

## **Black Mountains & The Knife: A Reflection**

*by*

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Both emblematic works of the Interwar period, Eve Langley's *The Pea-Pickers* and Jean Devanny's *Sugar Heaven* – two of the most noteworthy female writers in the modernist era of Australian fiction (Beilharz and Supski 339-340) – have inspired me to create the two collages. Their point of intersection is the naturalistic elements and features of social realism that exist in the novels. For the final result, I used Photoshop by piecing together multiple cutouts of letters sourced online as well as excerpts as cutouts from the digital copies of the aforementioned works.

Set in 1920s rural Australia, Eve Langley's semi-autobiographical novel *The Pea-Pickers* is filled with pastoral imagery, as nature was Langley's true passion (Seegerberg 64). The romanticization of rural Australia is evident in the lyrical language that Langley implements to describe the bush (Seegerberg 61). From the sun and its warmth to the hills, the wind and rivers, the beauty of the bush is enchanting. Some of these images I have compiled and arranged in a rather unruly order to create an evocative, free-verse piece of poetry (Figure 1), introducing additional words and lines in the revisited version to produce an image that matches Langley's narrative.

The poem's lines are enjambed, imitating the natural flow of the thoughts and feelings one may have when they are confronted by the sublime (Preminger 241). I have used the em dash medial caesura in the fifth line to signal a pause and draw attention to the sun as a central element in the poem (Preminger 95). Furthermore, the personification of the sun adds to the power that nature has over Langley's characters. The sun's touch has a calming effect on the speaker, putting her in

a hypnotic state. The allusion to the Great Depression in the phrase “[t]he coming years of sadness” in the fifth line refers to the financial struggles and hardships of the 1930s and reminds us that despite Langley’s love for the Australian landscape, *The Pea-Pickers* is a realist novel pertaining to Steve’s and Blue’s class and poverty (Beilharz and Supski 344).

The novel also explores gender themes that have not been entirely incorporated into the collage, as I wanted its main foci to be the description of sentimental and natural elements. Having grown up around the customers that visited their mother’s bush pub, Langley and her sister often studied and mimicked the bushmen and they would often dress up as men to go pea-picking (Segeberg 56). Here, the line ‘troublesome eagle’ (which is usually seen as a powerful masculine archetype) could be referring to the fluctuation of gender ideals in Langley’s character (St/Eve), who, according to Segeberg, “saw masculinity as equating freedom and creativity” (56).

As far as Jean Devanny is concerned, she was a working-class activist who was seriously devoted to politics and had joined the Communist Party of Australia in the late 1920s (Wells 231). Her novel *Sugar Heaven* is a politically charged piece, weaving together themes of class and gender and – focusing on the canecutters’ strike, as Wells states, “[it] reflects the socialist realist agenda of the CPA” during that time (231). Drawing from these themes, I created the second collage (Figure 2) as an assignment for the course Oceanic Texts and Culture(s), picking phrases off Devanny’s text to render some of the realities described in her text.

Images of cane knives, the brutal realities of sugarcane cutting, the harsh work conditions and the struggles of the working class (i.e., the canecutters) are all evidence of Devanny’s socialist realism (Beilharz and Supski 340), some of which I wanted and attempted to convey in my poem. Words such as ‘dread’, ‘brutal’ and the phrase ‘finality of life’ elicit a rawness, parallel to

the existential dread of a marginalised, overworked union. The sixth line is marked with a paradox; 'fierce breath' is contrasted with 'idleness', capturing the workers' toil and highlighting the tension between relentless labour and moments of immobilised exhaustion. Finally, the knife symbolises authority, power and violence or even the inevitability of a change that will disrupt the status quo.

Both *The Knife* and *Black Mountains* incorporate natural elements not only as a backdrop but as an active agent as well, which affect the speaker in each poem. *Black Mountains* triumphantly celebrates Australian nature, while in *The Knife* nature is contrasted with the raw depiction of labor, presenting the various facets of how nature and society interact within the Australian experience and aligning with the Social Realist literature of the mid-twentieth century.

### Works Cited

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