this journey. Once the day arrives and he finally enters the train, he is constantly in fear of not behaving and speaking in the appropriate manner, but seems to enjoy himself nonetheless. His behaviour towards the train conductor, or "steward," as Moon calls him, is ridiculously formal and snooty and is met with mockery:

"Who is this for?" [the steward] asks. [...]

"It is for me. Mr Moon. A booking made on the account of the State, on whose business I am travelling."

"Ah yes, I see." He seems almost disappointed to have found my name in his register. His manner is not what I would have expected.

He allocates me the salon next to his office.

"Here we are."

"Is this over the wheels?" I ask this as planned, It is well known that a salon directly over the wheels is less comfortable than one between the wheels [...].

"It don't float on air," he says and somehow thinks that he has made a great joke. He leaves laughing loudly, and in my confusion I forget to open the envelope I had marked "Tips". (Carey 254)

Moon simultaneously triggers feelings of antipathy and pity by violating the maxim of quantity of Grice's cooperative principle. He desperately wants the steward to know that he is travelling "on the account of the State." As this information is of no relevance for the steward, it creates the negative impression that Moon wants to show off, informing the train conductor of how 'important' he is. Thus, while we know how much planning and desire he put into this dream of a once-in-a-lifetime journey, Moon acts so sententiously and treats the conductor in such a condescending manner that the reader can understand why the latter is malicious and nasty towards him, and even develops a feeling of schadenfreude. Precisely this empathy for the conductor is what makes the third-order informativity in the seventh of nine sections of the story so disturbing. In the beginning of his journey, Moon tells his steward that he does not want to run out of ice for his gin and tonic, as he has heard that this often happens on trains. On the second day of his journey, he overhears that the dining car has indeed run out of ice, and is pleased that he had made sure that there was plenty in his compartment. When he takes a "constitutional" after dinner, he meets his steward "scooping ice into a silver bucket" (Carey 258). "'Ah,' [he thinks], 'the devil has his own supply'" (Carey 258). As in "Peeling", figurative language becomes shocking truth and he discovers that the devilish steward takes the ice for his compartment out of a coffin with "a man's naked corpse inside and, packed around his pale corpulence, great quantities of ice floating in water" (Carey

259). The fact that he had been drinking gin and tonic with ice formerly cooling a human corpse and possibly infested with cadaveric poison evokes nauseating disgust. At this point the tame travelogue schema is suddenly turned into a revolting horror schema by this totally unexpected and highly unlikely third-order informativity. The revelation of the purpose of his journey cannot shock any more than the discovery of the origin of the ice in his drinks. Moon realises and admits that the journey, leading him to his assignment as an executioner, had not at all been what he had dreamed of, and that the price he paid for it was too high.

The thought provoking twists and turns in these stories all work with the disappointment of the reader's expectation. These expectations develop from hypotheses we form about what track a narrative will take--hypotheses which are based on the information provided in a text, the cooperative principle with its four maxims,<sup>9</sup> and the literary experience we bring to a text.

Carey manages in most of his stories to lull the readers into a comfortable state of mind, leading them to think that they know what is going on and what to expect. Once the setting and schema seem to be well established, he ambushes the reader with second- and third-order informativity, shaking up the world view of the readers, sometimes to the degree that any coherent reading is no longer possible and meaning appears to be shattered.

#### 4.1.2 Deictic shift theory and metalepsis

According to Peter Stockwell, the deictic shift theory "models the common perception of a reader 'getting inside' a literary text as the reader takes a *cognitive stance* within the mentally constructed world of the text" [original emphasis] (46f). He states further that this "imaginative capacity" within the reader makes it possible that we can see, hear and experience events in a literary text from a character's or the narrator's point of view (47). The reader thus shifts his deictic centres from his own life in actual reality to

---

<sup>9</sup> The four maxims of Grice's cooperative principle are the maxims of quality, quantity, relation and manner. (cf. Grice 41-58)

the reality of the text world: the world built by an author to contain a narrative. Of course, a text does not only consist of this one reality. Within a narrative there are different *deictic fields* on different levels. Deictic shifts, however, do not only take place when the reader ‘gets inside’ a literary text, but also occur within literary texts. A novel or short story, for instance, can start on the level of the narrator’s present and can move to an earlier point in his or her life. Following Stockwell’s argument, this would be a movement down “the virtual planes of deictic fields” or “a *push* into a ‘lower’ deictic field” [emphasis added] (47). “Entering flashbacks, dreams, plays within plays, stories told by characters, reproduced letters or diary entries inside a novel [or short story], or considering unrealised possibilities inside the minds of characters” are all considered pushes into deictic fields as well (Stockwell 47).

A movement in the opposite direction, or upwards in the levels of deictic fields, Stockwell calls a *pop* (cf. Stockwell 47). “You can pop out of a deictic field by putting a book down and shifting your deictic centre back to your real life level as real reader,” he states (47). Within a literary text, a pop can be the shift back to the narrator’s present from a flashback, but also a narrator making an extradiegetic comment about a character or situation towards the implied reader<sup>10</sup> is a deictic push, such as a comment that does not feature in the (other) characters’ ‘reality’. “These involve shifts from the character who is the current focus of attention up to the deictic centre of the narrator” (Stockwell 47). These pops can also mean a movement out of the fictional reality and a shift of the deictic centre onto the level of the (implied) author. This “deliberate transgression of the threshold” between the narrative reality and the actual reality of the reader is called “*metalepsis*” in Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse Revisited* [original emphasis] (88). Genette claims that “when an author (or his reader) introduces himself into the fictive action of the narrative or when a character in that fiction intrudes into the extradiegetic existence of the author or reader, such intrusions disturb, to say the least, the distinction between levels” (88). Exactly this disturbing pop is what Carey

---

<sup>10</sup> The “implied reader” is “the reader to whom the novel is directed” by the author, who knows only very few of his ‘real readers’ (cf. Stockwell 42f.).



employs in some of his stories to shake up the clear distinction between reality and fiction, as elucidated below.

What makes Carey's pops and pushes both disturbing and haunting is their function as yet another element that violates the reader's expectations. Stockwell claims that "[u]sually, we expect pops and pushes to be balanced: flashbacks usually return us eventually to the current time; plays within plays do not take over the entire narrative; we do not read a book forever!" (48). As we will be able to see from the following examples, Carey does not abide by this rule.

In the analysis of schema refreshment in the stories "Crabs" and "Peeling", we have already touched upon the fact that in both narratives, Carey plays with the possibility that their schema refreshing elements could be interpreted as dream sequences, a possibility which remains opaque in both. If the final passage of "Crabs" is a dream or wishful thinking, i.e. a push into the deictic field of the eponymous character, Carey denies us the balancing pop back to the level of the character's fictional reality. In "Peeling", Carey employs a similar, though even more disturbing effect: since the reader gets no hint about where the fantasy starts, or if it is a fantasy at all, the author makes it impossible to locate the deictic push. No matter how hard we try, it is impossible to keep track of where the deictic centre is located within this fictional world. And without the existence of an obvious push, there cannot be a balancing pop back to the 'reality' level.

"Do You Love Me?" could also be read as partly taking place in the narrator's wish world. The relationship between the narrator and his father is described as difficult and ambivalent, as the son wishes to meet his father's expectations but is unable to do so (cf. Carey 3). And despite the 'scientific' theories explaining the dematerialisation of physical elements of the fictional reality, the father thinks that it is a lack of love for the affected people, buildings and landmass that causes their dissolution. When the father himself dematerialises at the end of the story, Bruce Bennett attributes this to "a post-Freudian revenge fantasy" (199). If we assume that to be the case, however,

although there are no indications for such a push except for the fact that supernatural events are described, we must assume that Carey, by intentionally withholding such headers, violated the co-operative principle, in particular the maxims of quantity and manner. (Rubik 176)

“Report on the Shadow Industry” starts out on the fictional reality of a first-person narrator, giving a report on the nebulous ‘shadows,’ which are produced in factories and packaged in boxes. They are described as having a highly addictive effect on the members of the fictional society, and as being consumed by all social classes but mostly by the lower ones: “The Bureau of Statistics reveals that the average householder spends 25 per cent of his income on these expensive goods *and that this percentage increases as the income decreases*” [emphasis added] (Carey 138). When at the end of the story the narrator refers to the story itself as another shadow, the metalepsis out of the story and into the reader’s reality takes place; the reader suddenly finds himself to be a consumer or user of the shadows, just like the lower classes he was previously encouraged to disdain. “For here I have manufactured one more: elusive, unsatisfactory, hinting at greater beauties and more profound mysteries that exist somewhere before the beginning and somewhere after the end” (Carey 139). By the addictive effects of the shadows and irresponsible behaviour of their consumers, the reader is led to believe that the shadows are an allusion to drugs. “The intellectual arrogance of readers is further encouraged by the information that lower-class people in particular are prone to spending their money on these vapoury delights [...] and that the narrator feels embarrassed when caught buying a shadow” (Rubik 173). The extradiegetic comment at the end, however, puts the reader and the narrator on the same level, and suggests that the shadows are, in fact, an allusion to literary art. It is, according to Margarete Rubik, “a metafictional comment on the commodification and commercialisation of literature in capitalist society,” and reveals that “both readers and writers are complicit in [the] system” that makes literature “one more marketable commodity promising shadowy satisfaction” (173). Some ambivalence about the meaning of the shadows remains, though, as the one consumed by the readers was not in a box but in a book, and was certainly not produced in a factory with colourful clouds coming out of its chimney.

In “The Fat Man in History”, the metalepsis at the end of the story reveals that the action does not merely centre on the character Alexander Finch, who is part of the movement “Fat Men Against The Revolution” (Carey 184), but is, in fact, “A Study of Leadership among the Fat” by Nancy Bowlby (Carey 205). As in “Report on the Shadow Industry”, the metaleptic comment does not thoroughly correspond with the rest of the story, since it is focused on the character of Alexander Finch, whose thoughts and ideas we get to read. The author of the study, however, is not with him all the time, so if we accept that the whole text is, in fact, her report, it remains questionable where she got all the relevant information. But since the living conditions seem more like a cage and less like a house, it also seems possible that their whole environment was part of a giant scientific laboratory, vaguely reminiscent of *The Truman Show*. Also reminiscent of “Report on the Shadow Industry” and similar to the schema-refreshing third-order informativity discussed above, the metaleptic account forces the reader to look at the whole text from a completely different perspective and to re-interpret everything in the light of it being a scientific experiment carried out for the twenty-third time and planned to be performed on a larger scale:

The following results were gathered from a study of twenty-three successive “Fantonis”. Apart from the “Fantoni-apparent,” the composition of the group remained unaltered. Whilst it can be admitted that studies so far are at an early stage, the results surely justify the continuation of the experiments with larger groups. (Carey 205)

What is most disturbing about Nancy Bowlby’s comment is that it makes the reader the addressee of her report, and therefore the initiator of the study. Again the readers find themselves in a complicit position they did not demand or expect.

In “War Crimes”, the metalepsis is not only at the end but also at the beginning of the story, and consists of an ambiguous metafictional section told by the first-person narrator. It is ambiguous because there is a connection to the narrative that follows, when the narrator states that “[t]hey will write about [him] as a tyrant, a psychopath, an aberrant accountant, and many other things [...]” (Carey 310). In the story, the narrator is indeed an accountant employed to avert the bankruptcy of a factory manufacturing

cheap microwave meals. The rest of this first section of the story, however, could also be interpreted as an author's fears and concerns about what will be done to his or her text by the critics:

In the end I shall be judged.

They will write about me in books and take care to explain me so badly that it is better that I do it myself. They will write with the stupid smugness of middle-class intellectuals, people of moral rectitude who have never seriously placed themselves at risk. [...]

They will write about me as tyrant [...] but it would never once occur to them that I might know exactly what I am doing. Neither would they imagine that I might have feelings other than those of a mad dog.

But they do not have the monopoly on finer feelings [...].

I cannot begin to tell you how I loathe them, how I have, in weaker moments, envied them, how I longed to be accepted by them [...].

The vermin, may they feast on this and cover it with their idiot footnotes. (Carey 310)

As it is not clarified who "I" and "they" are, it seems one of the obvious options that an author (such as Carey himself) is a possible "I" and that the "middle-class intellectuals" covering his text "with their idiot footnotes" are the critics by whom he "longed to be accepted." It would not be a typical Carey short story if there was a solution to such ambivalence and vagueness, so the reader is released into a narrative about two cruel accountants rambling from one bankrupt company to the next to rescue them with their methods of ruthless firing and killing of employees.

At the end of the narrative another metalepsis occurs, when the narrator suddenly addresses the reader directly:

And I am not mad, but rather I have opened the door you all keep locked with frightened bolts and little prayers. I am more like you than you know. You have not inspected the halls and attics. You haven't got yourself grubby in the cellars. Instead you sit in the front room in worn blue jeans, reading about atrocities in the Sunday papers. (Carey 336)

This metaleptic comment follows a sequence where the narrator describes how Sergei, one of his fellow accountants, is delivered to the angry mob of the factory hands. By sending Sergei out in a fine suit and with a

briefcase, he sacrifices a pawn to calm the furious anger of the factory workers, which was aroused when the narrator's business partner, Barto, shot a sixteen-year-old boy. The boy stole one of the TV dinners the factory produced and they had his body tied to the fence as a warning. The implied reader is made the narrator's accomplice in his incredibly brutal methods simply by being the audience of any news coverage. And by addressing the reader directly and claiming the he is "more like [us] than [we] know" he crosses the borderline that normally keeps the reader comfortably at a distance. Suddenly, we find ourselves to be part of the narrative.

"The Uses of Williamson Wood" does not feature a metalepsis like the stories above, but does make extensive use of deictic pops and pushes within the textual reality. The reader constantly has to shift the deictic centre between the actual text world and the protagonist's mental retreat. The young woman at the centre of the narrative escapes time and again into a fantasy dream world: her psychological retreat from the horrors she has to live through daily. The cool, green jungle is in utter opposition to her stifling, disgusting and abusive reality. The reader learns that she developed this powerful means of getting away from reality when she was still a young child "in a special leather harness [...] strapped to a length of fencing wire" to be safe from the deep mining shafts surrounding the house she lived in with her mother (Carey 207).

It must have been there, in that white hot place, that she had learned how to go somewhere else, to dream of green places and cool clear rain, to ignore what her eyes saw or her body felt. [...]

Her mother's lovers, in varying degrees, had been enraged or irritated by her withdrawals. She learned not to hear their words or feel their blows. Now, at nineteen, her long thin legs still bore the ghost of their rages, the strip of a heavy piece of wire, the spot of a cigarette. Yet they had not touched her. (Carey 207)

Throughout the story she retreats to her mental hide-out every time she is raped by her superior, Mr Jacobs, an older man greedy for money and power.

At the climactic end of the story, when he again wants to rape her after winning the sickening bet in which she challenged him to eat dog's

excrement for money, she loses touch with the 'reality' of the narrative completely:

She tried to be somewhere else. She had to be somewhere else. When she dropped the cement bag down the ladder she was already walking down the sandy path to the mango tree. Somewhere far away, she heard a grunt had come from a tangled mess of the bright painful snakes.

"No snakes here," she said.

She descended the ladder beside the path and found the snakes snapping around her ankles.

"Go away," she said, "or I will have to kill you. No snakes here."

But the snakes would not go away and writhed and twisted about each other making their nasty sounds.

It took her a while to mix the cement with sand and carry enough water, but soon she had it mixed and she buried the groaning snakes in concrete where they would do no harm. (Carey 217)

The final push back into her actual reality is not carried out and she apparently remains in her mental hide-out. An account of what happens to her or what she does in the ghastly narrative reality is only vaguely hinted at and left to the reader's contemplation. It is suggested in the quote above that she murders him by dropping cement bags onto him and then rids herself of his body by burying it in the cement she mixes, but the reader gains no certainty about this. Retreat and reality are reversed and the memories of her childhood become a distant nightmare. "The moon shone through the sawtoothed sky and she dreamed that she was trapped in a white arid landscape, strapped in a harness and running helplessly up and down on a wire, but that was only a dream" (Carey 217).

Another story with confusing pops and pushes in and out of deictic sub-worlds is "Concerning the Greek Tyrant". In this narrative, the deictic levels are not just shifting, but rather intertwined to such an extent that it is virtually impossible to distinguish between the actual level of the narrative and the several layers of dream-levels we encounter.

Initially, the reader learns that Homer, the Greek author of the *Iliad*, has a fever, and that the epic tale including Odysseus and his men are products

of Homer's feverish dreams. So far, the story is not disorienting and the notion that an author's characters are parts of his imagination is nothing new. The narrative becomes confusing when Homer himself enters his own dream world as a character and is able to talk to Odysseus. Odysseus, however, has knowledge about Homer's actual reality, where he lies in bed with a fever:

"Are you still ill?"

[...]

"I'm better now," he says. Fever is not a very pleasant thing for a man."

"It's possibly worse," says Odysseus, "for creatures of his imagination."  
(Carey 110)

This, too, is a metaleptic transgression of the boundaries between the deictic fields of the narrative, and it continues with Odysseus enquiring about Homer's progress with the writing of the narrative he is part of:

"[...] Are you still lost?"

"Homer is never lost," says Homer. "We have made a few minor explorations and now it's time to get back to the main story [...]."  
(Carey 111)

Echion is the vehicle by which another push is carried out, when we learn about his dreams about past battles and several deaths he has already died, all of which turn out to be discarded sketches of Homer's masterpiece. Echion is suspicious about the nature of these dreams and shares his thoughts with Diomedes, his best friend:

"Did you have that dream, Diomedes?"

"I don't know." [...]

"I know you did." Echion spoke very calmly. "I know you had that dream, Diomedes. I know we all had that dream. And all the other dreams. I don't think they were dreams. I think these terrible things have really happened and Odysseus has used magic to make us forget." (Carey 112)

The pushes, pops and metalepses are impossible to keep track of with certainty, and the reader can never be sure on which level the deictic centre is located at any given moment. The story ends when Odysseus' warriors descend from the Trojan horse and find Echion dead – having died the death we remember from Homer's final version of the *Iliad*, breaking his neck by falling from the wooden horse. But in Carey's story he had time to leave a note in the sand, before he died:

"KILL THE PIG TYRANT HOMER WHO OPPRESSES US ALL."

But the words were erased by the blind feet of his companions as the whole incident concerning Echion was later erased by Homer, who no longer found the incident interesting enough to tell (Carey 116).

## **4.2 The differences between the imaginary and the semi-absurd stories**

### **4.2.1 What makes the imaginary stories disturbing and confusing?**

As already mentioned in chapter 3, the categories of the imaginary and the semi-absurd of Carey's short stories are not divided by clear-cut boundaries, but are rather a matter of degrees on a spectrum ranging from 'almost realistic' to 'imaginary' or 'surreal.'

However, the stories labelled as 'imaginary' in the previous chapter share a surreal or fantastic quality that detaches them from the reality we know as the actual world and sets them in a universe both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Their disturbing effect is achieved mostly by elements that contradict our natural laws embedded in realities which otherwise resemble the world as we perceive it. Carey's fictional realities are so familiar because of the *principle of minimal departure*, which "operates as a cognitive mechanism of efficiency in understanding alternate discourse



worlds”<sup>11</sup> (Stockwell 96). Stockwell claims that unless we are told otherwise by a text, “we assume an identity with the actual world. Gravity still works, China exists, there was a Norman Conquest of England in 1066, and unless we are directed otherwise, these and all our other actual world assumptions are put into operation by default” (96). Concerning the principle of minimal departure, Culler states that the reader assumes that a text expresses “a significant attitude to some problem concerning man and/or his relation to the universe” (115). Finding out what ‘significant’ attitude concerning mankind Carey wants to express with his unfathomable fictional universes is the most difficult – if not impossible – task with which the author challenges his reader.

Among the imaginary narratives in *Collected Stories*, there are three categories that use similar elements to remove the stories from a realistic grounding in the actual world: “Do You Love Me?”, “Kristu-Du”, “The Last Days of a Famous Mime” and “Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion” all feature elements which contradict the natural laws of our world; in “Conversations with Unicorns”, “Concerning the Greek Tyrant” and “He Found Her in Late Summer”, Carey adds a mythical element to contradict the actual reality; and “Crabs”, “Exotic Pleasures” and “The Chance” play with the genre of science fiction.

In “Peeling”, “Report on the Shadow Industry” and “The Puzzling Nature of Blue,” Carey does not play with any of the common genre conventions of narratives not set in the actual world; these stories will therefore constitute a fourth but inhomogeneous category.

The world described in “Do You Love Me?” seems quite similar to our reality, and many elements of the narrative support this assumption. Firstly, we learn that the story is about a society organised as a *nation* that performs an *annual census* in which the population and their possessions are counted. They celebrate the “Festival of the Corn” (Carey 1), which is reminiscent of the religious tradition of Thanksgiving in the American Christian tradition and

---

<sup>11</sup> “[A] discourse world is the imaginary world which is conjured up by a reading of a text, and which is used to understand and keep track of events and elements in that world” and “we can understand a discourse world as the mediating domain for reality as well as projected fictions” (Stockwell 94).

harvest celebrations in other religious communities. This festival “takes place in midsummer, the weather always being fine and warm” (Carey 1). From this we can see that the seasons of the year also correspond with our reality. The members of this fictional society live in houses and own “furniture, electrical goods, clothing, rugs, kitchen utensils, bathrobes, slippers, cushions, lawn mowers curtains, doorsteps, heirlooms, [...]” (Carey 1). The list of props and participants closely resembling our known world is almost endless and even stretches to globally operating companies like the ICI (Imperial Chemical Industries). Thus we are led to assume that “all our other actual world assumptions [can] put into operation by default” (Stockwell 96). So far, these are all notions we know from our own world. The slight deviations from it--such as the quasi-clerical role the cartographers play in this society--are so small that they are quickly discarded as being too insignificant to prevent us from “[assuming] an identity with the actual world” (Stockwell 96). Thus, the *mental space* created here is identical with the mental representation of the actual world (cf. Stockwell 96). However, by violating the physical principle of conservation of energy – Carey allows landmasses, buildings and people dematerialise--the author introduces an imaginary element to a world otherwise so similar to ours that we assume our natural laws to be valid there, too. A *conceptual blend*<sup>12</sup> is necessary for holding together the properties of the mental projection of our actual world, and a mental space where the principle of conservation of energy applies, is suspended.

“Kristu-Du”, the story about an autocratic white architect, Gerrard Haflinger, who thinks he can bring change to the suppressed tribes of a supposedly African country, is also set in a world not unfamiliar and easily definable in the space of reality. At the end of the story, however, the natural laws are challenged. The central element is the eponymous domed building the architect has planned and imagined to lead to the liberation of the people from their cruel dictator, Oongala. Gerrard Haflinger designs the building “to the brief of Oongala’s first victim, the late president, as a unifying symbol for the eight tribes” and thinks that it will become “one of those rare pieces of

---

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed account on mental spaces and conceptual blending see Stockwell 96ff.

architecture which [...] act on the future as well as exist in the present” (Carey 20f.). The dictator rules with cruelty and promotes himself as the “Great Magician of tribal myth by utilizing a continual array of new tricks” (Carey 17). The architect believes that his building will actually unify the tribes against their malicious ruler and that he will thereby make a considerable contribution to the over-due coup d’état. At the end of the story after hundreds of thousands have been unified in and around the Kristu-Du for four days, the dictator arrives and Haflinger is convinced that Oongala will face his end. At precisely this point, however, the narrative moves away from familiar ground, and when the dictator enters the enormous dome, the condensation that accumulated from four days of discussion between hundreds of thousands of people rains down on them, which the crowd takes as a miracle. The intended vehicle to freedom turns into “a machine that [will] keep these primitive people in Oongala’s murderous grip for another forty-three years” (Carey 37).

In actual reality, the notion of rain within a building is simply not possible and contradicts the laws of nature as we know them. As in “Do You Love Me?”, the reader’s reality space has to be blended with one containing a world where this would be possible.

In “Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion” the natural laws are violated by the suicidal horses the shepherd third class tries to protect from drowning in the pool. In the actual world, horses are able to swim and are usually not very melancholy or prone to suicide. Carey, of course, does not provide any explanation for why these particular horses cannot swim, nor does he answer why they always gather around the pool gloomily and then fall into it and drown. The notion of sad horses committing suicide definitely calls for a conceptual blend, as in the stories mentioned above.

The extremely short and fragmented story “The Last Days of a Famous Mime” is explicitly set in Europe and features realistic narrative props, such as the airline *Alitalia*. Apart from its staccato style and eccentric strangeness, this story can also be contained in the reality space, except for one small sentence that requires another conceptual blend: “Asked to describe an aeroplane he flew three times around the city, only injuring himself slightly on landing” (Carey 14). What is suggested here, especially by the last part of the

sentence, is that the Mime can fly without technical assistance, which is of course not possible for human beings in the actual world.

Of the second group, “Concerning the Greek Tyrant” takes a special position. From its beginning, the story is set in the fictional world of Homer’s feverish dreams. Thus, the reader is prepared to encounter imaginary and fantastic elements. The fact that the story does not pretend to be staged in the actual world, but in the process of the author writing the colossal saga of the *Iliad*, gives the reader the chance to build a completely new mental space for it: a space where anything can happen and rules governing this universe are not predetermined. However, since the story refers to a well-known masterpiece of occidental literature and is set in what is supposed to be the days of Homer, we expect the characters and plot to turn out as we know the *Iliad* from our present-day perspective. And after a few digressions, Carey even complies with the expectations of his readers and lets Echion die when he descends the Trojan horse, just as we know it from Homer’s *Iliad*.

In “Conversations with Unicorns”, the mythical element is also introduced at the beginning of the story, but here the expectation of the reader is once again disappointed. The mental space we have containing creatures like unicorns is one related to fairy tales, myths, fables and fantasy texts. Nevertheless, Carey embeds this fable element in a very realistic modern day environment. Cars, parking lots, rifles and the sport of hunting all place the narrative in a world much more related to the reader’s actual world than within the imaginary space occupied by unicorns, centaurs and other participants of mythology and fable. Furthermore, the mythical notion itself does not really fit into its mental space, as the unicorns do not show the typical qualities of wisdom, innocence and purity. Instead, they show very humane characteristics, as discussed in section 4.1.1. To make sense of this story, the reader would have to blend the mental space containing mythical creatures with one about anthropomorphic animals, and this blended space must again be merged with that of reality. But combining so many inconsistent notions makes it impossible to keep track of the meaning of each element within its respective space, therefore making interpretation of meaning a difficult, if not impossible, task.

In “He Found Her in Late Summer”, Carey also makes use of this mythical space blended with the space of reality by allowing the protagonist to believe in the existence of vampires. Similar to “Conversations with Unicorns,” the notion of the vampire itself is slightly distorted and not totally congruent with the commonly shared concept. As discussed in section 4.1.1, Dermott becomes convinced that the young woman he has picked up at the riverside is an actual vampire, feeding on his life energy. In order to make sense of the meaning of this story, the reader has the two options: either labelling Dermott mad or ignorant, or once again blending the mythical with the reality spaces.

In “Crabs,” the first story playing with the conventions of the science fiction genre, the setting is quite similar to that of the American film, *American Graffiti*. All the elements necessary for creating a convincing 1950s or 60s setting are there: trains, cars, a drive-in theatre, men performing ‘manly’ tasks (like the protagonist’s friend Frank who works for a towing company), Marlboro cigarettes and *Playboy* magazine. The different schemata that are called up when the protagonist and his girlfriend get locked up at the Star Drive-in Theatre already pose a challenge to the mental space: “concepts of a drive-in, a car-dump, a refugee camp and a prison camp are blended, and although these are all fenced-in places with restricted entrance, there is no meaningful conceptual space to contain them in our reality” (Rubik 179). In the Kafka-esque metamorphosis at the end, however, natural laws are violated by the insertion of imaginary elements, just as in “Do You Love Me?”. The metamorphosis of a human being into a car, or at least a hybrid of the two, cannot be contained in a reality space, but only within a science fiction schema. From today’s perspective, we look back to the 1950s or 60s and know that such a fusion of man and machine is not possible in the present, nor was it back then. The science fiction element cannot be contained in a meaningful mental space of these past decades and thus makes the conceptual blend inevitable, but it does not help in establishing the meaning of the story.

“Exotic Pleasures” has a very similar effect on the reader’s construction of different spaces. In this short story we are also encouraged to build a mental space far too similar to our present-day world to meaningfully contain

unrealistic elements such as space travel, stellar colonies or a bird destroying the planet by excreting the seeds of the extraterrestrial Rock-drill tree, on which it feeds. The protagonist, Lilly, waits in “a boiling old Chevrolet” (Carey 218) at a parking lot until her partner, Mort, returns from looking for a job as a miner on Kennecott 21, a stellar colony of the earth and origin of the Rock-drill tree. A mental space for science-fiction schemata usually does not contain old cars and motels, but does accommodate enormous well-populated space platforms; this space must therefore be blended with the reality space.

“The Chance” also belongs to this subgroup of the imaginary texts in *Collected Stories*. The world here is almost as we know it, except that there has been an invasion by the extraterrestrial Fastalogians, who set up a genetic lottery, referred to as “the Chance,” which lends its name to the narrative. As in “Exotic Pleasures”, the reader is confronted with a reality too familiar to be located in a distant future, but at the same time one that is strange and bewildering. The complete exchange of a creature’s set of genes facilitating the transfer of the mind into a completely different body is something that will probably never become feasible and adds a fantasy or science fiction element to the story. If we consider that the story was published in the 1970s, we realise that the double helix structure of the DNA was discovered only some twenty years before Carey wrote this text. This casts a different and more futuristic light on “The Chance” than simply regarding it from today’s perspective on genetics.

However, in this story the reader is yet again confronted with the blending of mental spaces. On the one hand, the reality space is used for containing entities like beer, cigarettes, mosquito nets and restaurants. On the other hand, many of these familiar concepts are invaded by the Fastalogian colonisation: “The restaurant was one of those Fasta Cafeterias that had sprung up, noisy, messy, with harsh lighting and long rows of bright white tables that were never ever filled” (Carey 266).

“Peeling” is one of the stories which is hard to categorise when it comes to imaginary or strange elements, as it is set in a more familiar environment. “Outside the fog is thick, the way it is always meant to be in London, but seldom is, unless you live by the river, which I don’t,” the narrator states

(Carey 84). But not only the location of the city of London adds to the assumption that the story is set in the mental representation of the perceived actual world, but also the story's protagonists. The narrator is an older man in love with a young woman called Nile, who is his neighbour. References to more specific existing places, like Portobello Road, and actual world entities like the game *Monopoly*, the typically English milk bottles on the doorstep, and the famous beer brand *Guinness* make this fictional reality even more realistic. The reader learns that Nile works at an abortion clinic, and this, too, is possible in the mental projection of the actual world, as is her eccentric hobby of collecting dolls she denudes of hair and eyes and paints white. The surreal element removing the story from familiar ground comes into action when the woman herself is dismantled, ultimately exposing a small white doll. The conceptual blend of the realistic space and a space where the taking-apart of a woman is possible, have to be blended in order to make any sense of the story at all. But, as has been shown above, the exact meaning of this surreal element cannot be ascertained.

"Report on the Shadow Industry" and "The Puzzling Nature of Blue" do not require conceptual blends of such extremely different mental spaces as some of the stories described above. Nevertheless, the reader needs to blend the mental representations of strikingly realistic fictional worlds and metaphorical thinking. The shadows in "Report on the Shadow Industry" and the eponymous blue stain the drug Eupholon in "The Puzzling Nature of Blue" causes are both surreal elements, but are quite obviously symbols of something else. Precisely what these two notions represent, however, cannot really be determined, forcing the reader to draw upon metaphorical thinking. While the shadows could be interpreted as a metaphor for drugs, lottery or literature, the blue stain is a twofold metaphor – first it is the obvious stigma of Eupholon consumption which, secondarily, may represent resistance and revolution against a council prohibiting the drug. As both the shadows and the blue stain are not part of our actual world, they cannot be interpreted meaningfully without blending the realistic space with a metaphorical one.

We can see from these elaborations that the imaginary among Carey's stories are difficult to interpret or even understand without allowing for the merging of seemingly contradicting mental worlds.

#### 4.2.2 Why are the semi-absurd stories so unsettling?

As elaborated in the previous section, the so-called “imaginary” stories obtain their unsettling and haunting qualities from the reader’s inability to make sense of the fictional world in which they are set. The ‘semi-absurd’ stories are equally, if not more haunting to the reader’s mind, since they cannot simply be brushed aside as taking place in the realm of the absurd, fantastic or simply *unreal*. The following analyses will show that these stories can indeed be contained within the reality space, but still have an absurd quality mainly resulting from a threat with which the reader is confronted.

As mentioned above, the two categories of the imaginary and the semi-absurd are not clear-cut. And like the imaginary stories, the group of the semi-absurd is not homogenous, but can roughly be subdivided into two groups.

The first group are five stories sharing the characteristic that their haunting aspect lies in their breach of taboos within Western civilisation. The stories “Withdrawal”, “The Fat Man in History”, “A Schoolboy Prank”, “The Journey of a Lifetime” and “War Crimes” all deal with the notion of *death*—a notion steeped in taboos—in different ways. Taboos function as strong social restrictions, and breaking them means an almost existential threat to the members of the cultural community that shares them. Death is probably an especially strong one and Carey’s seemingly cavalier handling of this sensitive issue causes a serious threat to the world view of the Western reader. As the reader does not readily change his world view, these stories seem absurd despite being set in perfectly realistic worlds.

In “Withdrawal”, the reader encounters the second-hand furniture dealer Eddie Rayner, who entertains the very twisted hobby and professional sideline of collecting, exhibiting and selling the remains of dead people. His collection includes pieces of evidence, photographs of murders, even a “phial of blood said to have once pulsed through Marilyn Monroe’s veins” and “[a] stained shirt with a foul smell which was certainly worn by Guevara in Bolivia, sold by a traitor to a policeman to a tourist to a woman collecting examples of folk weaving, and finally to Eddie” (Carey 121). The delight he takes in these objects is only involuntarily secretive, as he actually would like to share his



back room exhibition with a broader public: "Sharing the imaginary stranger's delight Eddie wishes, once more, that the back room was not a back room. The exhibition of murder victims in the front room is a flirtation with his fantasy of declaring the back room open for general viewing. It is a calculated experiment" (Carey 121). Eddie's violation of the sanctity of death—especially that of murder victims—is obviously regarded as impious by his fellow second-hand dealers on High Street, who file a complaint against his exhibition of "[s]ixteen photographs of the bodies of murder victims lying on lino, on carpet, on cobblestone" (Carey 117).

Death is a sensitive issue in the Western world, but taking pleasure in seeing pictures of murder victims would certainly constitute a breach of taboos. However, Carey takes a step further, inducing the reader to feel threatened when Eddie tries to arrange a deal for a severed human hand: "Dean Da Silva has a severed hand to sell him, or, more correctly, has hinted to a mutual friend that a severed hand might become available" (Carey 119). The height of outrageousness is reached, when a former friend and now heroin junkie tells Eddie about the death of his landlady, who died while sitting at a table about to write something. The friend tells Eddie that after several days, the corpse has not yet started to decompose, and Eddie's interest is aroused immediately. After some complications, he actually brings the body back to his flat in order to put it in his chamber of horrors, possibly with the intention of selling it. This whole incident is certainly one of the most violent breaks of taboos surrounding death possible, especially as Eddie enjoys it so much, and does not just do it for reasons of profit:

He had dealt, all his professional life, with pieces of death, the cunts and pricks and tits of death, bottled, embalmed, and photographed close up. But here he had crossed that vague, disputed territory that separates the pornographic from the erotic. Accustomed to peering through keyholes, he was surprised to discover that he had walked through a door and it was all quite different from what his tingling hysterical nerves had told him it would be. He felt no suspicion of fear, no disgust, no exhilaration. Merely a kind of curious calm like a good stone. (Carey 132)

In this passage, Carey most explicitly confronts the reader with this taboo, by creating a character who reacts in the exactly opposite way to the reader.

The character on whose perspective the whole narrative is focused is immune to the terror of confrontation with a dead body, instead taking genuine, almost erotic, pleasure in seeing the deceased woman. Fear, disgust and pleasure are basic emotional reactions to fundamentally antithetic situations, but while the first two are defence mechanisms against life-threatening situations, the third is a reaction to situations that are life-sustaining, similar to food intake or sexual activity. If, instead of reacting to a threat with a defence mechanism, we respond with pleasure, the result is increased danger; such an inverted reaction could be considered the result of mental illness. Carey's character, however, is not explicitly portrayed as mentally ill, but yet "has never wondered deeply about his love for these items. When challenged he has defended himself as a liberator, a man who has opened a door and let fresh air into a room musty with guilt" (Carey 121f.). Thus, Eddie is indeed aware of the taboo he is breaching, but does not care about it at all – quite on the contrary, he wants to see this taboo flouted. That he questions this social convention and that Eddie is portrayed as eccentric, yet not utterly mad, allows for the potential that anyone could pose a similar threat to the comfortable, familiar social rules.

The absurd aspect in "The Fat Man in History" is similar, and, as mentioned above, is based on the same taboo. The fat counter-revolutionists not only kill their leader but also eat his flesh. Cannibalism is probably seen as an even stronger desecration of corpses than the business with death in "Withdrawal". The most gruesome tales about 'savages' have always been those about their eating human flesh. The human species is regarded as a social and cultural species, and the murder and consumption of their own kind contradicts this notion, making cannibalism a nutritional taboo in most cultures. Nonetheless, in some cultures, specific parts of the body, such as the heart or male testicles, are believed to bear an individual's strength or power, and their consumption is seen as a means of transferring this power to the consumer. In Western cultures, this ritual is clearly regarded as superstitious and barbaric, but in "The Fat Man in History", Carey features a similar aspect of cannibalism:

*Rationale by A. Finch*

The following is a suggested plan of action for the “Fat Men Against The Revolution”.

It is suggested that the Fat Men of this establishment pursue a course of militant love, by bodily consuming a senior member of the revolution, an official of the revolution, or a monument of the revolution. [...] [original italics] (Carey 201)

As we can see from this extract, the Fat Men do not eat their leader Fantoni’s flesh in a situation of existential threat, such as being in the extreme danger of starvation if they do not. They eat it because of spiritual or ideological reasons, since they believe that thereby they “would incorporate in their own bodies all that could be good and noble in the revolution an excrete that which is bad. In other words, the bodies of Fat Men will purify the revolution” (Carey 201). Several indications show that the Fat Men live in a Western civilisation: they dance to the famous Strauss waltz “Blue Danube” and drink Scotch, for instance. As the Western world is much influenced by Christianity, the pagan belief that the consumption of human flesh could have a positive influence on the consumer and could additionally contribute to some higher goal seems appalling to the reader.

In addition to the horrific notion of cannibalism, “The Fat Man in History” breaches yet another taboo: the scientific experimentation on human beings without their consent. As mentioned in section 4.1.2, Alexander Finch and his fellow revolutionaries are subject to a scientific study about leadership amongst them. The ruthless scientist Nancy Bowlby is not some detached academic watching from a secure ambush, but rather interacts with the subjects of her study and even pretends to be their friend. Her cold-heartedness reminds the reader of the matter-of-course way the Nazi regime experimented with humans during World War II, and just as Jews, Roma and Sinti were considered dispensable and treated as second-class citizens during the Nazi regime, so too are the Fat Men in Carey’s short story. This reminiscence of Nazi-experimentation, next to cannibalism, makes up another aspect of the unsettling quality of this story, as it simultaneously dissociates and associates this fictional world with the actual reality of the reader.

“A Journey of a Lifetime”, a story whose horror twist and schema refreshment has been discussed at considerable length in section 4.1.1, also plays with the notion of and taboo around cannibalism. The protagonist, Moon, does not directly consume human flesh, but the revelation that the ice cooling his drink has also cooled a naked corpse operates along similar lines. Like one of the revolutionists<sup>13</sup>, the realisation about the intake of parts of another human being (at least body fluids and epithelial cells) causes Moon to be physically sick: “I did not answer when he knocked, and in fact was unable to, for I was in the toilet, my stomach rent with uncontrollable spasms” (Carey 259).

Different to Eddie in “Withdrawal”, the protagonist of this narrative shows the ‘correct’ reaction, but since the reader is only privy to Moon’s perspective on the events of his train journey, he is forced to identify with him to some extent; Moon’s fear and disgust are thus immediately transferred to the reader. The most shocking aspect about the whole incident is probably that Moon was forced to consume the contaminated ice without knowing where it came from, and was thus robbed of the opportunity to refuse. If we consider how often, in our modern day reality, we consume food and drinks prepared by somebody else and how little control we have over where they come from and through what processes they have gone before they end up in our systems, Moon’s experience, when transferred to our own lives, is highly unsettling. The almost natural trust we take in the people preparing our food and drinks is fundamentally shaken by this story.

Also discussed in section 4.1.1 was the horror twist evoked by the exhumation of Turk Kershaw’s dog. The desecration of the beloved pet is almost comparable with violence against the dead body of a human family member, especially if we consider Kershaw’s situation. He is no longer young and utterly lonely, which makes the desecration of his pet all the more deplorable. The exhumation and subsequent defilement of the dog has two threatening aspects: first, the confrontation with the former students’ act

---

<sup>13</sup> “Glino is still vomiting in the deain in the backyard. He has been vomiting since dawn and it is now dark. Finch said he should be let off, because he was a vegetarian, but the-man-who-won’t-give-his-name insisted. So they made Glino eat just a little bit.” (Carey 204)

itself, and, second, the reader's speculation about the incredible impact the sight will have on Kershaw's psyche when he returns home. Sangster, Davis and McGregor not only violated the beloved dog, but also Kershaw's home, his sanctuary, the place where he, at least prior to this incident, felt safe and secure: a place he connected with many wonderful memories about a happy life filled with love and companionship. Because the story ends at the point when the three men have carried out their monstrous deed, we are not permitted to learn about its impact upon Kershaw, the character whose perspective we share throughout the story and with whom we have come to sympathise (or at least, pity). What we do know about is the traumatic effect this event has on the perpetrators, who "[a]t that moment [...] were not to know that they had made an enduring nightmare for themselves, that the staring eyes of the dead dog would peer into the dirty corners of their puzzled dreams for many years to come" (Carey 249).

"War Crimes" also plays with the shock caused by the mention of death. The story is set in a faintly dystopian universe arguably reminiscent of situations during one of the past financial crises, complete with masses of poor, unemployed people on the edge of revolution. Apart from the metaleptic comments discussed in section 4.1.2, this story derives its unsettling quality from the unheard-of cruelty of the punk-like business accountants. Already on their way to the factory where the story is set, they deliberately run over two people with their car, not even bothering to stop:

As we approached they attempted to drag a dead tree across the road.

I felt Bart hesitate. The cowboy boot came back off the accelerator, making a stoned decision at eighty miles an hour.

"Plant it," I said. I said it fast and hard.

He planted it. The Cadillac responded perfectly. I heard the crunch of breaking wood. Tearing noises. Looking back I saw two bundles of rags lying on the road.

"Shit." The word was very quiet. I looked at Bart. He looked a little pale.

"How did it feel?"

He considered my question. "I don't know," [...] "just sort of *soft*. Sort of ..." he furrowed his brow, "sort of did-it-happen, didn't-it-happen type of thing."

I leant into the back seat and pulled up a bag of dope and rolled an exceedingly large trumpet-shaped joint. [original italics] (Carey 311f.)

This incident is not mentioned or discussed any further during the narrative, and they do not seem to have any emotional response whatsoever to their killing (or at least seriously injuring) two people.

In another incidence, the reader is casually informed of how the former general manager left the factory: "We worked from the old general manager's office, the brown smudge of his suicide an unpleasant reminder of the possibility of failure" (Carey 315). The killing of a sixteen-year-old boy unsettles the character of Barto, but the narrator is again distant and cold, observing only that "a pea rolls out" of the boys mouth, which contains "a chunk of TV dinner, slowly thawing" (Carey 331).

That the narrator, who is the only informant of the reader, is so shockingly unemotional about the death of other human beings, is most appalling. The reader is confronted with his or her own feelings of terror and fear and is left alone with them, since the narrator does not share them in the least. This emotional numbness makes him alien and dangerous, which is perhaps the reason why Barto follows his inhuman orders and ultimately organises a mass murder at his command. The narrator even watches from his raised hide-out on the roof of the canteen as Barto "lead[s] his contingent of workers through the dusk in the direction of the front gate. Each man had a flamethrower strapped to his back and I smiled to think that these men had been producing food to feed those whom they would now destroy" (Carey 337).

The stories making up the second group within the semi-absurd category share a different quality. In "A Windmill in the West", "American Dreams" and "The Uses of Williamson Wood," it is the extreme isolation from the rest of the world and the characters' imprisonment in such horrible circumstances that makes these stories so threatening. All protagonists seem to be in complete isolation from the rest of the world and do nothing to change their situation. As discussed in the second chapter, the theme of

imprisonment in inescapable situations features in many of Carey's stories, but in these three texts there is no obvious reason for the characters to stay in their positions. A basic reaction to an unpleasant situation that cannot be altered is usually escape; if there is no other scope of action in a menacing situation, there is often an option to run. The protagonists of these stories, however, do not seem to regard this option as a possibility for themselves, since nothing – or at least nothing they could possibly access--seems to exist outside their microcosm. Their isolation is also an aspect unimaginable to a reader with a functional social network. Thus, if we consider Culler's notion of the principle of minimal departure (as elucidated above), and assume that Carey's goal is to express "a significant attitude to some problem concerning man and/or his relation to the universe" (Culler 115), taking into account that the reader has to identify with the characters to some extent because of the limited narrative voices, this inability to escape their isolation translates to a threat to the reader's similar autonomy. As we do not readily accept such a curtailment of our abilities, we apply a defence mechanism on a different level and label these stories as absurd, thereby distancing ourselves from them.

In "A Windmill in the West", an American soldier is stationed to guard a border between Australian and American military territory in the Australian desert. There is nothing but a road, a small aluminium caravan he inhabits, and a windmill in what he believes to be the west side of the fence running through the desert. He busies himself with collecting and killing scorpions while increasingly losing his sanity. Halfway through the story, he begins to confuse east and west, sees the sun set in the east and cannot tell which side of the fence is in which nation's territory. Although his utter isolation obviously poses a threat to his mental stability, he does not even consider contacting the world outside the seemingly endless desert. This world outside his microcosm clearly exists at least in the form of superior military personnel and the pilot of the private plane he shoots at the end of the story (see chapter 2). However, there is no mention of the soldier's family or friends at all. No home is ever referred to, and it seems as if he had not existed before he was assigned the task of guarding this border. As in so many of Carey's stories, we again encounter reality props, like a *Playboy* magazine or a

telephone at his disposal, which clearly place the story in a reality at least similar to ours, yet there is no explanation of his uncanny isolation. What is so unsettling and striking about his situation is that his isolation does not stay on the narrative level only – his thoughts, too, are only concerned with his immediate surroundings: the task he has to fulfil, the scorpions he collects and that the road running through the fence's only visible opening is not a full 90-degree angle.

He does consider consulting his compass to solve the confusion about the cardinal points and thinks about calling his military superiors to clarify which side of the fence is which nation's territory, but, for no obvious reason, does not act on these ideas. He does not actively decide against taking these actions – these thoughts are simply not pursued any further. Thus, although there is nothing about this story actively contradicting the reality space, the soldier's maddening isolation, passivity and stagnation make this story unsettling and absurd.

"The Uses of Williamson Wood" is set in a similarly minute and horrific microcosm. As discussed above, the young woman, through whose perspective this story is related, works at a Lost and Found, and seems to have no reality outside of her abusive environment. The reader never learns about the place where she lives or any other individuals with whom she is in contact. Other people do populate this universe, as it is once mentioned that there are customers who come to the Lost and Found. There is also mention of a mother, with whom she lived in a mining area during her childhood, but she seems to have disappeared. The unsettling and unanswered question haunting the reader is why she cannot simply resign from her position, thereby making herself no longer a victim of her superior's brutal rapes. There is again no explanation of her general circumstances that could perhaps account for some dependency locking her into this destructive environment. At least she does escape somehow by retreating to a mental wish world permanently.

The townsfolk in "American Dreams" are more like the soldier in "A Windmill in the West". Although Chinese labourers and American tourists come to the small town, the inhabitants are apparently unable to see a chance to escape their situation by simply leaving. Moving away would be



the easiest way to free themselves from the necessity of being avatars of their former selves for the American tourists, but no one seems to consider this option. Despite references to Hollywood and the visits of strangers from outside, the town itself seems to be the whole universe to its inhabitants. Their suffering becomes somewhat absurd because of their own readiness to accept it.

### 4.3 Concluding with a haunting lack of closure

For Lyn Hejinian, the author of *The Rejection of Closure*, a text is open when “all elements of the work are maximally excited” and when it “rejects the authority of the writer over the reader” (3). The first certainly holds true for Carey’s stories, but the second of Hejinian’s statements is controversial when applied to his short fiction. Does he reject his authority over the reader or does he actually develop its full scope by pretending to give him or her an endless scale of possible readings, in truth, withholding even a single one? Thus, are Carey’s short stories open texts, or are they closed off from any access on the part of the reader?

After examining the different cognitive and psychological mechanisms which are exploited to confuse the reader, it has become obvious that the semi-absurd and the imaginary qualities of Carey’s *Collected Stories* reverberate in the minds of the readers long after they have closed the book because there is no closure to be reached.

In *The Narrative Modes – Techniques of the Short Story*, Helmut Bonheim claims that “[w]e expect endings, much more than beginnings, to show what the story was about, what special effect was to be achieved” (118). It has become apparent that Carey’s stories deny the reader this satisfaction. They are not explained, and their meaning is not clarified. Open endings leave “conflicts [...] unresolved or insoluble, or the ‘slice of life’ is left uncovered and without any particular container: hanging, as it were, in mid air” (Bonheim 119).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Renate Brosch asserts that the short story is the text type most similar to the cultural practice of storytelling, which is the basic pattern to human self-conception and world view (cf. 73). Thus, in this narrative mode, the ending is the most aspired point of a

narrative, expected to provide a deeper understanding of the plot and some kind of closure or revelation. Part of the reading pleasure is the expectation and recognition of a denouement, Brosch claims (cf. 73). Closed stories convey the comforting feeling of an untied knot, a lifted tension or a resolved conflict (cf. Brosch 76). According to Brosch, the traditional plot-oriented short story – ending in an epiphany – satisfies the reader's demand for a gain of insight and revelation (cf. 77), whereas an open ending causes a dysfunctional dissonance reverberating in the reader's mind long after the reading has been finished (cf. 81). In Carey's short stories, the reader is undoubtedly left with open ends, loose threads and lingering dissonances.

Carey's writing "consists in the interweaving of so many strands and layers of narrative that the attempt at unravelling brings the reader close to despair" (Boge 27). It tampers with fundamental emotional survival mechanisms as well as playing with socially accepted categories like genres and schemata to achieve the reader's utter confusion and frustration about not being able to work out a final meaning or message. He "triggers and intensifies his readers' existential angst, forcing them to confront their deepest fears", Schulze claims (118). No comment, or implicit yardstick makes it possible to establish a solid exegesis; on the contrary: the reader is left "with a suggestive and beckoning array of alternative interpretations which elude any ultimate certainty" (Hassall 10). The instability or inconsistency of worlds that are trusted to be stable and well-known is certainly a message Carey could be trying to convey – but this is a reading evoking even greater fear within the reader than the simple identification and empathy with his characters.

Drawing together all the threads laid out in this thesis, we can see that in Carey's short fiction, the principle of minimal departure becomes a powerful weapon that uses the reader's mental mechanisms to catch him defenceless when he least expects it. Precisely at the moment when the reader thinks he knows what to anticipate, Carey strikes with a surprising twist, and the game of meaning making and searching starts anew. The reader's traditional schematic thinking and the socially learned concepts and categories usually employed to successfully steer our way through life are exploited to upset, disconcert and shock the readership and leave them

“puzzling for an interpretation” (Rubik 169). “[N]o matter how we try, we will never get the hang of this puzzling world” (Pons 407).



## 5 References

### 5.1 Primary Literature

Carey, Peter: *Collected Stories*. London: Faber and Faber, 1995.

### 5.2 Other References

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and simulation*. 5th ed. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.

----- . *America*. 10th ed. London: Verso, 1999.

Bennett, Bruce. *Australian Short Fiction: A History*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002.

Birns, Nicholas. "‘A Dazzled Eye’: ‘Kistu-Du’ and the Architecture of Tyranny." *Fabulating Beauty. Perspectives on the Fiction of Peter Carey*. Ed. Andreas Gaile. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005. 101-113

Bliss, Carolyn. "Time and Timelessness in Peter Carey's Fiction – the Best of Both Worlds." *Antipodes* 9.2 (December 1995). 97-105

Boge, Chris. *Outlaws, Fakes and Monsters. Doubleness, Transgression and the Limits of Liminality in Peter Carey's Recent Fiction*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2009.

Bonheim, Helmut. *The Narrative Modes. Techniques of the Short Story*. Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982.

Brosch, Renate. *Short Story. Textsorte und Leseerfahrung*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier. 2007

Carroll, Noel. *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Clay, Rebecca A. "Substance Abuse & Suicide: White Paper Explores Connection." *SAMHSA News* (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) 17.1 (January/February 2009). 15 March 2011  
[http://www.samhsa.gov/samhsanewsletter/Volume\\_17\\_Number\\_1/SubstanceAbuseAndSuicide.aspx](http://www.samhsa.gov/samhsanewsletter/Volume_17_Number_1/SubstanceAbuseAndSuicide.aspx)

Clunies Ross, Bruce. "Some Developments in Short Fiction, 1969-1980." *Australian Literary Studies* 10.1. (1981). 165-180

Cohen, Gillian. "Schemata." *The Blackwell Dictionary of Cognitive Psychology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990. 316-317

- Feddersen, Jan. "Zum Tod von Günter Amendt. Kämpfer gegen das sexuelle Igittigitt." *Spiegel Online Kultur*. Monday, 14 March 2011  
<<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/0,1518,750711,00.html>>
- Fludernik, Monika. *An Introduction to Narratology*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2009.
- Gaile, Andreas. "The 'contrarian streak'. An Interview with Peter Carey (Conducted on 26 March 2004 in Manhattan). *Fabulating Beauty. Perspectives on the Fiction of Peter Carey*. Ed. Andreas Gaile. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005. 3-16
- Gelder, Ken. "Other Alternatives: Speculative Fiction." *The New Diversity. Australian Fiction 1970-88*. Ken Gelder & Paul Salzman. Melbourne: Mc Phee Gribble, 1989. 113-139
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.
- . *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.
- Grice, Paul H. "Logic and Conversation." *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech acts*. Ed. Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan. New York: Academic Press, 1975. 41-58
- Hall, Stuart. "Kodieren/Dekodieren." *Cultural Studies. Grundlagentexte zur Einführung*. Ed. Roger Bromley, Udo Göttlich, Carsten Winter. Lüneburg: zu Klampen, 1999. 92-112
- Hejinian, Lyn. "The Rejection of Closure." *Poetry Foundation*. 21 March 2011  
<<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237870>> (page numbers 1-11 refer to print-out version)
- "History of Abortion Law in the UK." *Abortion Rights. The National Pro-Choice Campaign*. 16 May 2011  
<[http://www.abortionrights.org.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=18&Itemid=44](http://www.abortionrights.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=18&Itemid=44)>
- Hassall, Anthony J. *Dancing on Hot Macadam. Peter Carey's fiction*. St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1994.
- Marler, Robert F. "From Tale to Short Story. The Emergence of a New Genre in the 1850's." *The New Short Story Theories*. Ed. Charles E. May. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994. 165-181
- Matthews, Brander. "The Philosophy of the Short-Story." *The New Short Story Theories*. Ed. Charles E. May. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994. 73-80
- Pons, Xavier. "Weird Tales. Peter Carey's Short Stories." *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English*. Ed. Jacqueline Bardolph. Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2001. 391-407

- Rayfield, Donald. *Anton Chekhov. A Life*. London: Harper Collins, 1997.
- Rubik, Margarete. "Provocative and Unforgettable: Peter Carey's Short Fiction – A Cognitive Approach." *European Journal of English Studies* 9.2 (August 2005). 169-184
- Schulze, Cornelia. "Peter Carey's Short Stories. Trapped in a Narrative Labyrinth." *Fabulating Beauty. Perspectives on the Fiction of Peter Carey*. Ed. Andreas Gaile. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005. 117-136
- Selden, Raman. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Brighton: The Harvester Press Limited, 1985.
- Stockwell, Peter. *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Thomson, Philip. *The Grotesque*. London: Methuen, 1972.
- Tsur, Reuven. *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics*. 2nd ed. Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press. 2008.
- Woodcock, Bruce. *Peter Carey*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996.
- Yanal, Robert J. "The Paradox of Suspense." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36.2 (1996). 146-158





## 6 Index

---

### *The Stories*

“Do You Love Me?” · 13, 24, 26, 56, 65, 74, 82, 84, 86  
 “A Letter to Our Son” · 57, 59  
 “A Million Dollars’ Worth of Amphetamines” · 32, 57, 58  
 “A Schoolboy Prank” · 16, 18, 21, 41, 43, 50, 57, 69, 70, 89  
 “A Windmill in the West” · 14, 15, 57, 95, 98  
 “American Dreams” · 6, 9, 11, 14, 15, 24, 28, 38, 39, 41, 42, 49, 53, 57, 95, 98  
 “Concerning the Greek Tyrant” · 56, 80, 82, 85  
 “Conversations with Unicorns” · 39, 53, 56, 68, 82, 85  
 “Crabs” · 5, 14, 50, 56, 66, 67, 74, 82  
 “Exotic Pleasures” · 13, 25, 32, 33, 57, 82, 87  
 “Fragrance of Roses” · 53, 57, 58  
 “Happy Story” · 39, 53, 57, 58  
 “He Found Her in Late Summer” · 16, 32, 57, 58, 67, 82, 86  
 “Joe” · 51, 57, 59  
 “Kristu-Du” · 13, 37, 56, 82, 83  
 “Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion” · 6, 7, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 21, 53, 57, 82, 84  
 “Peeling” · 16, 21, 35, 56, 67, 72, 74, 82, 88  
 “Report on the Shadow Industry” · 24, 25, 30, 32, 53, 56, 75, 76, 82, 88  
 “Room No. 5 (Escribo)” · 14, 35, 37, 59  
 “The Chance” · 13, 22, 54, 57, 58, 82, 87  
 “The Fat Man in History” · 14, 22, 38, 50, 57, 76, 89, 91, 92  
 “The Journey of a Lifetime” · 48, 57, 70, 89  
 “The Last Days of a Famous Mime” · 24, 26, 53, 57, 82, 84  
 “The Puzzling Nature of Blue” · 14, 32, 35, 36, 38, 56, 88  
 “The Uses of Williamson Wood” · 16, 22, 41, 57, 78, 97  
 “War Crimes” · 13, 32, 47, 49, 54, 57, 77, 89, 94

“Withdrawal” · 13, 32, 57, 89, 91, 93

---

### **A**

agency · 5, 6, 9, 13, 14, 23  
 alienation effect · 55, 56  
 Amendt, Günter · 31, 102  
 analepsis · 41  
 atmosphere · 20, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39, 70

---

### **B**

Baudrillard, Jean · 10, 28, 101  
 Bennett, Bruce · 6, 75, 101  
 Birns, Nicholas · 35  
 Bliss, Carolyn · 6, 35, 101, 2  
 Boge, Chris · 99, 101  
 Bonheim, Helmut · 98, 99, 101  
 Brecht, Bertolt · 55  
 Brosch, Renate · 34, 35, 40, 45, 46, 47, 48, 51, 52, 53, 99, 101

---

### **C**

capitalism · 6, 7, 9, 12, 15  
 Carroll, Noel · 40, 42, 43, 101  
 Christie, Agatha · 48  
 Clay, Rebecca · 31  
 Clunies Ross, Bruce · 53, 54, 101  
 cognitive poetics · 3, 56, 60, 63  
 Cohen, Gillian · 60, 61, 64, 101  
 colonialism · 6, 13, 14  
 cooperative principle · 67, 71, 72

---

### **D**

deictic shift theory · 60, 73  
 dystopia · 6, 35, 37, 38, 66, 94

---

**F**

Feddersen, Jan · 31, 102  
 Fludernik, Monika · 36, 46, 50  
 focalization · 46, 50  
 Freud, Sigmund · 24

---

**G**

Gaile, Andreas · 52, 101, 102, 103  
 Gelder, Ken · 24, 26, 27, 102  
 gender identities · 4, 18, 23  
 gender roles · 8, 16, 22  
 Genette, Gérard · 41, 74, 102  
 Grice, Paul H. · 67, 71, 72, 102

---

**H**

Hall, Stuart · 28, 102  
 Hassall, Anthony J. · 6, 5, 6, 7, 9, 14, 20, 21,  
 25, 26, 29, 31, 32, 47, 48, 53, 54, 65, 68,  
 99, 102  
 Hejinian, Lyn · 98, 102

---

**I**

Ikin, Van · 6, 7

---

**J**

Joyce, James · 24

---

**M**

Marler, Robert F. · 53, 102  
 Matthews, Brander · 52, 102  
 mental set · 60, 64, 66  
 metalepsis · 22, 60, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78  
 metaleptic comment · 15, 76, 78  
 Modernism · 24

---

**P**

Peden, William · 53  
 Pons, Xavier · 28  
 Postmodernism · 24

---

**R**

Rayfield, Donald · 44, 103  
 Realism · 26, 27, 54, 55  
 Rubik, Margarete · 1, 2, 3, 6, 63, 66, 67, 75, 86,  
 100, 103,  
 Russian Formalism · 55, 63

---

**S**

schema · 57, 58, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67,  
 69, 70, 72, 74, 76, 86, 93  
 Schulze, Cornelia · 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 21, 22, 46,  
 99, 103  
 script · 60, 61, 62, 64, 65, 66, 68  
 Selden, Raman · 55, 103  
 Stockwell, Peter · 52, 61, 62, 63, 64, 73, 74,  
 82, 83, 103  
 Swift, Jonathan · 69

---

**T**

Thomson, Philip · 64, 103  
 Tsur, Reuven · 63, 64, 66, 103

---

**W**

Wilding, Michael · 4  
 Woodcock, Bruce · 6, 5, 11, 12, 14, 18, 20, 28,  
 29, 30, 45, 47, 54, 55, 103, 2

---

**Y**

Yanal, Robert · 40, 42, 103

## 7 German Abstract

Peter Carey ist einer der bekanntesten Schriftsteller Australiens und einer von nur zwei Autoren die bereits zweimal mit dem hoch dotierten Man Booker Prize ausgezeichnet wurden. Seine ersten beiden veröffentlichten Bücher waren Sammlungen von Kurzgeschichten, die zwar weniger bekannt sind im Vergleich zu seinen Romanen, in ihrer Qualität jedoch seinen späteren Erfolgen um nichts nachstehen. Mit der ersten dieser beiden Sammlungen, *The Fat Man in History*, gewann er ein enthusiastisches Publikum für sich und erlangte fast Kultstatus. Für den zweiten Kurzgeschichtenband, *War Crimes*, wurde Carey sogar der, damals neue, New South Wales Premier's Award verliehen. Seit der Veröffentlichung seines ersten Romans *Bliss* im Jahr 1981 ist Carey nun ein weltweit bekannter Romanautor und hat angesichts diesen Erfolges wenig Grund sich wieder Kurzgeschichten zuzuwenden, obwohl manche Kritiker darin sein wahres Talent sehen (vgl. Woodcock 37 und Rubik 169).

In dieser Diplomarbeit wird versucht, die gemeinsamen Charakteristika seiner gesammelten Kurzgeschichten, 1995 unter dem Titel *Collected Stories* erschienen, herauszuarbeiten.

Im ersten der drei Hauptkapitel wird untersucht, welche sozialkritischen inhaltlichen Aspekte in einem Großteil von Careys Geschichten behandelt werden, obwohl sich die Geschichten generell einem linearen und metaphorischen Deutungsmuster entziehen, und wie sich diese auf die Handlungen und Charaktere auswirken. Als Mitglied der Hippiebewegung der 1960er und 70er waren Carey die Auswirkungen autoritärer Systeme auf das Individuum ein Dorn im Auge und seine Kurzgeschichten kritisieren relativ offenkundig den Kapitalismus, die Amerikanisierung, fixierte Geschlechterrollen und stellt die Rolle von Kunst in der spätkapitalistischen Welt in Frage.

Das zweite Kapitel beschäftigt sich mit der Erzähltechnik, die Carey in seinen Geschichten anwendet. Die Orte an denen die verschiedenen Handlungen sich zutragen bleiben immer vage und auch die Zeit zu der die Geschichten spielen ist nie näher definiert. Die verschiedenen

unzuverlässigen Erzählerstimmen, geben dem/der Leser/in nie das Gefühl, dass er/sie zur Gänze erfassen kann was in den Geschichten genau passiert und was der Autor damit sagen will – wenn man ihm überhaupt unterstellen kann, dass er etwas bestimmtes sagen will. Die Kurzgeschichten vermitteln in ihrer linearen Erzählweise oft fast unerträgliche Spannung, was auch Gegenstand dieses Kapitels ist. Obwohl die spezielle Mischung aus realistischer Erzählweise und verschiedener fantastischer Elemente, es dem Leser unmöglich macht die Geschichten einem bestimmten literarischen Genre zuzuordnen, wird trotzdem versucht sie in drei Gruppen zu unterteilen. Bei dieser Einteilung ist mir bewusst, dass sie keine universelle Gültigkeit hat. Sie dient ausschließlich dazu ungefähren Tendenzen Rechnung zu tragen, denn den von mir entwickelten Kategorien imaginary, semi-absurd und realistic könnten auch andere Geschichten zugeordnet werden, als ich es hier getan habe.

Im letzten Kapitel werden einzelne Aspekte der Theorie der Kognitiven Poetik erläutert und auf Careys Kurzgeschichten angewendet, um zu verdeutlichen warum der/die Leser/in nie zu einer schlüssigen und befriedigenden Deutung kommen kann. Die Geschichten werden nicht klarer in ihrer Aussage oder Stimmung, jedoch gibt die Kognitive Poetik Denkanstöße, die die Art der Komposition leichter zugänglich machen oder zumindest erklären wieso eine Auflösung unmöglich ist.

## 8 Lisa Klauser – Curriculum Vitae

### Werdegang

Seit 2010	Selbstständigkeit als Sprachtrainerin
2007 – 2010	Wahlfachmodul Kulturwissenschaften / Cultural Studies im Rahmen der freien Wahlfächer des Diplomstudiums
2005 – 2011	Diplomstudium Anglistik und Amerikanistik
2004 – 2005	Diplomstudium Molekulare Biologie
2004 – 2005	Auslandsaufenthalt in London, UK. Erwerb des “Certificate of Proficiency in English“ der University of Cambridge
1998 – 2003	Besuch der Bundesbildungsanstalt für Kindergartenpädagogik in Steyr, Matura, mit ausgezeichnetem Erfolg, im Juni 2003
1994 – 1998	Besuch der Unterstufe am Bundesrealgymnasium Steyr
1990 – 1994	Besuch der Volksschule Aschach an der Steyr