

# How Rukeyser and Lanyer Look at Landscape

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Rukeyser's poem "The Book of the Dead" examines the results of the exploitation of a landscape to satisfy greed. The poem itself is a tribute to the victims of the Hawks Nest Tunnel Disaster. It was not only negligence which caused this disaster but also the interference of the human world with the natural landscape. Throughout the poem, she explores this fusion of humanity and nature across history, beginning with a description of Europe's first discovery of America. "See how they took the land ... pushed forests down in an implacable walk" (Rukeyser, lines 25 – 28). These explorers see the environment as theirs for the taking; nature is nothing but a rung on the ladder of power and they have scant regard for those stepped upon as they ascend. Scigaj describes the landscape as "now polluted ... infected by pathogens created by corrupt greed" (141). These man-made pathogens are a blight upon this treasured place. Rukeyser's picture of interrupted serenity serves as a reminder that our environment is more than mere silica in the ground, lining the pockets of the rich. Who are we to take nature's gifts and twist them into this unrecognisable beast?

"[A]nd you young, you who finishing the poem / wish new perfection and begin to make" (Rukeyser, lines 88 – 89). Rukeyser directly addresses the reader and extends an invitation to join her in pursuing the aim of a better world. She is asking that the reader begin to look at their landscape as something to be protected. Morehead recognises this hopeful tone, seeing the poem as "recording the hope for recovery in the face of atrocities and serving as a model for building a better future despite the ruin of many lives" (343). Rukeyser's critique of these atrocities is as damning as her vision of a better world is inspiring; there is a careful balance struck. We must not become disheartened nor accept that this exploitation of our environment is inevitable. When confronted by the mass destruction of nature seen today, it is easy to allow one's self to be overcome by lethargy. Rukeyser asks that

we nevertheless strive to break this hegemony, for apathy will bring only the death of progress.

Lanyer's "The Description of Cooke-ham" looks at landscape as a place synonymous with the memories created there. The focus of the poem is Clifford, the apple of Lanyer's eye, and by extension, her home of Cooke-ham. Established as a place representative of their relationship, Lanyer layers praise lavishly upon Cooke-ham and its surrounding environs. "The trees with leaves, with fruits, with flowers clad / Embraced each other, seeming to be glad" (Lanyer, 23 - 24). The poem positions the house as a place at one with nature; its blinding radiance shining outwards from the beating heart that is Clifford. Clifford's beauty is so tremendous that, while in her presence, mother nature herself exudes happiness. The grace bestowed by her very attendance allows nature to express its true self. "The gentle winds did take delight to be / Among those woods that were so graced by thee" (Lanyer, 39 - 40). Lanyer sees Cooke-ham's surroundings through the lens of an exquisite loveliness granted by Clifford.

The poem, unfortunately, serves as a farewell to this utopian place. McBride points out this melancholic atmosphere, stating that "the flora and fauna of Cooke-ham mourn rather than celebrate Clifford's marriage ... marriage does not define and affirm community but disrupts relationships and destroys the society of women" (97 - 98). Clifford's marriage is a source of immense grief for Lanyer as she must now depart from Cooke-ham. Thus, the house and its gardens have become a place for reflection upon the times they spent together. "Those pretty birds that wonted were to sing, / Now neither sing, nor chirp" (Lanyer, 185 - 186). The atmosphere changes to one of sorrow. Clifford's departure has a profound effect on the estate and, in the eyes of Lanyer, Cooke-ham begins to wither. Her attribution of human emotion to Cooke-ham's environment is perhaps a coping mechanism for Clifford's departure; it is easier to mourn when one's mourning can be shared with so many. Looking at the landscape in this way allows Lanyer to first celebrate their friendship before then grieving its conclusion. Their memories have become part of the landscape, enhancing, and changing it. Cooke-ham is not inherently valuable because of its remarkable walls or extravagant windows; its value is instilled

through the experiences of the people who lived there. Lanyer, for one, is immensely sad to see said experiences come to an end.

Another facet of Lanyer's "The Description of Cooke-ham" is how the poem fashions a landscape of its own in its depiction of Cooke-ham's gardens as a Utopian environment. It is an exclusive space occupied only by women and God. Chedgzoy recognises this, "Imagined as a shared female space, the garden becomes the locus of Lanyer's recreative deployment of memory" (16). The garden is an idealised centre of comfort and safety for Lanyer and Clifford. This Edenic environment even lends its patrons a religious experience. "With Moses you did mount his holy hill / To know his pleasure, and perform his will. / With lowly David you did often sing" (Lanyer, lines 85 – 87). Lanyer holds Clifford in such high regard that she has begun to see her amongst this heavenly company.

However, just as man was cast out of Eden, Lanyer must be displaced from this world. Until now this landscape stood apart from time; it existed solely as a haven separate from the chaos of the outside world. McBride acknowledges that "The death of the landscape figured at the end of the poem also represents the intrusion of temporality into the paradisaal world of Cooke-ham that is lost forever" (102). Lanyer's poem fights back against this intrusion of temporality by preserving Cooke-ham in her writing; a space free from the bounds of time. She wishes to maintain this "female locus amoenus" (Ng, 445). By re-imagining the garden through her poem, she moves it from a religious environment crafted by God to a wholly feminist environment. Lanyer seizes power over the space; recreating Cooke-ham's paradise such that all future women may experience it. (Munroe, 95 – 96). Lanyer is determined that Cooke-ham does not die with the coming of winter. She finds solace knowing that her memories will live on in her work. "This last farewell to Cooke-ham here I give / When I am dead thy name in this may live" (Lanyer, 205 – 206). Looking upon the landscape in her mind's eye allows Lanyer to move on from the physical space of Cooke-ham and take refuge within her imagined oasis. Through their reading of the poem, the reader too is gifted this privilege and may find happiness in knowing that the dream-like setting of Cooke-ham yet exists within the minds of many.

Rukeyser's "Book of the Dead" also views the landscape of West Virginia as a memorialisation; this time of those who died during the Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster. The 700 (if not more) victims have become inextricably tied with the land itself. Rukeyser describes "The hills of glass, the fatal brilliant plain" (Rukeyser, line 15). This landscape has become inseparable from the silica that comprises it; the same silica that led to the deaths of so many. Through interference from outside actors, the deaths of these miners were forced upon the land and have now come to define it. There is a degree of cognitive dissonance in appreciating the beauty of a site of such tragedy. Rukeyser describes how the workers "descended deeper for richer faults of ore / drilling their death" (lines 94 – 96). Their employer's thirst for profit drives every step the workers take into the earth; each step paid for in blood.

Rukeyser's message is clear. These men are not to be reduced to a statistic but instead become part of an international rallying cry, demanding that such injustices are never seen again. Rukeyser takes the landscape and transforms it from a depressing reminder of human avarice into a scene of solidarity. Gauley mountain breaks its shackles and becomes a symbol of hope; a message that these men can never be forgotten and that the working class will not remain forever fettered. Dayton identifies this, remarking that "The Book of the Dead is a monumentally hopeful poem, even as it is deeply mournful, and indeed this complex interplay of hope and mourning ... ultimately emerges as the defining impulse of the poem" (225). Rukeyser grants us this hope by crafting an image of workers across an international stage united by their collective voice. The voice of the poem joins this display of unity and urges the reader to join them on this newfound landscape "to extend this voice / to speak this meaning" (Rukeyser, lines 122 – 123). The chorus builds. Every ancestor sacrificed to satisfy their employer's insatiable appetite for wealth, labourers across the world "meeting avoidable death" (Rukeyser, lines 104), all of those living in terror of their superiors, and every life quenched under the boot of the capitalist class; they all come together. The harmony crescendos as the silenced break their peace. Their voices weave together into a brilliant tapestry; a stunning indictment of every parasite that sees human life and our landscape as fit for exploitation. Can you hear them singing?

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